

Milwaukee Avenue Street Conversion: *Transforming a Section of Residential Street into a Greenway*

by Randall Arendt

A two-block section of Milwaukee Avenue in Minneapolis, about 1,200 feet in length, was converted into a pedestrian greenway through joint efforts of residents and city officials after the area was designated as a historic district at both the national and municipal levels. Removing vehicular traffic from this part of the street has created a small linear park providing an extremely pleasant ambience. The conversion project works well because the 19th century lots are all served by rear lanes (a.k.a., alleys) providing garage access. This transformation, increasing livability while reducing infrastructure costs, provides a double win that could serve as a model not only for other older residential neighborhoods with alley access, but also for newly designed development.



Figure 1: Milwaukee Avenue today, showing sidewalks, grass, and shade trees. (Courtesy Milwaukee Avenue Homeowners Association)

The story began during the early 1970s when city officials announced plans to demolish 70 percent of the homes within a 35-block area south of the downtown (including much of Milwaukee Avenue), using funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Many of the houses on Milwaukee Avenue -- modest worker cottages built for primarily Scandinavian immigrants in the 1880s -- had been neglected during the Great Depression and World War II, and had fallen into disrepair. Most were also nonconforming in terms of lot size and setbacks. HUD's public process required that a "project area committee (or PAC) be formed to provide public input and, instead of endorsing the city's proposal (as officials had hoped), PAC members vociferously opposed it.

Angered by the demolition proposal, the PAC -- the official group representing residents and concerned citizens -- joined forces with them to propose totally rehabilitating the homes instead (ensuring that they all had indoor plumbing and central heating), but city officials, arguing that this would cost more than razing and replacing the nonconforming buildings, essentially ignored them. This energized the opposition, which secretly filed an application for federal designation as a National Register Historic District with critical assistance from the Minnesota Historical Society -- which very helpfully informed the PAC that approval by the Minneapolis Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) was not needed to obtain this protective designation.

The federal designation, granted in 1974, effectively blocked the HRA from using HUD funds to demolish the homes and construct four-story walk-up rentals, which would have negatively affected surrounding

property values. Rehabilitation was coordinated and assisted by two nonprofit groups (the Greater Minneapolis Metropolitan Housing Corporation and the Milwaukee Avenue Community Corporation), with much of the actual work performed by residents, who contributed vast amounts of “sweat equity” individually and during numerous “gutting parties” which also served to bring the community together even more. Although nine severely decrepit homes had to be razed, 98 others were thoroughly rehabilitated, including improvements such as new basements, new plumbing, heating system, and electrical service, with replacement front porches. These houses were given historic exteriors with completely modern interiors.

After the local (municipal) historic district was created in 1975, and with the urging of neighborhood residents, the city agreed to create the Milwaukee Avenue Mall by vacating a two-block length of Milwaukee Avenue and part of a cross-street (East 22nd Street). The city also administratively designated the area as a “Planned Residential District”, essentially relaxing most dimensional and area standards. In 1976, using municipal funds that had been received from HUD for urban clearance and “renewal”, the city replaced the street pavement and curbing with a central mall or greenway and a small playground on the site of the former intersection with E. 22nds St. The lawn area, trees, sidewalks, and play area, which were designed with neighborhood input, are owned and maintained by the Milwaukee Avenue Homeowners Association (MAHA), which was formed in 1978 and which has 78 member homes.



Figures 2 and 3: Milwaukee Avenue during the early 1970s, left, and in 2014, right. (Credits to the Star-tribune and Wikimedia)

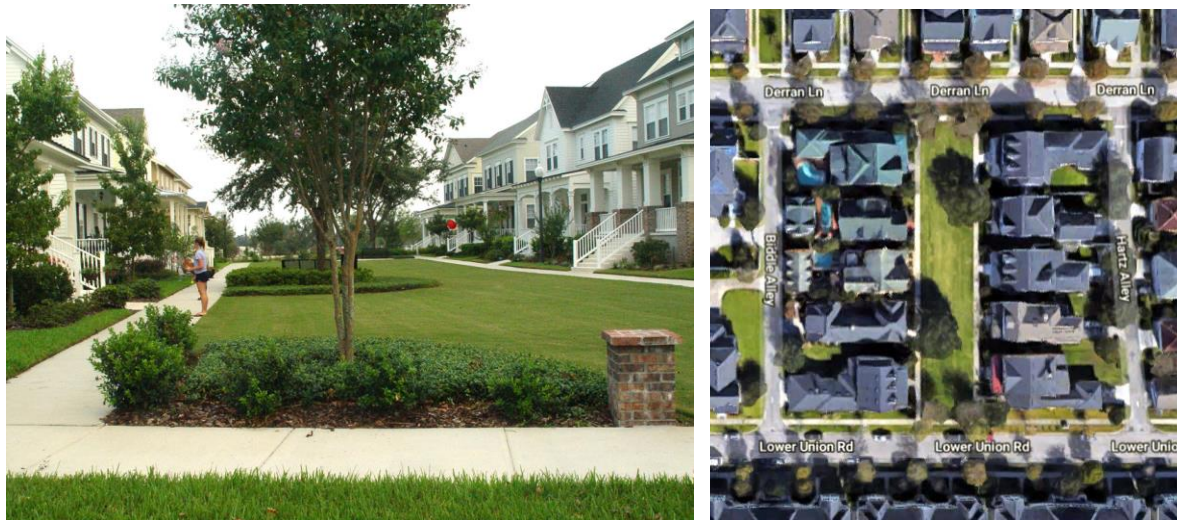
Deed covenants were attached to each property, mandating a homeowners’ association with assessments required of each member to pay for common area maintenance (including such items as lawn mowing, tree trimming/replacement, and snowblowing sidewalks). Architectural review of exteriors is performed by a MAHA architecture review committee.

The process of creating the necessary covenants and conveying the public street right-of-way to MAHA was long and difficult, but precedent exists in many cities to convert sections of streets (typically in downtown commercial areas) into car-free pedestrian precincts, closing them to vehicular traffic and replacing the asphalt with brick paving, shade trees, and benches, all paid for and maintained with municipal funds (see Figures 12 and 13). In residential neighborhoods that are underserved by public parks, such street conversions could provide green oases, similar to pocket parks that are occasionally

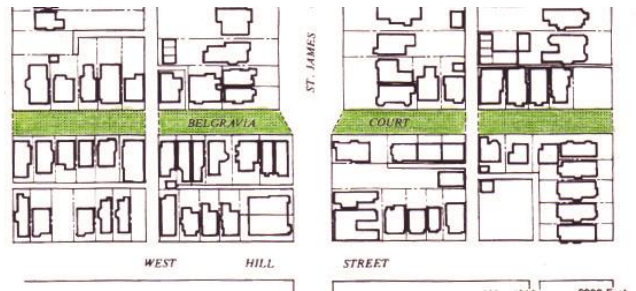
created on vacant lots or leftover spaces in downtown areas such as in Lewisburg WV and Auburn CA (Figures 14 and 15).

This novel concept has almost unlimited potential if also applied to new development, and could become part of the municipal regulatory standards governing the design of new neighborhoods and/or commercial areas. Indeed, many new urban communities have included such elements, from the car-free street section in Mashpee Commons in Mashpee MA (Figures 10 and 11) to the short sections of “green streets” in Baldwin Park in Orlando, FL (Figures. 4 and 5). This concept is not at all new, as the accompanying photo of Belgravia Court, dating from the late 1880s in Louisville KY, demonstrates (Fig. 5). In new developments, this concept could be extended to create multi-block greenways to connect neighborhoods with schools, parks, and shops.

This design approach reduces costs to developers (providing only sidewalks and landscaping is less expensive than paving streets and installing curbs), and also enables them to charge lot premiums), as they are not only more desirable places in which to live, but also appreciate more quickly due to the adjacent greenspace. Cities spend less on them even if they are not turned over to homeowner associations, as they do not require periodic repaving or winter snowplowing. This approach also reduces impervious cover and therefore stormwater runoff, and can provide locations to install landscaped “rain gardens” to help infiltrate runoff from roofs and sidewalks (Figure 8).



Figures 4 and 5: This 300-foot long mini-park, onto which ten homes face, is located in the Baldwin Park neighborhood of Orlando FL. Its 18,000 SF of greenspace adds significant value to these homes, and cost less for the developer to create than a traditional street. Designed as a greenway with sidewalks along the front lot lines, the space between them has been landscaped with grass, shrubs, and shade trees. It is owned and maintained by a homeowner association.



Figures 6 and 7: Belgravia Court, an early example dating from the late 1880s in Louisville (above), shows that this idea is not at all new. This lovely “street” consists of two sections, each about 400 feet in length. It is intersected by St. James Court with its impressive 50-foot wide boulevard median, which connects it with the Olmsted-designed 17-acre Central Park in Old Louisville.

Such examples have been described by architect Ross Chapin as “pocket neighborhoods”, defined as “cohesive clusters of homes gathered around some kind of common ground within a larger surrounding neighborhood” where a dozen or so neighbors may interact on a daily basis around a shared garden, quiet street or alley” (Figure 9). They are built at a scale “where meaningful ‘neighborly’ relationships are fostered... It is the physical basis for creating community with one’s neighbors”. (Chapin, *Pocket Neighborhoods*, 2011). Milwaukee Avenue residents report that their green “street” functions like a continuous front yard, with this shared social space creating a relaxed, friendly atmosphere where spontaneous encounters and interactions occur fairly often among the neighbors. Community spirit is high, with volunteer workdays in both spring (winter cleanup and planting) and fall (leaf raking). Summer events have included puppet shows and “Neighborhood Nights Out” in August, with a Winter Potluck in February.



Figures 8 and 9: Slightly sunken landscaped areas specially designed to capture and infiltrate stormwater, sometimes called “rain gardens” (left), reduce urban runoff and could be provided in central greens such as at Milwaukee Avenue, which exemplifies one form of “pocket neighborhood” (right) where homes in a small housing group face each other across common open space. (Source: The Cottage Company and Ross Chapin)



Figures 10 and 11: Mashpee Commons, a new urban community designed by Duany Plater-Zyberk Town Planners in the late 1980s on Cape Cod, features a pedestrian-friendly car-free “street” in the heart of its downtown.

It could help more neighborhoods in other cities to follow the Milwaukee Avenue example if municipal governments were to simply lower the legal and institutional obstacles facing local residents interested in taking over ownership and maintenance of such street conversions, which the city would initially create. Prof. Thomas Fisher, director of the Minnesota Design Center at the University of Minnesota, asks *“What if other blocks in the city served by alleys did what the residents of Milwaukee Avenue accomplished: forming a homeowners’ association, taking over the street in front of their houses, and converting the road to green space, play grounds, bike paths and pedestrian walks, with visitor parking at either end of the block? How many homeowners already have the equipment needed to clear snow, cut grass, and rake leaves in front of their property, and who wouldn’t want more space in which children can play and nature can thrive?”*



Figures 12 and 13: An eight-block long section of Charlottesville VA’s main downtown street (left) has been a pedestrian precinct since 1976. Its many tall shade trees, planted four decades ago, are credited with lowering summer temperatures by up to 18 degrees on hot summer days. Providing trees and benches and brick paving in the Market Square section of Portsmouth NH’s downtown business district (right) has created a mecca for residents and visitors alike, drawing them to the center and extending the time they spend there.



Figures 14 and 15: This new 5,600 Sf park (left) on the site of a burned building at the main intersection in the center of Lewisburg WV was created in stages between 2005 and 2013 by the city in partnership with two local foundations. At right is as pocket park in Auburn CA, created in 2009 when an awkwardly-angled intersection was rectified, freeing up about 6,000 SF of land, now filled with outdoor seating, numerous trees, landscaping, a fire pit, and a rain garden to pre-treat stormwater.