

## CITIZEN ARTIST

BY ADOLFO NODAL

Extensive opportunities exist in the American civic process for anyone who has the time, inclination and ability to affect the system in fundamental ways. Yet few American artists choose to eschew their solitary aesthetic mission to involve themselves in the sometimes mundane and always challenging business of providing quality-of-life services to a broader public beyond the denizens of the art world.

This civic conscience is, however, manifested in the actions of a diverse group of artists who have pioneered an urban, global, and environmental aesthetic that is the precursor of what may become a unified cultural approach to making the earth more livable by providing nuance and surprise to our urban landscape. Robert Tannen's extended palette of architecture, urban design and urban planning, coupled with his quirky aesthetic and inexhaustible investigations into the marriage of public interest and private vision, places him at the forefront of this new brand of artist.

His concern for the natural environment and urban affairs has fueled thirty years of projects devoted to identifying issues and proposing solutions that range from formal masterplans to poetic one-liners. It is his wish to help the world, as well as to make art, that defines Tannen as a citizen artist.

In this role, he has embraced such environmental and urban issues as housing, transportation, land use, waste management, public amenities, water conservation, agriculture, architecture, and economic and cultural development. These issues have been implemented using diverse strategies such as consensus planning, sculpture, governmental relations, conceptual art, civil engineering, drawing, real estate development, art activism, disaster recovery, site specific art installation, architecture, and environmental activism.

When he started making driftwood, stone and trash assemblages in



*Shotgun Temple*

Bayou Road, New Orleans

Fabrication, 1980

Installation, 1988

LEFT:

Shotgun Temple Dedication  
1988

1. Florence Schornstein  
Superintendent  
Parkway and Park Comm.
2. Mike Early,  
former City Councilman,  
Sydney Besthoff, art patron  
Robert Tannen
3. Sydney Besthoff
4. Residents - Bethany Home
5. Cameraman, Channel 8
6. Adolfo Nodal,  
former C.A.C. Director,  
& John McDonogh High  
Marching Band
7. McDonogh High Band  
Director  
Joseph Torregano  
and Robert Tannen
8. McDonogh High Band  
and Robert Tannen
9. Robert Tannen and  
Mike Early
10. Tannen and Nodal

Photographs by  
Lew Thomas



environment of the Pratt Institute. These experiences, along with an early career venture as manager of the Lazy Eight, a collaborative research and development company, fostered a sensibility that is both world-minded and of a personal, singular concern.

This specific set of experiences landed Tannen at the nexus between the Modernist movement's notion of the heroic artist and the Post-avant garde, socially concerned artist-as-cultural-worker who suppresses artistic ego in pursuit of public good. Like many artists of his generation, Tannen has had some difficulty reconciling the two. It is not always easy assuming the role of citizen artist because such activity serves two masters: the private muse and the civic combination of these two forces. It is what makes his work of immense value, and of service to his many-faceted community.

It is no wonder that Tannen chose New Orleans, a city far away from the jaded hustle of the urban art centers, as the base for his mature output. The Crescent City is, in many ways, the ultimate public realm. It is the only major metropolis in America where the normal pedestrian protocol is a greeting, rather than the aversion of one's eyes in passing. Its cultivated nineteenth-century flavor, vivid architecture, music and celebrations, make New Orleans America's most bohemian city. It is also a city known for its eccentricity and *joie de vivre*. For an artist with Tannen's background and vision, it became the ideal home and laboratory.

As an artist, architect and planner, Tannen's prominent role in the development of New Orleans' urban landscape cannot be underestimated. His drawings, sculptures and conceptual projects have opened dialogue and inspired change in a city often reluctant to do so. His participation in civic projects like the Mississippi Bridge project, the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition, and the subsequent riverfront and Warehouse District redevelopment have each fundamentally affected the shape and direction of the city. Finally, his role in the founding of the Contemporary Arts Center is, in this context, Tannen's most lasting and successful contribution to the collective edification of New Orleans, and is the quintessential combination of all of the forces defining his unique brand of art coupled with community involvement.

The collective work of Robert Tannen has inspired, and will continue to inspire, simultaneous bursts of public outcry and delight. As good art should be, it is challenging in the best sense of the word. In the aesthetic and civic arena, his art is both a warning and a celebration.

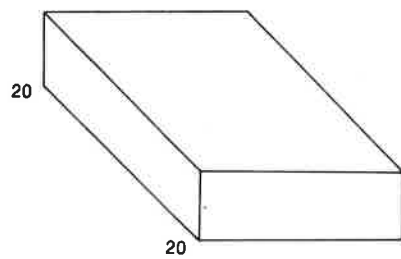
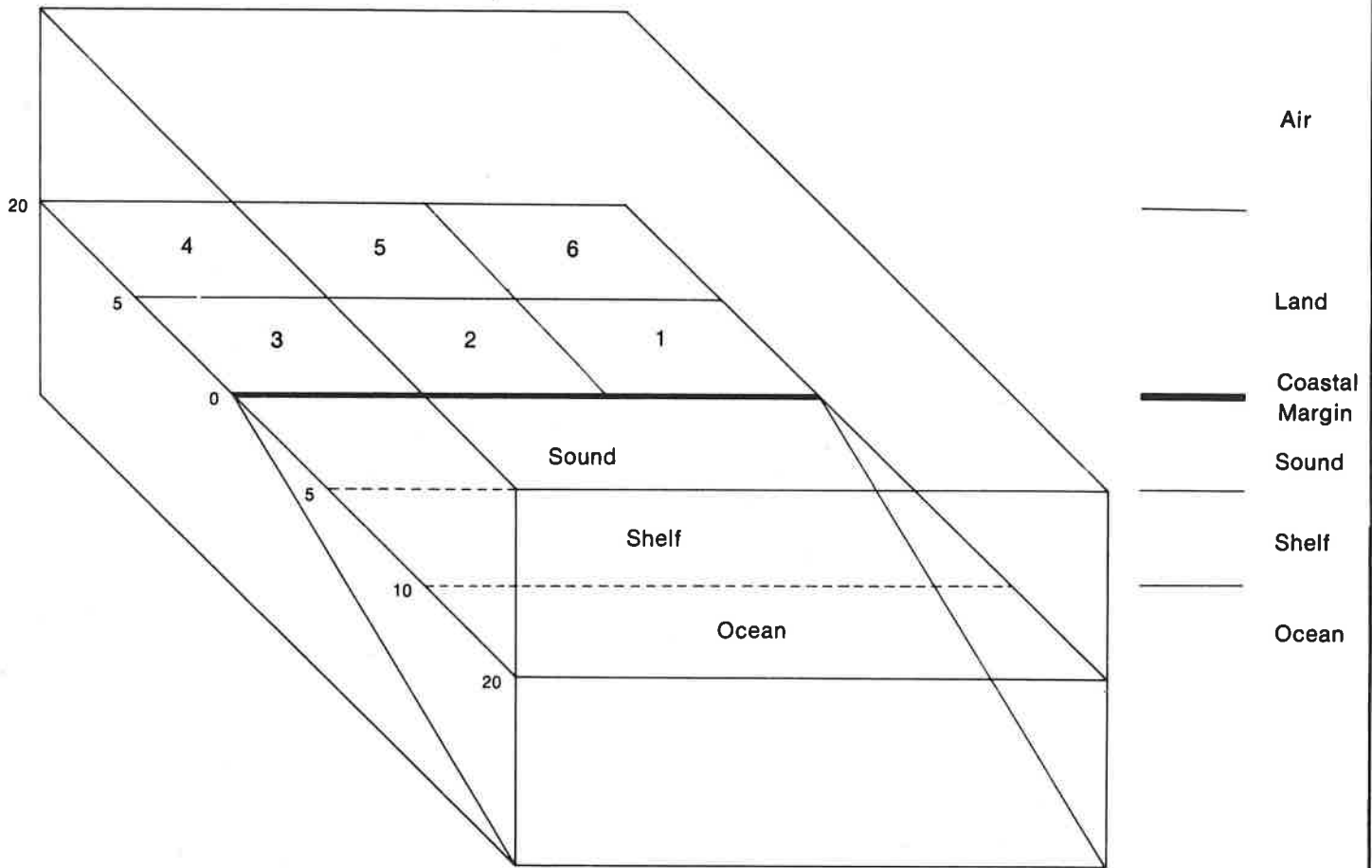


TOP:  
Opening Planning Process  
Mississippi River Bridge Study  
1971

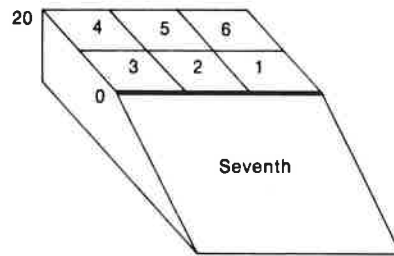
CENTER:  
Televised Public Forum  
Mississippi River Bridge Proposals  
1975

BOTTOM:  
Arkansas State Government Retreat  
Governor Dale Bumpers  
(now U.S. Senator)  
and Staff  
Petit Jean Moutain, 1974

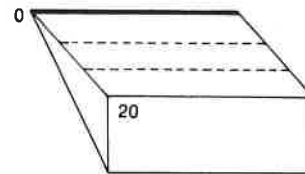
LEFT:  
*Map of Experience in  
Louisiana and Mississippi*, 1978



Air



Land



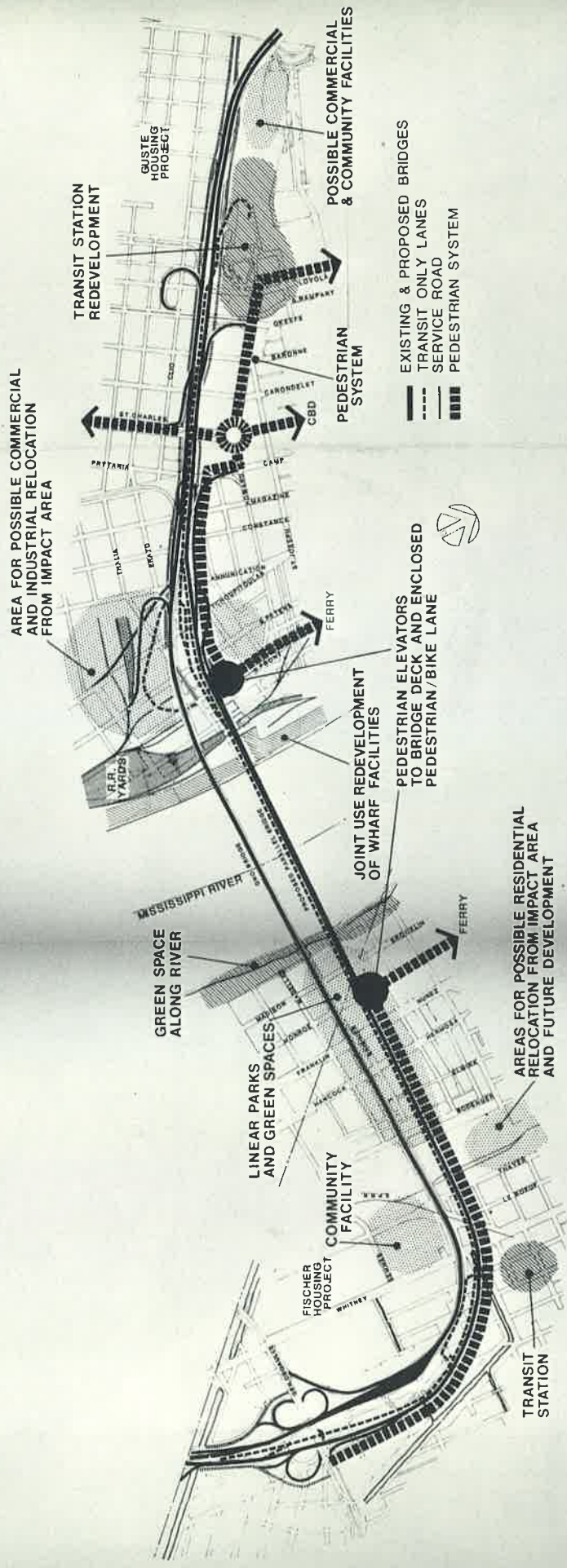
Current activity in the region is most dense along the coastal margin. Counties are ranked from 1 to 6 in the intensity of current and future development. Development in the Seventh County

will proceed over the next twenty years with activity levels increasing from the coastal margin south. This development will greatly increase the wealth-generating potential of the region.

## MISSISSIPPI GULF COAST AFTER HURRICANE CAMILLE : THE SIX AND SEVENTH COUNTIES

META SYSTEMS INC.

ROBERT TANNEN



**PROPOSED JOINT USE AND URBAN DESIGN CONCEPTS FOR GREATER MISSISSIPPI RIVER BRIDGE CORRIDOR IN ORLEANS PARISH, LOUISIANA**  
 ROBERT TANNEN  
 CURTIS AND DAVIS

**Planning Studies:**

**LEFT:**

Plan for reconstruction of six coastal counties of Mississippi devastated by Hurricane Camille. The concept proposes a seventh county -- the coastline, the Mississippi Sound and off shore Barrier Islands -- the areas most fragile and subject to hurricane destruction. The scheme offers ways to utilize and protect the land, water and air space. Concept proposal by Robert Tannen for Matasystems, Inc., Cambridge, Mass.

**RIGHT:**

Urban Design Proposal for Greater New Orleans Mississippi River Parallel Bridges. Proposal provides for pedestrian and bike access, and use of the bridge and surrounding area as catalyst for the creation of open space and urban redevelopment. Proposal by Robert Tannen included in studies conducted by The Planning Group, Inc. and Curtis and Davis Architects and Planners from 1971 -1977.

**NEXT PAGE:**

Completed New Orleans Mississippi River Parallel Bridges, 1989.

