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MY TURN

'Canal villages' could become Phoenix legacy

Amsterdam has 47 miles of canals. Venice 125. And Phoenix has ... 181! Yet, Amsterdam and Venice are widely known and lauded for their stunning canal-oriented cityscapes, while Phoenix has largely turned its back on this tremendous asset. Sure, we use the canals for recreation and have been engaged in canal enhancements — public art, benches, landscaping and shade structures — for years. But we have failed to leverage the opportunity to create special places along the canals that combine live, work and play.

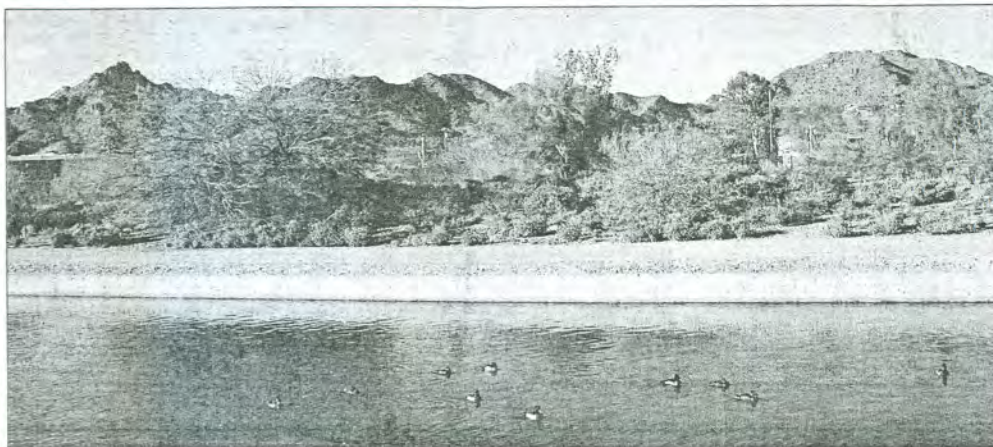


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I'm not suggesting we urbanize the length of our canals. Indeed, we must preserve the vast majority of these scenic canals as they are. It is curious, however, that the places where our modern street grid intersects with the canal system, initially built by the first inhabitants of this region from 100 B.C. until A.D. 1450, are largely neglected. The odd-shaped lots yielded by the overlap of the two systems has discouraged development in a city accustomed to right angled-lots. As we speed over the canals in our cars, we may see them from the corner of our eyes, or not notice them at all.

I propose we assist these ugly ducklings to grow into beautiful swans by creating "canal villages," small urban hubs where canals meet major streets.

Each neighborhood would determine the nature of their canal village. It might feature cafes, restaurants and boutiques on the ground level with offices and condos above. It could offer a community center, library, post office, affordable housing and market rate rental apartments. Perhaps a grocery, health club, bike shop and school, with assisted living for seniors. The canal village might be one story or more. It could blend with its surroundings or stand out. It might include public art by local schoolchildren or established artists. It could demonstrate green building practices, including sustainable water features that recycle water from the canals. Communities would gather to make these decisions during a half-day



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Her view on Phoenix canals, including this spot near 32nd Street and Missouri Avenue

workshop facilitated by the municipalities.

The only requirement would be that ground floor uses are public and oriented to the canal as well as the street. Southbridge, a project developed by visionary developer Fred Unger along the southern bank of the Arizona Canal in Scottsdale, offers an excellent example of such mixed-use canal and street-oriented urban development. While this project is situated in the middle of an existing downtown, I'm suggesting we apply Unger's model to these neglected parcels of our urban fabric.

The benefits of such "can-urban development" are many. While providing desired amenities to neighborhoods, the canal villages would also become a trademark Phoenix feature. Phoenix would become known worldwide for its unique canal villages. While each neighborhood would have its own canal village, with its distinct character, people would also enjoy visiting others around town. Unlike Amsterdam and Venice, much smaller cities with urbanized canals through-

out, Phoenix's trademark would be distributed canal villages, reflecting its unique quality of being a "network" city as well as a region that creatively intersperses urban living into a breathtaking desert landscape.

By offering comfortable and beautiful places next to the water, the canal villages will contribute to provide a sense of place, a sense of history, a sense of identity and a sense of community. The orientation toward the canal would bring people in contact with it more regularly, cultivating respect for our heritage as well as our precious water supply. For the thousands who use the canal banks every day for recreation, there will finally be a place to stop for something to drink, a bite to eat or to use the restrooms.

In addition, the canal villages would contribute to urban regeneration and economic revitalization. The zoning overlay and incentives provided by municipalities to support this kind of development could even spur the currently sluggish economy.

Rather than neglect the leftover

parcels that depart from the repetitive grid, I say we honor these moments where modern and ancient civilizations meet, realizing the long-term regional development framework envisioned two decades ago by Salt River Project, Arizona State University, the Junior League and seven Valley cities in a Metropolitan Canal Study. Rather than turn our backs to the canals, let's celebrate the birth of our state by enhancing what gave birth to our region and provides our lifeblood.

We could identify a location for the first canal village and open it for Arizona's centennial, with a plan to continue this pattern of development throughout the region over the next 100 years. These vibrant hubs along the canals would enhance our lives in so many ways and leave a special legacy.

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