Coastal Band. Pilot case in the Bay of Panama

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Panama, the key link of the American continent, is located in the tropical belt of America, bordered by the pacific ocean and the Caribbean Sea.

The Panamanian coast has thousands of kilometers in the pacific ocean as well as in the Caribbean sea. Its climate, tropical humid, characteristic of the area, is reflected through the 2.500 mm of rain fall during nine months of the year, giving us a ninety percent (90%) of relative humidity. The Panamanian economy depends greatly on its water abundance, because the panama canal will not function without it

This reality has been projected in various regional master plans in the last five years, one of them is the "metropolitan plan" for panama and colon city.

Its purpose is to regulate the development of the urban areas, to define and to establish rules for the land use, to guide economical activities and investments in urban infrastructure. within this plan, a series of rules and programs were proposed to improve the citizens quality of life, which includes the system of open space developed by the ministry of housing and the civil organizations, with the purpose of offering opportunities for recreation to the people living in the metropolitan area.

Considering that water confers to the city of panama its main esthetic feature, drawing its borders, reflecting its buildings and acting as a frame for the urban grid, it is propose to use these transoceanic waters as the structural base for new and existing open spaces, within the metropolitan area.

The opens spaces system defines the following types of recreational areas:

Urban green area, Coastal band, District park, Community park and Plazas

The costal band is a designed narrow public urban space, that allows the development of the passive and active activities proper of a urban center and it also facilitates the main body water supplies of the metropolitan area. Its minimum width is 50 meters based on the half average of the high-tide. The model of the coastal band should narrate forms and cultural expressions of the country that reflects the relationship between the urban people and water. This pilot project will be located in an area known as "balboa avenue". The selected area is the waterfront located between the seafood market in balboa avenue and "punta paitilla" residential area. This site was selected because it has a great potential for recreational and tourist use, for its historic value as a space in the common memory

of the citizens.

The coastal area selected is divided by the fishing yatch club and the miramar hotel, resulting a partial obstruction of the view to the sea and the marked unequal use of the coastal line. Currently, this area has a sidewalk of about 2 meters wide, alternated with 2 urban parks. By paitilla you will find the delta of the "matasnillo river", which goes through the city.

Nowadays access to the space is insecure for pedestrians, due to the change of the balboa avenue's nature, from a way of gentle vehicle flow to a way of massive traffic. The lack of adequate access walkways to the coastal line does not facilitates the intensive use of the open space located toward the sea. The coastal space counts with various perpendicular streets that connects itself with the urban grid, however the main corridors are parallel to the balboa avenue.

There are other open spaces close to the coastal area, but they are not connected visually or physically with it.

The most outstanding activities on these areas are macro businesses, banking and financial institutions, and residential use. It is evident the lack of small businesses like: restaurants, bars, discos, recreational centers, and other activities that could attract tourists toward the coast to enjoy it.
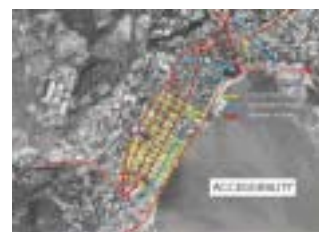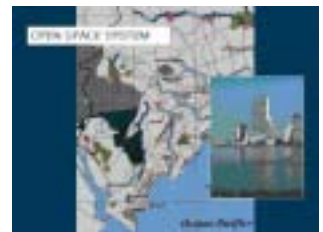
In spite of the lack of accessibility and the contamination, people continue using this area for recreational purpose.

The coastal band will be framed within the following main principles:

· The physical development should be a joined vision integrated with the surrounding.
· The coastal band should contribute to improve the environmental quality of coastal line and include its immediate urban surrounding.
· It will be a public and recreational space. Commercial use will be acceptable, as long as it is integrated to the open space and contributes to strength the public value of the coastal band.
· It should also contribute to project the landscape and historic values of the territorial coastal hub and its natural and urban surrounding.

Once the basic development ideas were defined, three different conceptual scenarios were created to be consulted with the civil organizations by a public forum. In this way, the community had the opportunity to participate in the creation of the final concept to develop this coastal band.

In the first scenario, two big development centers will be located in the extremities of the coastal line, which permit the esta-blishment of all kind of commercial – recreational activities. The west limit will have a moderate development oriented to cultural and educational activities which dimension should not exceed the already existing

adjacent buildings, to avoid breaking the present vision of the old city. The east limit will permit a more intensive use and will shelter services and commerce destined to satisfy a variety of recreational needs.

These development centers facilitate the creation of an open space to the public for all the city, so that the panoramic view of the bay of panama is kept and will be accessible to all the citizens. at the same time, the development centers will have the responsibility of generating financial resources to sustain the public open space. As well as the open space itself, development centers are connected by means of walkways to the other side of the balboa avenue. these walkways are extended as far as the first line of adjacent buildings, with the purpose to attract the transversal traffic of walkers to the public space.

The second scenario consists of a complete commercialization of the first line adjacent buildings on the other side of the balboa avenue, promoted by fiscal supports and special urban norms. this will imply the increase of the capacity of the walkways required to encourage people to use this sector. By the seaside a landfill will be done which will become the public open space, located between the seafood market to "punta paitilla".

Both spaces will be connected by sidewalks, located in those points where a greater concentration of activities is generated. In this way, the commercial development on the landside of the balboa avenue will guarantee a continuous flow of persons to and from the open space, and also will provide the economic resources for its management. By the seaside of the open space, recreational commercial services, for a very low intensive use, will be allowed to satisfy the need for snacks and beverages, or the use of any recreational equipments.

In the third scenario a considerable landfill is done on the balboa avenue that will shelter public open space sectors with zones of recreational commercial development and cultural and educational activities of a moderated intensity. the new generated space will have 50% of open space and recreational zones combined with another 50% of tourism, commercial, maritime and cultural development zones.

As in other cases, the walkways connecting the land side and the seaside will be important. this scenario suggest working only on the landfill area without intervening in the existing surrounding. in this way it is proposed that the public open space procures its own financial support.

The result of the public forum was a recreational space that could be visually and physically open, available and self sustainable. today the balboa avenue is still an important space in the memory of the citizens, but it is getting more deteriorated and environmentally threatened, due in part to the lack of concrete decisions that could allow the development of the coastal band.