

BEND ON THE OHIO

Can good design save a historic grain elevator in this Indiana town?

Text, drawings, and photos by Eric Fulford

TWENTY YEARS AGO I found myself in the river town of Mount Vernon, Indiana, which is perched high above a horseshoe bend on the Ohio River, to work on the site design for the entire city block of the new public library. During that first visit, just a few miles

north I discovered the quiet charm of the early 19th-century utopian community of New Harmony, Indiana, situated on the Wabash River. My appreciation of these two communities and their landscapes has prompted repeated visits with family and friends and, in 1991, my marriage in Phillip

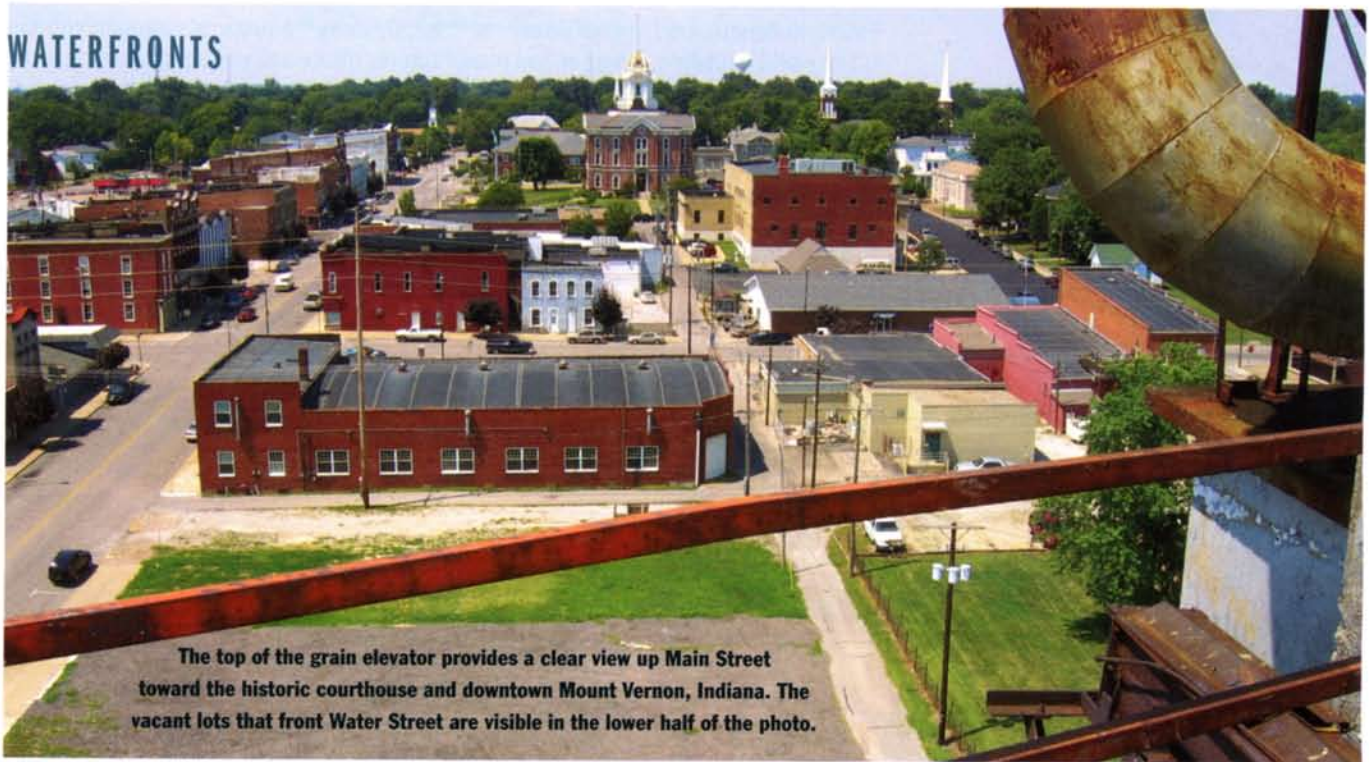
Johnson's Roofless Church in New Harmony to Ann Reed, my partner at NINEbark. So when we were invited to join with Dawn Kroh of Green 3, another landscape architecture studio, to develop a vision for 15 acres of Mount Vernon's river frontage, no persuasion was necessary.

More than 50 small Indiana and Kentucky river towns share the Ohio River; however, Mount Vernon benefits most



A birds-eye view, above, shows the future riverfront, the river bend, port, and agricultural landscape beyond. Existing Sherburne Park, the wharf, and the grain elevator, here, overlook the Ohio River.

WATERFRONTS



The top of the grain elevator provides a clear view up Main Street toward the historic courthouse and downtown Mount Vernon, Indiana. The vacant lots that front Water Street are visible in the lower half of the photo.

from its position on a horseshoe bend of the river and its setting among natural, historical, and cultural sites concentrated at the apex of this corner of the state. Its charm as an active working river town rests with innate qualities that don't rise from previous design or planning interventions—it re-

sides in its economic health and the potential for keeping the local culture intact for residents to enjoy. This can be seen at the small public park and wharf landing, three blocks from the county courthouse, where the community is drawn throughout the day and evening to pause and enjoy the vi-

sual power of the river, the continuous tow-boat and barge traffic, or the boat crews landing to restock groceries before moving up- or downstream.

This is also the place where a grain elevator occupies the heart of what is now being envisioned as a much larger public

The vision plan offers a contrast of old and new to produce a beauty no one aesthetic can equal and to provide a new riverfront experience.





The endless horizon of lawn and terrace, *here*, emphasizes the verticality of the transformed silos. A vegetated rain garden, *below*, will absorb most of the stormwater runoff from a reengineered Water Street.

gathering place. Visible from both the courthouse square and the river, the long silent grain elevator, now shorn of all its auxiliary buildings, stands alone between Water Street and the river. It was for us an immediately compelling landmark. This symbol of American ingenuity represents an economic marriage of agriculture and industry that first fascinated me during childhood trips across Kansas and only grew in importance professionally after I

had lived and worked in the Midwest. Ultimately, my appreciation was deepened by reading Reyner Banham's *A Concrete Atlantis*, Frank Gehlke's *Measure of Emptiness*, and Lisa Mahar-Keplinger's *Grain Elevators*, all of which led to my advocacy to incorporate their transformed presence in the design of urban places (see "Tilting at Grain Mills," *Landscape Architecture*, April 1994). My initial professional effort, a struggle with White River State Park

to preserve the Acme-Evans grain elevators in downtown Indianapolis, was not successful—the silos fell to the wrecking ball (see "A Canal Runs Through It," *Landscape Architecture*, May 1999). However, Mount Vernon offers another chance to demonstrate how the potentially adaptable form of the grain elevator can become a stunning destination for both the community and visitors.

The Ohio River played an enormous role in the economic health and identity of Mount Vernon a century ago; this remains true today and should hold true tomorrow with an active, working waterfront that is home to two operational grain loading and processing facilities, an expanding Port of Indiana, and a General Electric Plastics research and manufacturing facility that produces the high-performance plastics found in iPods and iPhones.

Kroh, with whom we have had several meaningful collaborations, worked with the mayor and advisory committees to secure several federal transportation enhancement grants and a federal appropriation the town matched, allowing us to prepare an overall vision plan and the design/construction documents necessary for the first of four phases of construction.



Early in the visioning process, it became clear that without intervention, the grain elevator would probably be demolished—bids to remediate any environmental hazards before granting a demolition contract had already been sought. It was pivotal that we clearly communicate the importance of the elevator as a landmark component of the planned park for Mount Vernon.

Expected resistance never materialized as town leaders, committees, and residents embraced the vision of a linear park that respected existing Sherburne Park and the wharf while incorporating the grain elevator, which with the right entrepreneurial efforts could be transformed into a world-class climbing facility with a ready-made platform for dining and spectacular panoramic views that could become the heart of a reborn riverfront.

The overall vision for the riverfront pre-

sented to the community included the following significant components:

Wharf Landing. The wharf provides anchorage for towboats and steamboat cruises that ply the river between May and October and lures folks to the water's edge either to launch private pleasure boats or to park and watch the river traffic. Interpretive elements that showcase the working river, past and present, will be integrated into the space, including vintage Library of Congress and local images of boat pilots, captains, engineers, and crews who worked the Ohio. The paved gradient that measures the seasonal flooding cycles of the river will be modified and improved.

Sherburne Park. The historic fabric and unique character of this nearly 100-year-old park and shelter will be respected and renewed by making it Americans with Disabilities Act accessible and by reducing the conflict between vehicles and people, which currently compete for access and views to the river.

Long formal lawn and stepped terraces. Inspired by the physical layout of

Sherburne Park, this 1,400-foot linear park would serve as the backyard of the town where children play, families picnic, or residents gather for festivals. This prized lawn will allow precious green breathing space for folks to take in the everyday theater of the plodding towboats and their cargo barges as well as outdoor films in the evening.

Grain elevator landmark. A renewed and transformed grain elevator will become a gathering point around which all types of activities swirl. It can offer previously unavailable views of the river bend, port, town, and agricultural landscape beyond. This durable concrete structure can be altered to offer enlarged interior spaces, constructed viewing platforms, and large windows. The most exciting adaptation and economic engine appropriate for Mount Vernon was a recreational rock climbing gym modeled on the internationally renowned Upper Limits in Illinois that, like Stone Works in Texas and OKC Rocks in Oklahoma, is housed in a once-abandoned grain elevator. Their nearly 100-foot-tall interior chambers have been adapted to of-

fer beginner and advanced climbers a variety of year-round climbing experiences from rappelling, shaped climbing stems, and leadable routes to exterior 120-foot ice climbing in the winter. Hiking and climbing recreational opportunities abound across the Ohio River in central Kentucky and over the Wabash River in southern Illinois, making Mount Vernon a potential destination attractive to both a local and a regional market of thrill seekers and professional athletes.

Water Street. Thoughtful planning and new architecturally designed commercial buildings, agreeably scaled to their older surviving neighbors, will be critical to the outward appearance and reconstruction along mostly vacant Water Street. Our first suggestion was to halt any further demolition of the neglected historic buildings in the surrounding downtown and that each new building along the riverfront should use similar materials as these survivors whose facades preserve the distinct charm of Mount Vernon. Our

second recommendation was to envision these new buildings as vibrant places to live, work, eat, or stay by including large windows at street level and sidewalk-wide balconies to take advantage of the broad view of the bend in the river.

Our advocacy on behalf of the grain elevator suggests that it will remain now and in the future as a link between past and present.

Riverwoods. The plan will protect and enhance the wonderful scenic nature of the open woodlands that stretch along the floodway and bluff from the landmark grain elevator to the Port of Indiana by providing a greenway trail link to the evolving regional Ohio River Discovery Trail.

These building blocks are intended to

help Mount Vernon reengage its physical and cultural link to the Ohio. Creating the plan has been an adventure for us as well, whether we were perched at the end of a hook and ladder 160 feet in the air (courtesy of the fire department) or nearly 200 feet above the ground in the extended bucket of a cherry picker that allowed us to access the roof of the grain elevator, where we photographed the dramatic panoramic views. The vision has led town leaders, even with a changed political administration, to authorize the NINEbark and Green 3 design team to move forward with phase one design and construction documents, set to bid later this summer. Our successful advocacy on behalf of the grain elevator suggests that it will remain now and in the future as a link between past and present and a place where visitors can once again enjoy the bend on the Ohio.

Eric Fulford is a practicing landscape architect for NINEbark, Inc. in Indianapolis and a fellow of the American Academy in Rome.