



Re-imagining the river barge experience

San Antonio, Texas is a large city with a small town feel, and the River Walk is one of our most distinguishing features. Designed in the 1920s and constructed between 1938 and 1940, the linear park is among the highest rated tourist attractions in Texas. Since its earliest beginnings, the River Walk has been navigated by small watercraft providing riders a unique view of lush landscaping and architectural gems.

As San Antonio prepared to celebrate its 300th anniversary in 2018, City leaders wanted to re-imagine the river barge experience with a newly designed, more sustainable and modular fleet using innovative technology to meet the needs of both tourists and residents. Creative collaboration with diverse stakeholders from public and private entities and the community resulted in a bold and innovative new fleet of barges that reflects the character of our progressive and growing city.

In just two years, the City of San Antonio's Center City Development & Operations Department oversaw the design, fabrication, and launch of a 44 barge fleet on the San Antonio River. The new design has truly transformed the river barge experience for residents and visitors. The river barges made their debut in September 2017, and the full fleet is in operation.

Background:

The previous river barge design was created for the 1968 World's Fair in Hemisfair Park. In fall 2015, the City partnered with The American Institute of Architects, San Antonio Chapter (AIA San Antonio) to implement an international design competition to redesign our river barges. A distinguished panel selected the top three proposals from a pool of 12 anonymous submissions. The evaluation criteria included constructability, functionality, maintenance, design and innovation. The finalists showcased their designs to the public at an open house in spring 2016, with the selection committee selecting Houston firm METALAB's design as the winner.

The City of San Antonio worked with METALAB to refine the design and test a prototype on the River Walk with actual passengers. In summer 2016, the City went through a competitive solicitation process to select a contractor to fabricate a fleet of 43 new all-electric, aluminum river barges. Lake Assault Boats, LLC delivered the full fleet of barges to San Antonio in September 2017. GO RIO San Antonio Cruises was selected by the San Antonio City Council as the barge operator, and assumed operation of the fleet in October 2017. The City of San Antonio retains ownership of the barge fleet.

Innovation: The design competition followed an aggressive schedule, and allowed for a public input process. The total time from call for designs to fully functioning 44-barge fleet was 24 months. The final design provides an all-electric fleet with increased passenger comfort and unique San Antonio branding that can continue to be innovative with changeable, decorative railings. The single-level deck design also allows for wheelchair accessibility with adjacent companion seating (the current barge design requires wheelchair passengers to sit behind the driver). An all-electric fleet of this size and this volume of usage had not been tested before, and San Antonio had to continuously refine



the design – testing two prototype barges in the process - before it worked for our needs (12-hour run time with less than 6-hour charging time).

The old barge design accommodated narrated tours plus chartered dining events. The new design accommodates a larger variety of uses including public tours, river parades, cocktail and dining cruises, live musical entertainment, and ballet performances. Morning yoga, pop up shops, floating animal adoptions and other creative uses could also be accommodated on the new fleet creating new experiences for the community.

Sustainability: The fleet of barges is all-electric with zero emissions, replacing a compressed national gas fleet. The barges are revenue-producing, and fees from barge operations helped fund the design and procurement of the new fleet. Barge fees will also help fund future capital needs of the fleet (i.e. replacement batteries).

Replication: Cities often face challenges in designing public spaces. For San Antonio, the river barges are ridden by over 1.5 million people every year. They are also utilized for special events such as river parades. The old barge design needed critical accessibility updates to better serve a diverse community, plus a new look that was representative of San Antonio's culture. With a multitude of users, creating a functional new design that met a variety of needs was imperative. Other cities could utilize a design competition with public input process to develop creative solutions for downtown public spaces.

Representation: The River Walk is one of the San Antonio's most prized public spaces, and traversing the river by barge is a unique experience enjoyed by millions every year. Improving the design of the barge was critical, and numerous groups provided input into the process. The diverse design competition jury represented various groups, including internationally recognized architects and engineers, local community leaders, artists, hospitality industry representatives, and designers. The technical committee provided expert guidance, and included River Operations staff with decades of experience on the San Antonio River, the City's Office of Historic Preservation, the City's Transportation & Capital Improvements Department, the San Antonio River Walk Association (association for River Walk businesses), the San Antonio River Authority, and the Southwest Research Institute. Community feedback on the prototype barge further refined the design to make sure it was right for San Antonio visitors and residents.

Outcome: More than 11.5 million people visit the River Walk annually. Of these, 9.3 million are from outside Bexar County and 2.2 million River Walk patrons are locals, approximately two thirds of which visit the River Walk more than twice a year. These visitors stimulate an overall economic impact of \$3.1 billion and support 31,000 jobs. The River Walk, and the barges that cruise down the river, are an essential part of San Antonio's urban fabric that attracts visitors from around the world.

The new barge design has been widely praised by locals and visitors. The new design is bold, innovative and reflects the character of San Antonio and its people. We are proud that our new fleet is in place as we celebrate San Antonio's Tricentennial in 2018.