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Pedagogy and Open Space: A Design for Learning

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Abstract

This is a case study about landscape design students becoming a part of the community through their work with a small piece of urban land. It is about making connections, learning through service, and the desire to create a sense of place while improving environmental conditions. The story of North Gate Park on the Paint Branch is about the will of the community to go beyond compliance of environmental regulations and to meet the challenge of seeking ecological balance in a city that has become burdened by the weight of the automobile. It tells of partnerships in service to nature and people, and team building through funding grants, city council hearings, design review board meetings, and multiple-agency co-operation. It is about innovative thinking for environmental change and how the process for turning land into place included university teaching, research and outreach. It is also a reflection on two unanticipated by-products of the design process – a change in how students perceive their education and a community’s reaffirmation of its values and commitments.

Keywords: Urban parks; studio learning; collaboration

1. Introduction

“The dawning awareness of the limits of the earth is a challenge to educators at every level everywhere. The knowledge and pedagogy necessary to subdue the earth is not entirely suitable to our becoming “plain member and citizen” of the biotic community (Leopold, 1966:240). But signs of change in educational priorities and directions are now more evident than ever before. And no institutions in modern society are better able to catalyze the necessary transition than schools, colleges, and universities....[T]hey have a great impact on what people pay attention to. The question is not whether colleges and universities could help catalyze the transition to a sustainable society, but whether they have the vision and the courage to do so (Eagan and Orr, 1992).”

David W. Orr

The Problem of Education, spring 1992

In 2000, the University of Maryland Facilities Master Plan Steering Committee, then in the beginning stages of updating its campus plan, invited David Orr to speak about his work with Oberlin College in establishing a sustainable university campus. His talk focused on the resources available to a research university and how these can best be put to constructive use in the making of healthy academic environments. He spoke of “rethinking education” and, as he had done in his book *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment and Human Prospect*, outlined several principles for integrating ecological consciousness in all matters of curriculum development (1994:12). One of these tenets was that the way learning occurs is as important as the content of particular courses. In his spoken plea for pedagogical reform he strongly emphasized that students and faculty need to become a part of the process for improving the quality of life in our communities, starting with their own campus.

This case study outlines how a group of students and faculty took Professor Orr's principles to heart. It records the process for transforming a neglected piece of land into a viable, valuable open space, turning education into "learning by doing" and, in doing so, taking responsibility for shaping the future of our environment. The process has culminated in a design that will help get people out of their cars, on their feet and in touch with nature. The resultant landscape will inform visitors about riparian and woodland ecosystems, remind the town and the campus of its agricultural roots, filter storm water runoff and give a good, comfortable seat for those waiting for the bus. More importantly, the process has resulted in new friendships, new collaborations, new visions and the will to forge ahead into new projects that will establish greater environmental sustainability. Nature, community and students of landscape architecture are the big winners in this ongoing experiment in sustainable open space design.

2. Background

In College Park, a suburb of Washington, DC, and the home of the University of Maryland's flagship campus, a three-acre parcel of land, located at the intersection of a major tributary of the Anacostia River and a busy commercial highway, has recently become a symbol of community optimism and healthy environmental change. Less than 500 feet from the monumental brick piers and bronze letters that announce the university's main entrance drive, this long-abandoned and overgrown floodplain has been physically inaccessible and visually obscured. Steep, eroding embankments along the stream valley of the Paint Branch make crossing difficult, and directional signs, event announcements and highway postings clutter the view. The property blends into the landscape of commercial roadside architecture that characterizes the adjacent highway. The floodplain is unsuitable for buildings but its location at the convergence of two interdependent communal entities – town and gown – gives it the potential to become an important gateway between the two.

Over the past five years, the property has been identified in two major planning documents as a candidate for park development. The 2001 College Park US 1 Corridor Sector Plan made note of its potential when it established urban design guidelines for thoughtful, sustainable development along the highway corridor. Upon its final approval, the University of Maryland Facilities Master Plan (2002) reaffirmed this proposal and suggested that a series of bridges over the Paint Branch create direct pedestrian and bicyclist links through the site. The processes for creating each of these planning documents included exhaustive efforts to engage the community and together the plans identified many of the community's need and desires.

In the spring of 2002, that park site caught the attention of the Landscape Architecture Program faculty and students who wanted to learn how a public park could best address issues of environmental sensitivity, urban sustainability, and community proprietorship. The proposed park site was located on land owned by the University of Maryland and the Maryland National Park and Planning Commission, a public planning and management agency that governs in the two Maryland counties that border the nation's capital. The Landscape Architecture Program initiated the discussion of what would be best for the land and for the community of students, employees, residents, and visitors, and the plan for North Gate Park was under way.

3. Site Description

The west and south boundaries of the site are defined by the Paint Branch stream valley. The main university campus is to the west of the stream but there are no direct connections between the architecture of the campus and this valuable environmental resource. On the

north side are privately owned commercial properties and to the east is US Route 1 (known locally as Baltimore Avenue), the same highway that runs from Maine to Florida. It is a congested, noisy, polluted, dangerous and unsightly urban highway and an all-too-familiar piece of late 20th-century Americana. Fortunately, there is a plan to transform this legacy of suburban sprawl into a tree-lined boulevard, promenade and mass transportation corridor, improving the experience for walkers and bicycling enthusiasts. The Urban Design Plan of the US Route 1 Corridor Sector Plan proposes increased residential and commercial development and major landscape enhancements.

4. Methodology

The second-year students in the four-year Bachelor of Landscape Architecture curriculum were introduced to the North Gate Park project in the Graphic Communication and Design Studio course. The instructor, Jack Sullivan, who is an Associate Professor and a practicing landscape architect, wrote the problem statement, which was based on recent community input. He conducted the second half of the studio as a competition for the park design.

The competition was funded with a grant from the Maryland Heritage Area Authority (MHAA) for “a design concept, site development, and construction documentation project for creating a public park near the north entrance to the University of Maryland on Route 1”. Students would be given cash awards for the concepts that best represent creative, appropriate and graphically clear responses to the design problem. As they began their design investigation, the students met with representatives of the University of Maryland, the Maryland National Capitol Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC), and the City of College Park, all of which had been collaborating partners in the grant application. Their contribution of equal shares in matching funds brought the total grant to \$33,200 to support awards and internships for the development of a complete set of construction drawings.

The studio’s pedagogical intent was focused on giving design form and ecological sustainability to urban parkland. The studio was to focus on design theory and technique, and ventures into a full community participation process had not been considered. Nevertheless, students and faculty soon realized that they could not work effectively without a better understanding of the conditions of the site and the needs of the community. They conducted interviews and informal workshops with representatives from several organizations within the community. Botanists, ecologists, community activists, heritage tourism proponents, bicycle enthusiasts, traffic engineers and nearby residents participated in student-organized site visits, interviews, and site analysis presentations.

At the end of the spring semester, 22 students presented their design proposals at a local city council meeting. Students received unanimous accolades for the thoroughness and professionalism of their presentations. The city council came to full agreement and gave its support for the project, offering the use of city staff to apply for transportation enhancement grants at the park location.

The University of Maryland Facilities Planning Department accepted the responsibility of forming the competition jury, which was composed of design and planning professionals, agency managers, institutional administrators and citizens. The North Gate Park competition winners Douglas Sheredos (first place), David Means (second place) and Claire Fishman (third place) received cash prizes and four other students received meritorious recognition for their creative and well-documented submissions. The jury recognized strengths in each of the three winning schemes: Sheredos (Figure 1, left) most thoroughly explored the site’s civic

potential and best explained his intentions for the entire park; Fishman’s inventive plan (Figure 1, right) brought a modernist’s vocabulary to the constructed ground plain and clearly ordered spaces; and Means (Figure 2) used native trees and shrubs to define a series of open and enclosed spaces for greater plant diversity and landscape interest.

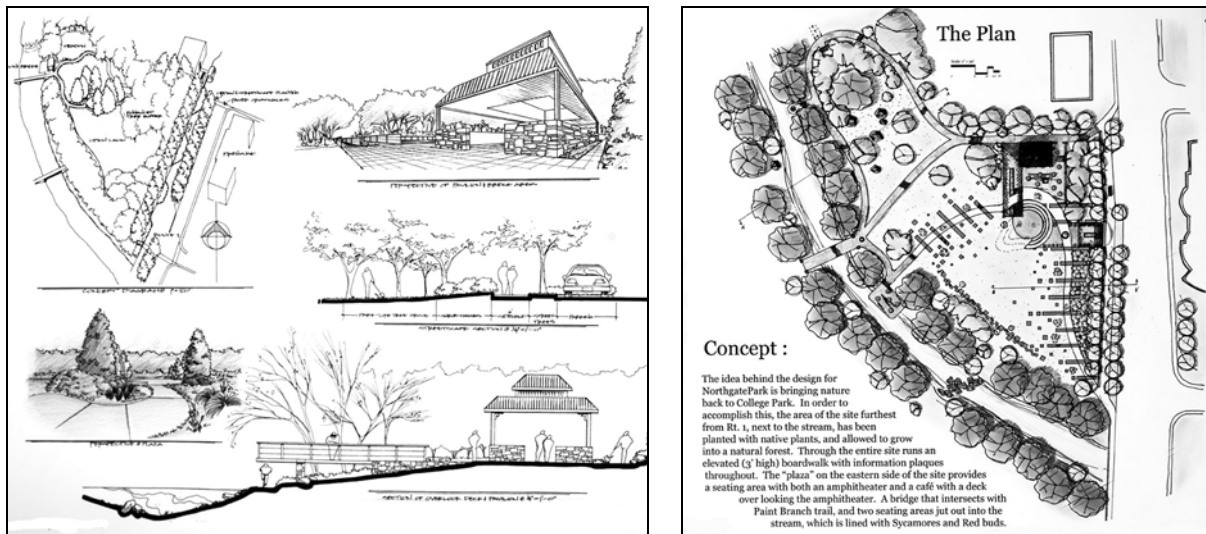


Figure 1. Award-winning schemes by Douglas Sheredos (left) and Claire Fishman (right)

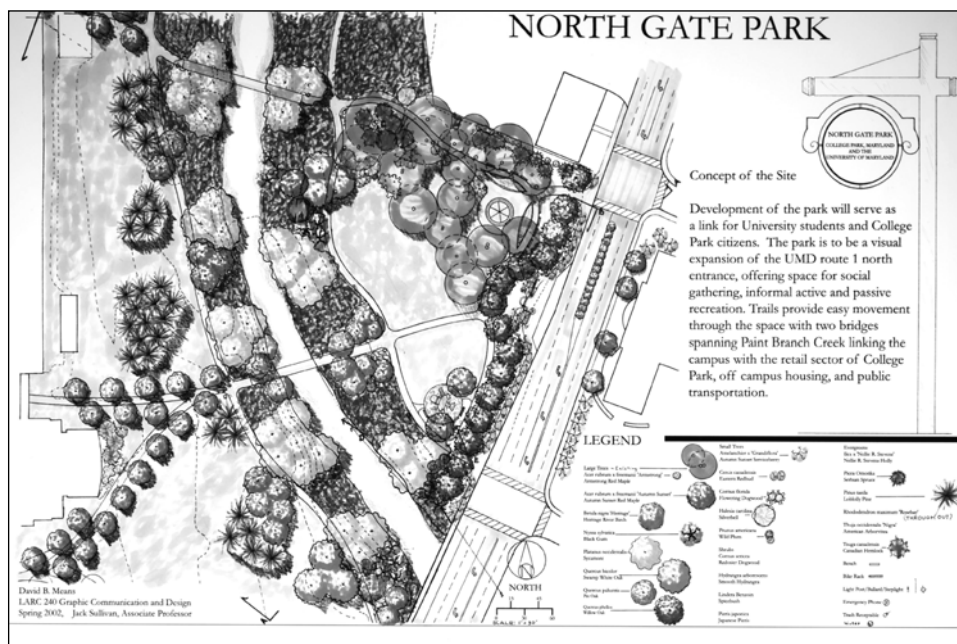


Figure 2. The plan by David Means.

5. The ‘Studio Office’

During the summer, the MHAA grant afforded an opportunity for five students to work full-time on the project. The student and faculty design team worked as a professional office, using the studio space and technology of the Landscape Architecture Program. Students surveyed existing vegetation and researched native plants and plant associations. They explored the use of sustainable building materials, bio-retention methods for managing storm water, architectural structures and night lighting, among other elements of the plan. Over the

course of the summer the design team established a new design, based on the concepts developed in the student competition. They revised and refined the design as they responded to comments following a series of presentations to the university’s Architectural Design Standards Board and Facilities Planning Department, the MNCPPC, and the College Park Planning Office. Students participated in all meetings, making presentations, recording comments and responding to concerns regarding materials, safety and character.



Figure 3. North Gate Park’s design builds on the desire to bridge the stream for pedestrian and bicyclist access to the commercial and residential areas along Route 1. Illustration by Jack Sullivan.

6. The Product

The approved park design (Figure 3) takes advantage of the developing forested stream buffer and the plans to restore the degraded stream, adding three other landscape scenarios – an orchard with a demonstration of native grasses, a wildflower meadow and a rain garden. A 300 foot long dry-laid stone wall- marks and protects the riparian buffer zone. Its capstone will be etched with images and text that identify the plants and wildlife in the park. The plan incorporates signage and art that interpret the ecological conditions throughout the park.

Two bridges and well-lighted pathways guide visitors through the park. Large, illuminated brick piers at the gateway plaza announce the arrival from the commercial highway and anticipate the campus entrance. Materials and architectural character reflect those of the university and the recent architectural accomplishments in the city. The plan accommodates universal access, poses minimal restrictions to water flow, and encourages wildlife migration.

5. Conclusion

The creation of a healthy community starts with a collective vision, initiated with the resolve of a few, and embraced with the commitment of many. At North Gate Park the vision focused

on the design of urban open space that will enhance and make more visible the beauty of nature, opening the door for the public's heightened awareness of the aesthetic and ecological value of this waterway. The park will accentuate a significant crossroad in the city and reinforce the community's intention to be stewards of the natural environment. This design process has redefined the roles and responsibilities of all participants and helped to determine a better way to serve nature and our fellow citizens.

Key Concluding Points

- The process of creating a design for a public park can become the means by which a community redefines its identity and proclaims its values.
- Through their participation with the community, landscape design students contributed to the communication of ideas and the interpretation of the community's needs and desires.
- With technical and artistic expertise, academic curiosity and scholarship, and unbounded enthusiasm, students have created a beautiful, comfortable and sustainable design.
- The success of the design process depends on the commitment and support of individuals and institutions who believe in the ideals set forth by the community.

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