

Sustainable Design and Social Purpose

David Rubin

Kelsey Cohen

The Smart Growth conference demonstrated how smart growth is really applicable to all fields of infrastructure. With talks covering food, transportation, urban development, and architecture, it became clear that much of smart growth requires thoughtful planning, and changing our perception of the built environment. Regardless of the scope, smart growth focuses on the development of communities – how space is used, rather than produced. It is taking sustainability and putting it into a more realistic context for people, with an emphasis on efficiency and economics, rather than just the physical environment.

As we defined the problems by looking historically at development patterns and how they have negatively impacted our environments, it became evident that architectural and urban planning is an essential component of this dialogue. Consequently, the field of landscape architecture has developed to join the idea of working with static and living systems to accommodate the growing change.

David Rubin, Connecticut College alum and practicing landscape architect and partner in the firm OLIN, gave an eloquent talk at the conference entitled “Sustainable Design and Social Purpose: Systems and Suppositions, Understanding our Changing Landscape.” His firm OLIN is an extremely well respected landscape architecture firm that strives to address “some of the globe’s greatest challenges: a comprised ecology, an aging infrastructure and the pressure to house growing populations,” (theolindstudio.com). They have worked on projects such as The Getty Museum in Los

Angeles, The Holocaust Memorial and Museum in Berlin, and Battery Park in New York City.

He first explained the need to understand that our landscapes are constantly changing, and proceeded to demonstrate this by looking back in time. Beginning with early environmentalism, a return to the city, and lastly how this has created multi-layered and complex landscapes today. Like many of the other speakers, he explained that cities grew in response to the booming post-World War II economy without careful planning because of the pressure to accommodate veterans returning from war, as well as the rapid influx of immigrants from Europe.

The field of landscape architecture originated with early environmentalism with the push to design with nature. Ian L. McHarg pioneered the concept of ecological planning and wrote a seminal book, *Design with Nature*. McHarg was trying to work with the growing cities and changing landscapes by showing how landscape design was feasible in any setting, including the city. The reentry into the city caused mass expansion without careful thought or planning. In short, it was most definitely *not* smart growth.

Often, landscape is misconceived as strictly a green pasture or ice-covered mountain, when landscape can exist in many forms. Rubin showed how less than 10% of US land today is untouched, and therefore the need to change our perspective of landscape. As Rubin says, “landscape is transformative, it allows for growth and design to change over time.”

In urban settings, it is often not about building new landscapes, but revitalizing existing ones in order to have multiuse spaces. It is about changing one’s perspective, exploring the possibility of designing over existing structures. Revitalized landscapes

have the potential to benefit the surrounding economy, environment, and community. It is important to create spaces that are not defined by socioeconomics, allowing everyone to participate and further integrate and socialize with one another.

In order to further elaborate about revitalizing the “layered and complex landscapes of today,” Rubin shared some projects that he has worked with OLIN. Bryant Park, a project completed in 1992, particularly encapsulated Rubin’s lecture. In the heart of Manhattan, Bryant Park was an unused space that was known as a gathering spot for illegal transactions and a temporary home to the homeless.

Rubin and his firm made Bryant Park a connective tissue to the city through careful planning. They worked to undo the social barrier by making it a vivid and lively destination that would benefit the public in more ways than one. The restoration of the park increased land value of the surrounding area, created more cultural events for New Yorkers, and allowed small food businesses to operate around the park. Olin also implemented a green roof over the lawn to create a regenerative dimension to the design. What we often fail to realize though, is in addition to the actual design of a walkway or entrance, there is as much thought given to placement and spatial dimensions in order to invoke particular behaviors. The physical aesthetic wasn’t so much as dramatically revamped, but entrances were widened and steps made more gradual to improve visibility of the park from the street. It was important to change people’s perception of feeling cut off from the city so as to reduce the possibility of illegal transactions. Tall hedges that had lined the perimeter of the park were removed. Olin was able to manipulate the park to feel similar to “a small town square,” (Goldberger).

At first glance, the park looks almost the same, just a cleaner and fresher version of the old. And many visitors will probably never see it as anything other than that. But the cumulative effect of the small changes is to render it a dramatically different place -- vastly more open than before, much more tied to the street and to the city around it.

Goldberger

The other component that allowed the park to exhibit such dramatic transformation was seating. As public space expert William Whyte Jr. believes, “empowerment over their public space extends to such details as seating,” (Goldberger). In order to feel safe, people like control – stationary seating is constraining and does not allow for flexibility or control of one’s surrounding - therefore Whyte advocated for loose seating, resulting in over one thousand movable chairs.

...this park has not been gentrified beyond all reason; on a recent lunch hour, when office workers poured in from surrounding buildings, they shared benches with people who were quite obviously not rushing back upstairs to check their faxes. The poor do not appear to have been driven out of the park, but merely to have begun to share it. There was a generous ethnic mix and, in what experts say is a good indication of the public's belief in the safety of a public open space, at least as many women as men.

Goldberger



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Yale University’s Science Hill is another project Rubín collaborated on. It was a smaller and more intimate scale. OLIN appropriately chose to focus on natural water

systems: how the water moves through the campus and the natural topography to create and define the academic functions. Teaching and research were placed at the top of the hill and intensive supporting facilities towards the bottom in an effort to facilitate more social interaction throughout the school. These small nuances are exactly what Rubin wishes to accomplish in his projects, the ability to subtly become a part of the social fabric of the school.

Besides Rubin inspiring us to want to go to a public space and start up a conversation with a complete stranger, he also gave great insight for how to approach smart growth. Like with Bryant Park and Yale, it is essential to understand cultural issues just as much as environmental, “hearing and listening and understanding what they want as part of their culture and society are part of smart growth.” We have to give people the right and opportunity to participate in smart growth. Urban planners and landscapers help facilitate the creation of many such opportunities. As Rubin said, “for now, if I can bring people into the urban condition and into communication and feel good about the place they are in, I am happy.”

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