

What We Learned

With each award cycle, the Rudy Bruner Award (RBA) starts anew. New projects are submitted (more than 90 this year), to be reviewed by a new Selection Committee, working with no pre-established criteria for what constitutes an excellent urban place. Each Selection Committee is asked to derive their own criteria as they consider the applications and winnow them down to a handful of finalists. Each finalist is the subject of a site visit by a Bruner Foundation team, and the results of their visits are presented to the Selection Committee at their spring meeting. At this second meeting, the committee again discusses the merits of each project, eventually elevating one to Gold Medal status. In identifying the winners, the Selection Committee explicitly and implicitly identifies the issues, themes, and challenges facing our cities, and comments on the kinds of urban places that address them in meaningful ways.

In 2007 our Selection Committee chose a typically diverse mixture of fascinating, quirky, brilliant, thoughtful places, united by their common desire to contribute to their respective neighborhoods and cities, and to develop urban places that are both successful in their own right and responsive to the needs of their communities. These places address a wide variety of issues, including public space and public infrastructure (as seen in Columbus Circle and Crossroads); low income housing and mixed-income communities

(High Point); art, culture, and learning (Children's Museum of Pittsburgh and Artists for Humanity); and urban manufacturing, showroom, and community space (Los Angeles Design Center). Since these are real places in real communities they are all complex, in process and product, with aspects of their story that bring new layers of meaning to the completed projects. However striking the space, it is often these "back stories" of struggle and perseverance, leadership and cooperation, tension and resolution that provide real insights into the hard work of urban placemaking. These winning projects are never simple, and without exception, they came to fruition despite limited budgets, competing agendas, political complications, and regulatory challenges.

One of the common traits of great urban places is that they have found ways to overcome these challenges, and in fact make use of them to create something better, more exciting, and more widely shared by the community than an easier and more straightforward project could possibly provide. These places seek to make connections between communities where none existed before or where some have long been severed. The Children's Museum of Pittsburgh tries to weave together a fractured community, and Crossroads built bridges physically and metaphorically between communities that had been isolated from each other. Columbus Circle serves as a meeting place in midtown Manhattan, and High Point Redevelopment weaves a fractured street pattern back together,

offering new amenities and promoting interaction between the project and neighboring communities. L.A. Design Center provides a new, attractive destination in the South Central area, inviting buyers from Los Angeles into this otherwise beleaguered and often ignored neighborhood.

While all of these winners are fully operational, they still remain works-in-progress. Difficult projects in times of strained budgets take time – Crossroads will be adding pieces to finish the original concept for years – and bold concepts based in broad participatory frameworks are always ongoing. High Point continues to add housing, parks, and support facilities, and the North Side of Pittsburgh may never be "finished," as it continues to evolve and change in ways that make it a more livable and stronger community.

Rudy Bruner Award winners have never been presented as models to be replicated or as formulas to be transplanted to other urban settings. Because they are so deeply embedded in their own contexts, their value to other places is often in presenting innovative strategies that can be adapted to fit the unique qualities of each city, each neighborhood. Their stories often reveal strategic visions that can be adapted to different urban settings, building upon the strengths that are unique to the history and character of every city.

SELECTION COMMITTEE COMMENTS

In many ways, the conversation among Selection Committee members as they deliberate about the gold and silver medals is as important as the result itself, because of what it tells us about critical urban issues of the day. Selection Committee members are chosen for their expertise, experience, and perspective on urban place-making, and the award process becomes a forum within which they enter into an informed dialogue about the concerns and challenges that surround cities in any given year. Their conversation illuminates the state of city-building around the country, and provides a unique perspective on the process of creating excellent urban places.

The Children's Museum of Pittsburgh won the gold medal for what it built, what it is trying to create, and the process it used. The Selection Committee commended CMOP for building connections among diverse groups of people; making a positive design contribution to the local urban landscape; and providing a new model for placemaking using complex collaborations among culturally-oriented institutions in the area. The committee was impressed by the leadership role Children's Museum of Pittsburgh has played within the community, and noted that this goes well beyond the usual purview of a children's museum, creating a new model for the role of a cultural institution in the city.



Photo: Albert Vecerka/Esto

They noted that many cultural institutions tend to be inward-looking and are not usually focused on their relationships to other cultural centers in their cities. The museum's success takes on additional importance because Pittsburgh and its North Side are seen as difficult places to work, given the enormous loss of jobs and population in previous decades. Finally, the committee saluted the excellent design of the museum, a plan that incorporates the historic preservation of two beloved local institutions with an elegant new facility that is also an environmental sculpture.

The Selection Committee applauded the redesign of the **Columbus Circle Urban Plaza** for completing the redefinition of a space that has played such a pivotal role in New York's history. They felt it did an outstanding job of transforming a desolate urban traffic island into an inviting, animated, and beautiful public open space, which has become a new destination in its own right. The committee was enthusiastic about the placement of fountains on the plaza, and about the use of berms and water sounds to mitigate traffic noise. They also noted the complexity of achieving the design goals in such an intensely used and constricted space.

The committee also felt the public/private partnership between developers, the landscape designer, two major non-profit organizations – the Central Park Conservancy and the Municipal Arts Society– and the City of New York was exemplary, and demonstrates the quality of place that can be produced by this kind of high-level collaboration. Members of the committee did express concern, however, about responsibility for ongoing maintenance, but felt that, on balance, the redesign of this important urban space provides lessons and a model which will be useful to other cities.

The Selection Committee was also impressed by the participatory process and level of civic engagement undertaken by the Seattle Housing Authority in creating **High Point**. This process assumed particular importance because a central goal for High Point was to connect it to the surrounding neighborhood by continuing the local street pattern through the project. This created new public open spaces and community facilities open to residents of nearby neighborhoods. The dialogue with neighboring residents helped establish these priorities and ultimately helped reverse the isolation that had become so problematic in the predecessor project.

In recreating High Point as a mixed-income neighborhood of market and subsidized housing, the Seattle Housing Authority went farther than required (by Hope VI rules) in providing one-to-one replacement of low-income units. It created a setting that has an exemplary



Photo: Olin Partnership

racial and ethnic mix that responds to the diverse populations in the Seattle area. Early in the planning process, public meetings to help make design decisions were translated into five languages (include Vietnamese, Cambodian, Spanish, and East African languages such Somali, Tigrinya, and Amharic). A range of rental and purchase-price points for the various kinds of housing units were created to provide a true and ongoing economic mix of tenants, from well-below the median income level to market rate. In an unusual move, the Seattle Housing Authority has also created a program for tenants, and a sliding rent scale that allows them to be responsive to changing employment circumstances. The committee also noted the ongoing professionalism and excellence of the Seattle Housing Authority which was described as an outstanding organization doing its job exceptionally well.

High Point was also unique in combining Hope VI goals with a major environmental focus that included reclamation of rain water through its extensive system of porous paving, swales, and a catchment pond, which also serve as amenities for High Point Residents. They

Columbus Circle Urban Plaza

also noted the use of environmentally-friendly materials in the building and operation of High Point and an organic gardening project which involves High Point residents in the production and nurturing of their own food.

The **Crossroads/Marsupial Bridge** project was seen as significant for the quality and inventiveness of its design, and for the fact that it addressed a much neglected issue – the state of repair and functionality of urban infrastructure. In the eyes of the committee, the Crossroads project provides a dynamic and viable new model for infrastructure improvements that are badly needed and poorly addressed in the country's older cities. The committee was enthusiastic about the project's playfulness and beauty; its strengthening of the pedestrian connection among nearby neighborhoods; and the way it enhanced pedestrian connections to the Milwaukee River. The importance of supporting river reclamation was also noted as an important national trend, and the fact that the original idea for a pedestrian bridge came from citizen groups, and was implemented through a model process and public/private partnership made the project even more exemplary.

What was most impressive to the Selection Committee about **L.A. Design Center** was the effort by two private citizens to give back to their local community through a major private investment, especially given the level of risk involved in this project. Francisco

and Alba Pinedos are private citizens who in developing the L.A. Design Center showroom, have contributed a significant public amenity to their neighborhood – a rare enough event in private commercial development. Committee members noted that it is every mayor's dream to have citizens like this, and the committee expressed dismay about the absence of city support for related infrastructure improvements that could have made success more likely. The Pinedos set very high goals and, in spite of the short time span and lack of help from the city, have created a place of beauty and renewed economic activity in a beleaguered neighborhood. The committee also felt that investment in a particular industrial sector of the local economy, in this case furniture manufacturing, had potential as an economic development tool for other cities. The design of this space was inexpensive and used simple materials to powerful effect. LADC makes a strong impact and provides a marked sense of place in both its courtyard, with its play of light and shadow, and its handsome interior space. One lesson from L.A. Design Center is that local governments need to identify, recognize, and support these kinds of citizen efforts.



Photo: Jim Brozek

Crossroads/Marsupial bridge



Photo: Richard Mandelkorn

The Selection Committee recognized **Artists for Humanity EpiCenter** for being the first building in Boston to achieve a LEED Platinum rating, for setting a new standard for construction in the downtown, and for having direct impact on the Boston Building Code. The excellence of the design and the transparency of the green elements were applauded, as was the use of recycled materials in the building design.

The innovation and effectiveness of the Artists for Humanity program was discussed and applauded at great length. Members felt it established a new direction for involving inner-city youth in the arts, and at the same time offered tools for breaking the cycle of poverty so ubiquitous in inner-city populations. The concept of developing entrepreneurial skills through the arts was felt to bring fresh opportunity and thinking to a long-standing urban issue. Finally, the committee applauded Artists for Humanity for its commitment to South Boston and for continuing to be active players in the Fort Point artist community as well as in South Boston.

2007 THEMES

One could hardly imagine six projects more different from one another in scale, scope, approach, and intention. Even so, there are a number of issues common to all of the 2007 winners and which provide insight into important problems facing many cities.

(Re)connecting Neighborhoods

Neighborhoods are in many ways the central building blocks, and the vital core of strong and successful cities. Much of the focus of the 2007 RBA was on developing and supporting sustainable neighborhoods. Urban neighborhoods are, however, only as strong as the physical, environmental, and social connections to their larger cities, and so much of the work of the 2007 winners involves establishing new connections between neighborhoods or remaking connections that once existed. In two cases (High Point and CMOP), this process involved finding ways to repair, work around, and overcome the damage done by past attempts at urban renewal. In other instances, neighborhoods had become isolated over time, and new thinking was required to forge new connections between new use and settlement patterns.

The need to reconnect areas of cities separated by past plans gone awry was central to the efforts of several of the 2007 winners. In some ways they are attempting to fix mistakes of ambitious urban

redevelopment efforts of earlier periods. This may be most explicit in the efforts of Children's Museum of Pittsburgh. The museum sits in the middle of a neighborhood that was damaged first by forced annexation and then benign neglect in the early twentieth century, and 60 years later by an urban renewal plan that tore down hundreds of buildings in the center of downtown. The original buildings were replaced with steel and glass or concrete structures that were not only charmless and out of scale, but also cut off the neighborhood from the urban core just across the river. The museum has been instrumental in organizing efforts to re-establish and reconnect elements of the community with new public space and organizing key players in the area to work together.

With High Point, the Seattle Housing Authority was also attempting to fix problems of the past and create, almost from scratch, a safe, livable, and ecologically sustainable neighborhood. Among the problems they faced were perceived and real issues with crime and drug use in the old development and a design that separated it from surrounding neighborhoods by a discontinuous street pattern that turned the project into a dangerous cul-de-sac. The program for High Point Redevelopment was to create a mixed-income neighborhood for residents significantly below median income as well as for those who could afford market rate housing. There is evidence that the new street pattern, which connected existing streets to and through the new development, is effective in reintegrating

the project with the community. Hopefully, the connections created by new street alignments and new public facilities will continue to strengthen as locals come into the High Point Redevelopment area to use the array of amenities built into the project.

Crossroads serves as a bridge B both literally and figuratively B connecting neighborhoods that were never part of a single community. In part, this was because there was no existing community to speak of (formerly, the Beer Line B area was entirely industrial). Older neighborhoods had always been separated by the river, and connections between them were not well served by the existing viaduct. The Marsupial Bridge provides new options. It creates an important (and marketable) link for those coming into the new condominium developments and also provides an easy opportunity for the communities beyond the river to use the Brady Street area for shopping, social connections, transport (bike), etc.

The redesign and revitalization of Columbus Circle was also part of a reconnection effort, though in a very different context. At the prosperous southwest corner of Central Park, this neglected space (once called "Aground zero" as the point from which all distances to New York City were measured) had been cut off for pedestrian uses. As part of the redesign of Columbus Circle, the beleaguered traffic island was transformed into an attractive public space. The new design draws large numbers of pedestrians to and through it.

It serves as a front door to both the Columbus Circle project and to Central Park, as well as an appealing public amenity in its own right.

Sustainable Development

Given the growth of interest in urban and global ecology, it is not surprising that sustainability and green design are important elements of several of the 2007 winners, and that sustainability is a more prominent theme in 2007 than in any previous RBA award cycle. No previous RBA winners had LEED-certified buildings — two of this year's finalists do. CMOP created a new structure that received a LEED Silver rating in support of its goal of providing a cleaner, more efficient, and sustainable setting for children's learning and development. Artists for Humanity, impressively, is one of only several dozen facilities in the country to boast a LEED Platinum rating achieved by its siting, the use of recycled materials, and its energy efficiency. It is the only recent large-scale commercial building in the U.S. designed without air conditioning. Both Children's Museum of Pittsburgh and Artists for Humanity use solar collectors, among the many features designed to lower the environmental impact of the structures. Instead of an air conditioning system, Artists for Humanity's designers developed a system that draws in cooler air throughout the night and maximizes natural air circulation during the day.



Photo: Seattle Housing Authority

High Point Redevelopment also has green design at its heart. The package of efforts at High Point that fall under the aegis of sustainability include energy-efficient design, broad swaths of green space, a significant effort to save old trees on the property, and a water reclamation system that resulted in permeable pavement, deep swales along neighborhood sidewalks, and a water retention pond. The High Point reclamation system virtually eliminated pollution-laden water run-off and contributes fresh, filtered water to a local salmon stream.

In addition, a special program addresses issues of environmental justice through the creation of "breathe easy" environments which were designed to reduce the presence of allergens and irritants in 35 subsidized homes in order to create a healthier living environment for children with asthma. Asthma is particularly widespread in low-income families and among African-American and Hispanic families.¹ The second phase of "breathe easy" homes are being constructed and a careful evaluation of their impact is underway.

High Point Redevelopment Project

What these three 2007 winners have in common, in addition to some specific environmentally-friendly features, is that the “green” aspects of the design were not add-ons to a standard design, but rather a reflection of the core values of the projects. The decisions to build “green” were principled ones, not determined by current headlines or cost-return analyses. While costs were carefully considered, the rate of return on investment alone (even with government incentives) would not have convinced most auditors to support many of these features. Rather, they were included because they fit the mission and goals of the organizations for the benefit of the immediate users and, in longer terms, for the sake of the local and global ecology.

Historic preservation can also be considered in the context of sustainability. In 2007, as in most other RBA cycles, historic preservation plays an important role in creating and sustaining urban excellence. Maintaining and reusing older structures is “green” in several important respects. Adaptive reuse keeps vast quantities of materials out of landfills, it preserves the energy embodied in the original creation and installation of materials, and it reduces the energy and environmental costs of construction. Restored and/or adaptively reused buildings frequently support a scale of the built environment that more appropriately fits the neighborhood and urban context.² Often, too, older buildings provide a quality of materials and detail unavailable in new structures.

Historic preservation also supports social sustainability because of the psychological effect it has on residents, as older buildings provide social and emotional continuity with the place and the past. This may be best illustrated in CMOP’s reuse of the Old Post Office, the Buhl Planetarium building, and later the Carnegie Library. Keeping these buildings as a central piece of the project was critical to creating a powerful sense of connection between residents and the museum and helped generate public support and recognition of the museum as a legitimate player in the neighborhood.

New approaches to the public/private/non-profit partnerships

RBA finalists are typically projects of sufficient social and organizational complexity that integration of efforts from a variety of sources and sectors is required to bring them to fruition. A perusal of the 2007 winners makes it clear that there is no one right way to go about creating new urban places. Rather, there is a mix of players and partners in all of these projects. What is interesting and instructive is how each project responded to its unique local conditions to create partnerships that were effective in their respective contexts. While governmental agencies and officials are necessarily involved in all six, in some cases the city’s role was insignificant. In Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh, Artists for Humanity, and L.A. Design Center, governmental organizations play very small roles. In Pittsburgh this is due to years of hard financial realities that have left the city with little in the way of professional or financial

¹ <http://www.neahin.org/programs/environmental/ejbrochure.html>
<http://www.asthma.partners.org/NewFiles/BoFACchapter15.html>
 GOTTLIEB, D. J. (1995). Poverty, race, and medication use are correlates of asthma hospitalization rates. A small area analysis in Boston. *Chest*, 108(1), 28-35.

² BUDDENBORG, J. (2006). *Changing Mindsets: Sustainable Design in Historic Preservation*. BRUCE THROCKMORTON, H. (1981). A bibliographical note on energy conservation and historic preservation. *Journal of Cultural Economics*, 5(2), 91-94. SEDOVIC, W., & GOTTHELF, J. H. *What Replacement Windows Can’t Replace: The Real Cost of Removing Historic Windows*.

resources to offer. Non-profits are forced to step up and take over some of what are traditionally seen as city roles. In the case of CMOP, the non-profit sector played a dominant role in the formation and development of CMOP, while the museum itself, along with other local cultural organizations, has become the driving force for community change on the North Side.

L.A. Design Center is the work of two local entrepreneurs who worked to see if small-scale furniture showrooms could be grouped in such a way as to harness and direct the local, small-scale furniture manufacturing industry. This project has also gone forward largely without governmental support. At first, city agencies were not involved because they weren't asked B the Pinedos had drive and a plan that they pursued on their own. Later on, when city support was solicited, its mechanisms were slow in responding to changing conditions. In this case, as opposed to Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, the lack of city support has been a serious problem, hampering the successful development of the original concept to its fullest. The accomplishments of these two local entrepreneurs are impressive, but the fact that the Afurniture district as originally conceived has not yet come together may illustrate the difficulty or impossibility of going it alone in such efforts. Earlier and more aggressive municipal support could have made an important difference.

City government also played a supportive but indirect role at AFH. This unique model evolved slowly and developed organically from the initial efforts of an individual artist working with local public schools to provide art programs, but it was otherwise largely under the radar of Boston city government. AFC exhibited the benefits of small, personalized non-profit organizations in that it was able to change and evolve in response to shifting real estate markets and economic opportunities, but continued to adhere to its initial goals of bringing economic opportunity and the production of art together for inner-city teens. AFH continues to provide art services to the corporate world as a way of funding its educational work and training its students to be self-supporting artists. This exciting combination of an imaginative and effective arts-based program, set within a fully sustainable building, is unique in the history of the RBA.

Though government agencies took backseat roles in Pittsburgh, L.A. and Boston, they were critical partners and leaders in New York, Milwaukee, and Seattle. Both Crossroads in Milwaukee and Columbus Circle in New York showed that, in spite of the complexity, the effort, and potential landmines involved in negotiating through the maze of agencies and programs to get to approvals and action, city agencies could work together in creative and supportive ways to achieve success. In New York, the difficulty of working within the city system is legendary. Here, though, for Columbus Circle, the variety of agencies (Parks, Transportation,



Transit, Sanitation) worked well together, probably helped along in no small measure by the personal interest taken by two mayors. In Milwaukee, the level of collaboration between the neighborhood, architects, engineers, and local university (whose dean is the Chairman of the Department of Community Development), may have created new models for elevating the level of design in urban infrastructure. In each case agencies provided support and creative help, rather than serving as roadblocks (as stereotypes of city agencies might suggest), and each project was better for the partnership.

Rebuilding Excellence in Post-Industrial Cities

Another theme that emerges in the study of these projects is the need to create new economies in post-industrial cities. While this is certainly not a new subject, this group of projects embodies several innovative approaches to doing so. Pittsburgh was, for much of the twentieth century, a classic industrial success story, as its steel mills produced huge quantities of material and well-paying blue-collar jobs. Its economy was in fact so tied to steel manufacturing

that it suffered immensely when that industry all but disappeared in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The decline of the industry meant the loss not only of well paying jobs, but also of population and the economic base that supported government and commerce. Pittsburgh lost so much population that in many areas (such as the North Side) there is now an oversupply of affordable housing.

CMOP represents an approach to reviving an economy in the absence of large-scale industry through the development of cultural assets. The museum was praised by the Selection Committee not just for developing an outstanding cultural institution of its own, with excellent new design and thoughtful preservation/adaptive reuse, but also for building on existing cultural resources in order to shape a new destination family district. By taking advantage of these existing and new cultural assets and linking them physically and symbolically, CMOP hopes to attract residents and tourists, who will spend money in their visits to the area, reinvigorating not just the cultural institutions but the economy of the neighborhood.

Though Milwaukee's industrial economy was somewhat less one-dimensional than that of Pittsburgh, it had similar problems. Milwaukee has also seen economic decline and population loss with the disappearance of tanneries and breweries along the Milwaukee River, near the Crossroads project. The city's response has been an active one, redefining the role of the Milwaukee River

from a source of industrial power and waste disposal to a site for recreation and housing. Where factories once stood there are now nature paths and, near Crossroads in particular, many new condominium units. The Crossroads project, with the Marsupial Bridge and urban plaza, has provided additional recreation options and support for this new housing, and for the reclamation of the river as an important benefit to urban life. The Crossroads project complements this effort by providing a significant pedestrian amenity to the new housing, linking it with the Brady Street district and bringing walkers closer to the natural environment of the river.

The L.A. Design Center offers yet another unique approach. Los Angeles has a diverse economy but it has nevertheless felt the crunch of change and movement “off-shore” of the manufacturing sector. L.A. Design Center purports to extend the economic success of two local entrepreneurs more deeply into a troubled neighborhood. Instead of converting manufacturing infrastructure to other uses, as is common in many cities, they are trying to redevelop manufacturing as a basis for neighborhood employment. Their model stresses competitiveness based on small-scale local production that is responsive to market needs in speed, quality, and customization of production, rather than on price.

CONCLUSION

With each Rudy Bruner Award cycle we learn new lessons about urban placemaking. While the importance of vision and cooperation among sectors never changes, urban leaders committed to their projects and their cities continue to find ever-changing approaches to the creation of place. Some new issues come to the fore – sustainability, for example – but the basics remain the same: broad dialogue and participation within the community, good design, and attention to the needs of the neighborhood to create places that work. These winners make a difference—to their cities, to their neighborhoods, and to their residents. They are replete with ideas and strategies that can be viewed, discussed, and adapted in cities and neighborhoods across the country, and which offer fresh approaches to the art of creating excellent urban places.