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Challenging Conventions

The 2015 Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence



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Lessons Learned

We are in the midst of an urban renaissance. Many American cities are experiencing new growth and development as residents and businesses return to the urban core, spurring new planning and investment. Yet many urban centers continue to face significant problems including poverty, lack of affordable housing and access to healthy food, underperforming schools, growing concerns about public health, and increasing economic and social disparity.

For nearly three decades, Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence (RBA) winners have illustrated the capacity of design to address urban challenges like these and create transformative physical, social, economic, and environmental change. They achieve this by drawing upon the inherent character and culture of their communities, often while addressing themes such as the importance of nature, the power of art, or the communal value of food, to transform urban areas. Cities and urban development evolve, of course—today’s integration of environmental sustainability in design could not have been dreamed of when the first RBA medal was awarded in 1987—but the need for creativity and innovation is enduring.

Just as enduring are the themes and lessons that have emerged from RBA winners over the years. Yet each cycle of the RBA provides fresh insight and

perspectives on recurring themes and highlights new ones that emerge from the challenges and opportunities facing contemporary American cities. This chapter reflects upon the lessons learned from the 2015 winners. They are gleaned from extensive discussions with the 2015 Selection Committee and countless conversations and observations during the site visits. These reflections expand our understanding of urban excellence, particularly as it has evolved over the history of the RBA, and reinforce the purpose of the RBA: to recognize excellence in urban design, celebrate the ways in which it transforms our cities, and use the stories of the winning projects as opportunities to educate and inspire.

The 2015 medalists reinforce several themes that have emerged among RBA winners over the years, including:

- the nature of placemaking and the necessity of anchoring projects in their place;
- leadership that offers energy, vision, and an inclusive approach;
- the use of collaborative partnerships and participatory processes;
- the empowerment and growth of capacity of people and organizations; and
- ways to leverage the power of design to affect transformative change.

They also share several distinct characteristics that, while perhaps not unique to this cycle, were notable among the 2015 winners and resonated with the Selection Committee. The 2015 medalists:

- addressed critical social, economic, and environmental issues facing many American cities;
- displayed remarkable courage and perseverance in light of substantial challenges; and
- demonstrated significant aspiration and ambition, challenging the conventional and tackling big problems in novel ways.

PROCESS AND CONTEXT MATTER

While successful urban projects can serve as models for other cities, they are more a starting point for inspiration than a template to follow. Adopting another city's project whole cloth, while a tempting way to shortcut the typically long and arduous but necessary design process, rarely works. Process matters and context is critical.

Placemaking that brings people together and embraces the distinctive history and characteristics of a city, neighborhood, or street has always been a hallmark of urban success stories. It was an important part of the story of Pike Place Market in Seattle, the first RBA gold medalist, as it has been for other winners over the years. The development process for each of our 2015 winners was thoughtful and inclusive, each yielding a uniquely local solution to common urban challenges.

This deeply local and contextual approach to placemaking is embodied in the "find your falls" counsel that leaders from the city of Greenville, home of 2015 Silver Medalist Falls Park on the Reedy, share with those who come to Greenville to learn how they created a vibrant, green city center. The advice to "find your falls" highlights the need to root projects in their local context, informed and inspired by the city's unique history and its current economic, physical, and social conditions. Successful placemaking begins with identifying what is unique about each place and using that as the basis for crafting effective local solutions.

Interestingly, unlike most RBA cycles, none of this year's winners are in major urban centers such as Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, New York, or San Francisco. Only once before have none of those cities been represented in a group of finalists. Instead, the 2015 winners are located in smaller cities within larger, growing regions—like Grand Rapids, Greenville, and Olympia—and in older legacy cities—former industrial centers like Baltimore and Cleveland—that are slowly recovering from decades of



Falls Park on the Reedy

decline. Although the circumstances and conditions are different, each of these cities is in the process of redefining its identity in the midst of evolution and change.

Although the issues and responses among the 2015 RBA winners couldn't be more different, the process of change was anchored in the culture and history of each specific time and place and initiated by visionary leadership from within the community. Once again, these leaders don't fit a single description, but rather share a deep passion and commitment to their city, a desire to help others and improve their community, and an understanding that broad collaboration and engagement are critical to success.

In Baltimore, a small, mission-driven private development company brought Miller's Court into being while in Grand Rapids, a coalition of business, civic, and philanthropic leaders together created a new public market. Institutional leadership in Cleveland transformed Uptown District while a garden

club, business leaders, and city officials worked together to create Falls Park in Greenville. And in Olympia, visionary leaders included people in the social sphere with the least political power—the homeless—who, with the support of nonprofit organizations, created a permanent housing solution.

ADDRESSING CRITICAL ISSUES

The 2015 winners address big challenges facing many American cities, such as the quality of public education, housing the homeless, improving public health through access to healthy food and green space, and reconnecting and regenerating urban communities. They illustrate that it's possible to tackle big problems with a variety of budgets and scales, ranging from a single housing development constructed for \$3 million to a multi-use project spanning a full city block and costing more than \$200 million.

The quality of public education is, arguably, the foundation of a successful and democratic society. Public schools, however, have suffered in many cities, especially those that have felt the pinch of constricted revenues. Improving education is not usually thought of as a problem for urban designers, as these systems depend largely on the efforts of school districts, teachers, and parents, often working in challenging circumstances. While great places can't create good teachers and schools, they can support them by building the capacity of the people and organizations that are part of the system. In Baltimore, leadership for this effort came from the private sector. Donald and Thibault Manekin and their partners at Seawall Development Company realized that attracting and retaining good teachers was critical to the health of the public school system. Working closely with the city, community, and nonprofit groups, they developed Miller's Court to provide an affordable, supportive, and safe place for teachers to live along with office space for educational nonprofits. Seawall works hard to foster connections, both within the building and with surrounding neighborhood residents and businesses. Over time, this investment has paid off,



Nicholas Garner/Teach for America

Teach for America corps member

with teachers staying on, falling in love with the city, and buying homes nearby in Remington. While it is too soon to evaluate the long-term impact on education, Teach for America was sufficiently impressed with the success of Miller's Court that it has moved to replicate the effort in cities across the country.

In so many American cities, homelessness continues to be a real and visible problem. Solutions that are both workable and affordable have been elusive, partly because the problem is so multifaceted; poverty, mental health, employment, and housing resource opportunities are among the many factors that need to be addressed. Quixote Village in Olympia hasn't solved the problem of homelessness, but it does offer a new model for providing inexpensive permanent housing in a supportive community for individuals willing to commit to refraining from the use of alcohol and illegal substances. The project succeeds, in part, by adapting the "tiny house" model with its inherent sustainability and cost benefits. Additionally,



Miller's Court

it creates a supportive community by arranging the private cottages around a central open area and providing shared gathering space and cooking and laundry facilities in the community building.

Increasingly, food systems and public health are also becoming major concerns in many urban areas. Grand Rapids Downtown Market addresses these issues by offering access to fresh local food, educational opportunities, and support for local food entrepreneurs in a new public market and civic gathering space that has become the pride of the community.

In a similar recognition of how attention to local natural resources can benefit the health of the community, Greenville reversed decades of neglect, cleaned up industrial pollution, and reclaimed the waterfall on the Reedy River. Falls Park reconnects the city to its historic roots by restoring the watershed, providing valuable green space in the heart of the urban core, and redefining the identity of the city in the process. Just as

important, the park has spurred revitalization of the downtown, creating an outdoor "living room" that connects surrounding communities and serves as a centerpiece for the city.

Finally, Uptown District in Cleveland illustrates how institutional collaboration and shared risk can knit together fragmented urban neighborhoods, especially in cities lacking a strong real estate market and public resources. Here, a large university, a long-standing community foundation, and several other partners played pivotal leadership roles in shaping, financing, and supporting multiple development projects and related initiatives that revitalized the district and connected it with surrounding neighborhoods.

COURAGE AND PERSEVERANCE

All of the 2015 winners demonstrated courage in tackling big issues as well as perseverance and patience, taking the long view and working steadily for years and, in some cases, decades. In the process, they all overcame numerous development challenges exacerbated by the uncertain economic times. Their success can inspire others to likewise address major issues and stay the course to see their projects through.

Quixote Village had an audacious beginning: A group of homeless people, brought together by local community organizers and the creation of the Poor People's Union, responded to a series of anti-homeless ordinances by creating a "tent-in." When the city moved to evict them, local nonprofits—mostly from Olympia's faith-based community—stepped up and offered to host the tent community. Over the next seven years, "Camp Quixote" moved from one host to another—more than 20 times in total—as volunteers in the community collaborated with state and local agencies to secure a site and funding and negotiate approvals and permitting for a permanent home. All the while the people in tents governed their own community, determining their own rules, disciplinary procedures, and activities.



In Greenville, more than 100 years of incremental planning initiatives provided the foundation for the creation of Falls Park on the Reedy. The idea for Falls Park was sparked by a planning study commissioned by the city in the early twentieth century. It was revived 60 years later by local garden club members who, with support from the city and community partners, led the cleanup of the Reedy River valley and commissioned a study that created the initial vision for the park. In the following decades, the plan was refined and expanded to include removal of a “perfectly good” vehicular bridge that obscured the falls. Removing urban infrastructure is always controversial and politically risky, yet the vision for the park allowed its proponents to successfully advocate for removal of the bridge, and the elegant pedestrian bridge now in its place is closely associated with the city’s identity.

Perseverance was also evident in Michigan, where decades of careful investment by civic leaders in the heart of downtown Grand Rapids led to the development of a new market that anchors one end of the growing city and required a last-minute injection of additional funding after the loss of anticipated financing. In Cleveland, Uptown District traces its roots to more than 50 years of collaboration among over 30 cultural, educational, and not-for-profit institutions and more than a decade of patient land banking by Case Western Reserve University. In Baltimore, the developers of Miller’s Court leveraged personal experience and relationships cultivated over decades and sought input from the community to inform the creation of an innovative supportive housing model.



Quixote Village

ASPIRATION AND INNOVATION IN CRAFTING NOVEL SOLUTIONS

Bold change and innovation require ambition to come to fruition. All of the 2015 medalists reflect the aspiration of their respective communities to challenge conventional wisdom and aim high, regardless of their size and resources, to develop the best possible solutions. They illustrate how

design excellence takes into consideration not only the physical qualities of a development—such as how it accommodates the needs of those who live in, work at, or use the site and how it responds to and fits into the context of the surrounding community—but also the thoughtfulness and inclusiveness of the process that was used to get there. The 2015 winners sought out creative planners and designers locally and worldwide to develop exciting, distinctive, and responsive settings.

From the beginning, the vision for Cleveland’s Uptown District was ambitious. It was intended to be different—to incorporate a mix of uses and housing types, to push the upper end of the market for housing even as it integrated student apartments, and to incorporate forward thinking “signature architecture.” Some of the world’s best-known designers were engaged over more than a decade of planning, including Frank Gehry, Laurie Olin, James Corner, Alex Krieger, Stanley Saitowitz, and Farshid Moussavi. The design approach to the new buildings lining Euclid Avenue resulted in a wholly new, visually distinctive contemporary urban fabric within the block.

Institutional leadership and collaboration was instrumental, with the Cleveland Foundation providing critical advocacy and funding for design and planning, not only for Uptown District but also for new public transit facilities and investments in surrounding neighborhood organizations to ensure that new development would benefit existing residents. Led by Case Western Reserve University and a broad coalition of important cultural institutions, the project remade and reinvigorated an urban neighborhood, linking the university and adjoining communities and providing a new gathering place for residents and visitors.

The story of Grand Rapids Downtown Market is firmly rooted in the progressive culture of this Midwest city, which strives “to be a city of the future, not the past” and takes pride in its tradition of civic engagement, agriculture, entrepreneurship, and innovation. It reflects the vision and



Uptown District

values of its civic leaders who have collectively, through powerful public-private partnerships, made substantial investment in the downtown core over more than three decades to ensure that it remains a vital urban center. Each investment, including the market, is the product of extensive research, community input, and planning that informs the design and signals the aspirations of the community, including the use of high-quality, durable materials.

Like the Downtown Market, Falls Park is the result of years of investment in research and planning by civic leaders who sought the best for Greenville. These efforts included national and international site visits to explore potential models for riverfront parks and downtown redevelopment. As with Uptown District, the community sought out leading designers such as Rosales + Partners, Sasaki Associates, and Santiago Calatrava to create a distinctive city space.

In seeking input and inspiration from leading design talent, other successful city projects, and members of their own community, the developers of these projects generated uniquely local solutions to problems in their communities, just as the developers of Miller’s Court and Quixote Village generated new models for workforce housing and housing for the homeless.

BUILDING AND STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES

Like other RBA winners over the decades, the 2015 medalists are also distinguished by their vision to create places that strengthen the capacity of people to affect change in their lives and communities and form broad coalitions and collaborations that increase impact. Truly transformative placemaking entails a long-term commitment to a place and to processes that involve and engage the community in crafting solutions. It creates a sense of ownership that is one of the most important outcomes of the process and yields benefits to the community that go well beyond the physical space. These kinds of participatory processes have been inherent to RBA winning projects throughout the years. They all demonstrate participation by and empowerment of people in the community, many of whom otherwise have typically had little input into the governing and design processes that affect their lives.

Indeed, the 2015 winners remind us of the importance of creating places that bring people together. They connect people with each other and the community and provide access to resources, such as amenities and supportive services, that enhance quality of life; build the capacity of individuals and the community; and contribute to the city’s overall diversity and vitality.

Ultimately, urban excellence is not judged by how a place looks, feels, and functions at any one fixed point in time. Great places adapt to evolving

conditions—economic, political, social, and environmental—and integrate into the fabric of their communities. To do so, their governing organizations and programs must be able to learn and respond to change. They must evaluate their own effectiveness, seek out new ideas and information, encourage broad participation, and support the development of human and social capital, providing the people they serve with the knowledge and skills to effect change. This is the draw of great urban places, which take root in communities, each with their own unique present and past, and use design to connect people to each other, to their own power, and to the potential of society as a whole.



Grand Rapids Downtown Market

Grand Rapids Downtown Market

These case studies share the remarkable stories of the five 2015 RBA medalists. They illustrate the roles of aspiration and leadership, courage and perseverance, and thoughtful attention to process and place in shaping urban development and demonstrate the power of visionary, participatory design to offer innovative solutions to critical issues facing cities today. The 2015 medalists, like other RBA winners over the years, offer ideas and inspiration, lessons to learn from, and food for thought for future urban placemaking.