LEARNING ABOUT URBAN EXCELLENCE
This is an excerpt from:

**Commitment to Place: Urban Excellence & Community**

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*with*

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INTRODUCTION

Each cycle of the Rudy Bruner Award forges an understanding of urban excellence by asking a distinguished Committee of urban experts to examine, evaluate, and interpret the values embodied in five places. Committee members are not simply jurists; they are also students, learning from each other and from the winners. Their discussions are challenging and risky, demanding self-examination as well as judgment. People who are used to “knowing” are asked to make their perspectives vulnerable to expertise outside their disciplines. This vulnerability creates a climate of listening and a patient search for a deeper understanding of urban excellence. Thus what may begin as a series of assertions around the Selection Committee table becomes the construction of a shared set of values, among candidate submissions and among Selection Committee members, which can then be employed in identifying the Gold Medal winner.

This year’s deliberations returned again and again to the concept of commitment to place and placemaking. Learning from the five projects, the Selection Committee sounded an unusually clear call for an urban excellence that engendered not only commitment to place, but also to the processes involved in making and sustaining places. This expanded concept of place, collaboratively developed during the course of the Selection Committee work, stands as an interdisciplinary common ground. Economic, social, political, design, and managerial insight all led the Committee to conclude that commitment to place in this year’s program was embodied in processes that were iterative, inclusive, conducive to learning, able to build capacity and consensus in the community, conflict resolving, evolving, oriented to grassroots constituencies, contextual, and focused on both project design and economics. If this list seems dauntingly exhaustive, consider the Committee’s suggestion that all of these elements of good process belong to a single overarching approach: commitment to place expressed through a commitment to “placemaking.” Placemaking occurs when local communities work together to create, recreate, and care for urban places, and in so doing strengthen and empower themselves. This work, literally taking place on common ground, can only be sustained by the kind of hardheaded democratic processes recognized by the Selection Committee. And, importantly, such work must be sustained: the process of placemaking does not end when a place has been built; it is an ongoing activity that maintains, sustains, and renews places and communities as they evolve over time.

THE EVOLUTION OF PLACE

The 1999 Selection Committee placed a particular value on the responsiveness of the product to community processes and to changing circumstances. Yerba Buena Gardens, for example, started as a grand but exclusive vision of a financial district “fortress” safely protected by skyscrapers from what was described by some as surrounding blight. As the strategies for implementing the vision began to incorporate more constituencies and agendas, the ultimate goal itself began to change, transforming to reflect the needs and aspirations of those involved in defining and creating the place. Some of the original vision survives to this day, but it has been
enriched by different perspectives and an expanded set of possibilities. Evolution cast aside some traits — office buildings, for example — while adding others: affordable housing, Zeum, the bowling alley, and a variety of community programs. Ultimately, the project became a mixed-use development around a large public garden that contributes significantly to both the city of San Francisco and the immediate South of Market neighborhood.

Like Yerba Buena, the National AIDS Memorial Grove began with a strong vision, in this case for a “living memorial” devoted to those affected by the AIDS epidemic. Also like Yerba Buena, this core vision proved inspiring enough to sustain the project while remaining sufficiently flexible to adapt to change. The actual design, for example, evolved from the initial conception of a ginkgo grove to the final plan for a landscaped dell. The expansion of naming opportunities was another departure from the original concept, this one driven by financial need. Most important, however, was the evolution of the volunteer workdays. Originally seen as a strategy to get the memorial built, these workdays became central to the meaning and purposes of the place. In a very real way, they became part of the memorial itself. As much as the different physical dimensions of the Grove, these workdays shape how people interact with and use the space, and have created a level of commitment that reaches deep into the community.

The Grove’s workdays also provide an example of how placemaking continues long after a place has been “finished.” The memorial continues to change as new constituencies participate in its development and maintenance, and as the AIDS epidemic itself changes over time. This kind of ongoing placemaking can also be seen in the collaborative structures that oversee the maintenance, operations, and future development at Yerba Buena — structures that, not accidentally, resemble the democratic processes out of which the project was ultimately forged. Such efforts to ensure continued collaborative oversight also appear in the Portland Public Market, where wage structures and the point-of-sale system permit constant dialogue in a context of mutual commitment. In Parkside Preservation, such structures are still incipient, since the communities living in the neighborhood are less prepared than other winners to organize and fully represent themselves in the development process. However, the collaboration of social service providers and faith-based organizations with businesses, outside investors, and James Brown’s own organization gives a strong foreshadowing of what might evolve. And while ARTScorpsLA is by far the least structured of this year’s winners, the radically evolving usage of the artparks reveals a commitment to continued democratic involvement.

ARTScorpsLA also illustrates another, subtler aspect of the idea of the evolution of place: the acceptance of fragility and impermanence in the urban landscape. No place lasts forever. But the art of placemaking suggests that perhaps no place is ever “completed” at all. If taken to its logical extreme — as it was by Tricia Ward at ARTScorpsLA — this reasoning leads to a kind of planning that not only takes into account but actually relies upon constant change. In the artparks, the narrative of creation loses its
“climax” — completion — and becomes a continuous and ongoing story of construction and maintenance. ARTScorpsLA’s artparks were built during a discrete period of time, but the actual construction was only one manifestation of the relationships and community activities that sat at the heart of the project. The parks therefore remain open to different users and attendant changes, like the entrance and departure of the “Old Gangsters” and the basketball courts. Since la Culebra was never “completed,” there have been fewer barriers to reprogramming it to suit the wishes of the communities that use and maintain it.

In sum, the values embodied in the places were seen by the Selection Committee as the basis for their ongoing care. The making of place and the ongoing care of place belonged to the same evolutionary ideal — a process that continually enriches places and their underlying visions, animates action based on shared need, remains inclusive, improves relationships among participants, and engenders long-term caring for place.

INCLUSIVE PLACEMAKING
Crucial to the kind of responsive evolution envisioned by the Selection Committee is a commitment to inclusiveness in both place and process. At its most basic level, this means that the evolutionary schema outlined above must be grounded in an essentially democratic dialogue among the various communities associated with a place. This space for discussion must be carefully constructed so that powerful players and experts are made vulnerable to the “view from below” provided by community groups, local residents, social service providers, and other stakeholders. This is not intended to undermine the experts, but to ensure that their expertise is used in the most beneficial and context-appropriate ways, rather than simply exerting itself according to its own momentum and logic. Again Yerba Buena provides an excellent example of this: the lawsuits created a space in which major players like the Redevelopment Agency were forced to discuss the project with area residents who felt marginalized by the process. Design, financial, and development expertise produced little until local residents and youth were fully vested in the process.

The fact that Yerba Buena’s inclusiveness came about as the result of such bitter disagreements illustrates the fact that a good process often emerges from the dynamics of conflict. An inclusive process can, in fact, often be the most expedient, most efficient, and ultimately most successful model of development available - despite its arduousness, inefficiency, and daunting challenges. One is reminded of the saying about democracy: it is the worst system, except for any other. If the dialogue between stakeholders is not sturdy, practical, and realistic, it may not be able to contain all the conflict that inevitably attends any serious urban intervention. Indeed, many of this year’s projects suggest that such dialogues must be institutionalized, in the kinds of structures for ongoing placemaking described earlier.

Inclusive processes, the Selection Committee found, seem to produce inclusive places. Parkside Preservation resulted in well-restored mansions — immediately rented to special needs populations.
ARTScorpsLA transformed urban dumpsites into unique community artparks — which were then open to all locals, including gang members. Portland Public Market created a powerful shopper and tourist magnet — which also housed an innovative restaurant run by the clients of a nearby social service provider. The workdays at the AIDS Memorial Grove are open to anyone, allowing participation of the full diversity of people affected by the epidemic. Yerba Buena, of course, has integrated this inclusiveness in countless ways, from the programming of the arts facilities and the garden to the Tai Chi park and low-income housing. In each case a place that might have been committed only to wooing tourist dollars, or at least to serving the needs of a narrow portion of the local community, instead became an authentic part of its urban habitat.

The Selection Committee was also impressed with the fact that many of this year’s finalists included young people — an unusual attitude in contemporary urban projects. In some places, like Yerba Buena, this willingness was hard-won, as the area’s young people organized and advocated for elements that they deemed important. Yerba Buena ultimately met the youths more than halfway with Zeum, the day care center, the arts opportunities, and the other youth facilities. ARTScorpsLA depended on young people from the beginning, mobilizing youthful energy to build and fill the artparks. The various artistic opportunities provided through the program reinforce ARTScorpsLA’s commitment to inner city youth.

Other projects have incorporated young people as well. The AIDS Grove, for example, has evolved into a place where students of all ages come to volunteer and learn about the epidemic and about gay and lesbian issues. The “food theater” at Portland Public Market not only draws in adult shoppers, but begins to build an understanding of local food production in ways that can capture the imagination of children. These kinds of practices, the Selection Committee felt, were very impressive at a time when youths are often “designed out” of urban places because they are seen as a destabilizing enemy to a safe urban environment. The inclusion of the young reflects faith in the placemaking process: by bringing them into the process in meaningful ways, these places have persuaded young people to invest themselves in their communities, incorporating them as sources of positive energy and activity. As one Selection Committee member explained,

As a society, we don’t honor our youth enough. The issue for our generation is to deal with the generation gap by empowering our youth more than we have in the past. We should be tool makers for young people to help them grow past the culture of immediate gratification.

COMMITMENT TO PLACE

One undeniable fact stands out in these descriptions of inclusive evolutionary processes of placemaking: they require a lot of work. None of the themes identified by the Selection Committee are easy to achieve, and though they might ultimately be the least problematic way to proceed, they promise challenging work with uncertain rewards. What, then, motivates people to begin and to
sustain such processes? The answer, the Committee came to believe, is best described as commitment to place. By this, the Committee meant the kind of commitment epitomized by James Brown in Parkside: to the place for what it could be, but also for its history, what is currently there, and who is currently there. The envisioned future, in other words, builds on and affirms the existing place and the human communities and relationships attached to it. This kind of commitment is powerful enough to draw other stakeholders into the project, enabling quality placemaking to proceed. Yerba Buena balanced the profit potential of its choice location with homes and programming for local residents; Parkside took advantage of historic mansions to help fund special needs housing for locals; ARTScorpsLA turned unpleasant and unused urban dumps into artparks for local communities; and the Portland Public Market marshaled local materials and contractors to construct a strategic urban intervention designed to complement already existing patterns of central city use.

The kind of commitment to place embodied in these projects does more than make collaborative efforts possible; it also serves as the basis for community building. The Selection Committee noted that caring for places can provide a common ground that actually fosters relationships between people and communities, making it easier to build the kind of institutionalized dialogues that lie at the heart of placemaking. Thus the process of creating Yerba Buena had the effect of producing not only buildings, but organizations like TODCO, the Yerba Buena Alliance, and the places-with-faces maintenance group that sustain both the body and spirit of the project. The National AIDS Memorial Grove provides a focus for gay and lesbian groups and AIDS activism, and the workdays in particular serve to strengthen bonds between participants from diverse segments of the community. Parkside Preservation and ARTScorpsLA are still some distance from producing mature community organizations, but they have already engendered a level of activism and community self-awareness that may well have been unthinkable before the projects began. At a more generalized level, the Portland Public Market’s mission includes educating Maine’s shoppers about their citizenship in a statewide agricultural economy, raising their awareness of where their dollars go and persuading them to participate more actively in keeping the state’s family farms viable.

Another byproduct of the commitment to place is the aspiration to create the very best place possible. Each of these projects came about in response to needs and goals that could easily have been met at a more minimal level. Certainly many blighted neighborhoods have been renewed without the elaborate restorations completed in Parkside, or the world-famous architecture that graces Yerba Buena. A community-built and community-maintained local park does not necessarily conjure up images of meaningful artistic visions like those created by ARTScorpsLA. The Portland Public Market and the AIDS Grove, too, were conceived as well-designed and beautiful places that make significant aesthetic contributions to the urban fabric. The Selection Committee felt that such high aspirations eventually mattered on more levels than the aesthetic. In Parkside,
for example, the restorations allowed special needs populations to be housed without triggering present or future “not-in-my-backyard” syndromes. In all the projects, the commitment to include locals was dignified by the quality of design in the places created — places that testify to the pride in the places local constituencies have created together.

Quality design and community pride stand out all the more starkly for the desperate situations in which these urban interventions were born: neighborhoods ruined by slash-and-burn urban renewal, financial crises, riots, or slow urban decay; populations decimated by an epidemic, poverty, social ills of every kind; buildings vacant or destroyed. This kind of hardship, ultimately, can sometimes provide the galvanizing force required to begin pioneering work in urban placemaking. Not all placemaking need be heroic, but this year’s finalists all represent significant successes in the least hospitable of locales. The Bruner site visit teams always interviewed at least one person who shook their heads and said, “no one in their right minds would have thought of doing that,” whether that was putting the San Francisco MoMA South of Market, restoring a burnt-out beer master’s mansion in Parkside, clearing the used needles and other garbage from the de Laveaga Dell, investing in a new public market in depressed downtown Portland, or marshaling Latino youths to retake urban dumpsites from reluctant absentee landlords. All of these projects, the Selection Committee noted, turned entrenched urban problems into opportunities. In the chaotic quilt of hard times, new relationships can be forged and new possibilities imagined and realized, especially if placemakers are willing to make their vision a shared one and open themselves to the contributions of others.

A PRACTICAL IDEALISM

Despite the idealism inherent in the Selection Committee’s concept of urban excellence, Committee members felt that excellence firmly belongs in the “real” world of practicality as much as in the idealistic world of inclusiveness and democratic dialogues. The Committee took care to recognize that old-fashioned economic savvy and creative financing are by no means antithetical to the collaborative evolutionary processes that they discerned in this year’s finalists. Several projects faced considerable economic challenges, and full awareness of and respect for these challenges was a critical factor in their success. Yerba Buena, for example, shrewdly traded against its commercial profit potential to make possible its social justice and cultural agendas, while in Parkside the historic preservation and low income tax credits allowed neighborhood renewal to proceed. The National AIDS Memorial Grove acknowledged fiscal realities by promising to fund the gardener in perpetuity and by providing more naming opportunities to achieve that goal. The Portland Public Market faced very few economic constraints, but its developers are fully aware that unless individual vendors can turn a profit, the market is at risk; thus they have allowed for constant fine tuning through the point-of-sale system. Finally, ARTScorpsLA’s guerrilla strategies — just take the land if it is not being used — grew out of the scarcity of community resources.
Economics are not the only place where practical creativity and common sense were of value in this year’s finalists. Collaborative processes do not obviate the need for problem solving and hard critical work; they only create a context where solutions can be found and implemented successfully. The idea of putting the Convention Center underground at Yerba Buena, for example, made the gardens and many of the other facilities possible. The inspiration to house special needs populations in the refurbished mansions of Parkside neatly managed the difficult feat of balancing local needs with development goals. The decision to embrace and expand the volunteer workdays at the National AIDS Memorial Grove not only made the project possible, but extended its reach beyond the de Laveaga Dell and into the lives of those who participated. In these cases and many others, placemakers continued to produce “urban pioneer” style ideas even as they worked within a context of collaboration and democratic purpose. This suggests that pioneering urban innovations need not emanate from a top-down traditional leadership style, but can also emerge from a more grassroots placemaking effort.

This mentality does not mean that the Committee declared inspired or visionary leadership to be unimportant. It remains critical. Again, the best example of this comes from Parkside, where James Brown’s energy and commitment has been almost solely responsible for powering the project through the decades. His leadership, however, has been intimately intertwined with a commitment to the neighborhood and the people of Parkside, with the ultimate goal of helping create a genuine neighborhood where such singular leadership could give way to more broad-based community coalitions. Brown’s instinct for inclusiveness appears in his cooperation with the outside investors PHPC, and in his ties with local service providers and organizations. This sort of visionary leadership tied to collaborative goals can also be seen in Helen Sause of the San Francisco Redevelopment Authority; her willingness to share responsibility for the project only enriched her commitment to the inspirational, world-class vision of Yerba Buena Gardens. And few projects have witnessed the kind of collaborate-at-all-costs attitude of Tricia Ward at ARTScorpsLA. In each case, the advantages of strong leadership based on visionary ideas and inspirational energy were retained even in a process that embraced inefficient, conflict-ridden, and (in a word) democratic progress.

PLACES FOR PEOPLE, PEOPLE FOR PLACES

In the final analysis, the placemaking concepts that emerged from the Selection Committee deliberations stress the importance of relationships among people as well as the relationships between people and place. The complex processes involved in the evolution of urban places are, in that sense, quite simple: they are the kinds of processes that result from merging the social logic of democracy with the architectural logic of physical planning and urban design. Such an approach is pragmatic in the best American tradition, valuing what is useful and beneficial to those who will use and benefit from it. It is also democratic, ensuring that those people using and benefiting from a place are the people who have a stake in it — its citizens, so to speak.
To a certain extent, this notion of urban excellence can be seen as a corrective to urban planning visions that over-emphasize the technical expertise of planners and architects, seeking instead to draw professional expertise into a context where it will most benefit the people and communities attached to an urban place. The result, as this year’s winners illustrate, are technically good and beautiful places that support diverse communities and encourage community members to become stakeholders in their neighborhoods.

One clue that this delicate balance between technical and social excellence has been successfully struck can be seen in the fact that Yerba Buena, the Portland Public Market, the National AIDS Memorial Grove, ARTScorpsLA, and Parkside Preservation all celebrate the ordinary experiences of everyday life, be it: people doing Tai Chi in the park; shopping in the Portland Market; working through the pain involved when one’s life has is touched by the AIDS epidemic; struggling to raise children in poor communities in Los Angeles or Philadelphia; sustaining family farms in Maine; or simply pausing for coffee or a cup of “stone” soup on a busy day.

To be sure, this year’s winners also represent the celebration of the extraordinary as well: Botta’s San Francisco MoMA, and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts by Polshek and Maki; the discovery and representation of cultural myths within former garbage dumps in the barrios of Los Angeles; the celebration of food origins and sources as part of consumer education in Maine; the substantial restoration of parkside mansions in Philadelphia; and a former needle park reborn as a national memorial to all those touched by the AIDS epidemic.

How were these extraordinary mixtures of the everyday and the transcendent created? The investigations and discussions that led to the 1999 Rudy Bruner Awards revealed that these successes were not accidental, nor were they unique to their locations. Rather, they came out of patient, arduous, everyday decisions to commit to a place and its peoples; out of an ability to recognize problems to be solved while remaining open to new ways of solving them; and out of a willingness to include all players in both process and project. The coming together of these relatively simple elements grows out of the courage to challenge conventional wisdom, and out of faith in the importance of place and the possibilities of placemaking.

The projects awarded the Gold and Silver Rudy Bruner Award Medals in 1999 are intentionally vulnerable and risky in a climate where one might expect to see pressure for increased power and a reduction of risk. They are each in their own way incomplete, in a world that values comprehensive and complete solutions to the challenges of the day. And they are inefficient and in some ways uncertain in cultures that seem to value efficiency and an economy of means above all else. The courage and democratic faith embodied in such decisions, and the resulting quality places they produced, can be an inspiration to us as we seek to make excellent urban places.