What We Learned About Urban Excellence

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Reinventing Downtown

2005 Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence

BRUNER FOUNDATION, INC.

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The Question of Urban Excellence:

The Rudy Bruner Award Since 1987

Since 1987, the Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence (RBA) has sought to promote fresh and innovative thinking about cities, and to encourage us all to demand – and build – excellent urban places. Award winners are places that incorporate political, community, environmental, and formal elements into an inclusive and multi-dimensional whole. RBA Selection Committees do not impose pre-conceived definitions of excellence on their consideration of applications. Rather they strive to discover excellence in the places represented in each application.

This is not an easy task for Selection Committee members. They are given no definitive criteria for award except that the place considered must be real. Unimplemented plans are not accepted. The places submitted must be considered excellent by the members of the inter-disciplinary Selection Committee but there is no absolute measure against which their choices will be evaluated. The same is true for the applicant teams, who must make many decisions about how to represent their projects in order to make a convincing argument for the quality and importance of the places they nominate.

In short, the selection process requires Committee members to maintain an open mind, and to make closely held personal positions on excellence open to challenge by other members of the Selection Committee.

Similarly, applicants, and those who write in support of each application, have to rely on a collaborative construction of the reasons they believe the places they created are worthy of consideration for the Award. In this mutual search for convincing definitions of excellent places, the Bruner Foundation, its Selection Committees, and applicants for the Award have, for almost twenty years, been engaged in an exploration of the critical factors that promote excellence in process, place, and values.

The range of place types recognized in the RBA process is wide. No special privilege is given to large or small places, to any specific theme or building program, or to the strength of any given discipline over another. No building program or theme is more or less likely to be awarded. Since its inception, the program has awarded places as disparate as Yerba Buena Gardens in San Francisco and New York City's Greenmarket. Yerba Buena involved over $15 billion of capital investment, while Greenmarket began in 1975 with a grant of $35,000. In 1989, the gold medal was awarded to Portland, Oregon for its work implementing the 1972 Downtown Plan, and in 2003 to the Camino Nuevo Charter Academy, an elementary school in the MacArthur Park neighborhood in Los Angeles that has revitalized a struggling immigrant community through engagement of parents in the education of their children. As these examples show, the twenty years of the RBA has yielded a staggering variety of themes and types of winners.

The 2005 Rudy Bruner Award continues the tradition of discovering excellence in a wide variety of urban places. In this year's cycle, there are two art based places and three transit oriented places. All of the places awarded are very different in scale, cost and impact. For example, the Portland Streetcar Project's capital expenditures were $88.7 million. This project shares the spotlight with the Heidelberg Project, a series of art installations in inner-city Detroit, with 2004 annual expenditures of less than $70,000. Yet the Committee recognized the very different, yet equally important, impacts of these remarkable places on their respective cities.

In the selection process, design remains important, but is considered in the context of the integrated effect of all aspects of placemaking. Social responsibility is often a characteristic of RBA award winners, many of which have played pivotal roles in revitalizing and empowering their blocks, neighborhoods, or communities. The quality of leadership and a guiding vision in the creation of place often emerges in the discussions. Even the economics of projects are subject to a variety of interpretations from Selection Committee members and applicants alike. Some projects rely on significant public funding, while others are totally market driven or led by foundation resources. Many represent a complex and often creative mix of funding sources. Again, there is no assumption of what constitutes good project economics outside the full complexity of the applicant's context: the reality of

their process, the physical, material and social make up of place, and the values evident in both process and place, all drive the selection process.

The RBA plays a unique and crucial role in the realm of awards for urban places. It is not a design award, nor is it an award for plans or social programs, rather, the RBA considers quality of place characterized not only by quality design, but by the skillful interweaving of political, community, environmental, and formal elements into an inclusive and multi-dimensional whole. RBA winners often transcend the boundaries between architecture, urban design and planning. They are frequently developed with such vision and imagination that they often dramatically transform sites that struggle with some our most persistent urban problems into quality places to live and work. As we conclude the tenth RBA Award cycle, the importance of such an award continues to be affirmed not only by the winners themselves, but by policy makers, design professionals, community organizers, and others involved in the complex process of urban placemaking.

Reinventing Downtown: The 2005 Rudy Bruner Award

Elements of all of the previous Selection Committee discussions, as recorded in past RBA publications, resonate with the 2005 winners. Even so, as in every RBA cycle to date, the unique talents of the Selection Committee and applicant teams have created still another vantage point about making and sustaining excellent urban places.

In many ways, this tenth cycle of the RBA has been about the process by which place constituencies establish new visions of place and community when the old ones no longer work. These winners illustrate the ways in which urban excellence emerges through processes that include the rethinking of neighborhood or community identities. The process of rethinking often includes both what and how these places contribute to their larger urban context. The 2005 winners represent powerful imaginations of alternative futures. The themes underlying them respond, each in their own way, to the challenges faced by our cities today, and together they suggest a variety of ways of rethinking urban issues and re-imagining urban places.

TRANSIT ORIENTED PLACES

There are three winners this year that are transit oriented: the Portland Streetcar Project, Fruitvale Village, and Downtown Silver Spring. All of these winners created dramatic shifts in the public image of their precincts, neighborhoods, and cities as a whole. Constituents had to re-imagine both places and processes to realize new possibilities.

Imagining Place

Consider Portland, Oregon, where acres of abandoned rail yards, Portland's Lovejoy expressway ramp, and another seventy acres of empty or underutilized warehouse structures created a barrier between an established northwest neighborhood and its downtown. Added to that, the City faced a declining economy reflected in increasing office vacancy rates, increases in unemployment, and a high city crime rate. This is not the mix that would normally lead one to predict such a city would be tearing down viaducts, redirecting parking revenues to streetcars, redeveloping large tracts of brownfields, and building new housing and commercial structures as well as public parks in the central city. Yet the power of a new vision of Portland resulted in public investments that would cover the cost of demolition of the Lovejoy ramp, the creation of a multi-million dollar park infrastructure, new street infrastructure replacing rails, a streetcar system connecting employment centers about 2.5 miles apart, and almost $1.5 billion in related new commercial and housing development. This is the legacy of Portland Streetcar, Inc. — they enabled a completely new and even more robust vision, now a reality, of the urban core.

Silver Spring, Maryland had a different set of issues. A "first ring" suburb of Washington D.C., Silver Spring was the site of one the nation's first suburban malls. The historic mall, in significant disrepair, stands near the abandoned art deco Silver Theatre and frames the corner of one of the busiest intersections in the city. Traffic moved through this central intersection, and there was a very active metro with park and ride, but no real reason to stop. There was little significant retail in the area and less reason to expect some anytime soon. However, the Montgomery County government, working with merchants, residents, and developers, re-imagined this place. They did not see it as a dying first ring suburb of the nation's capital, but as a potentially vital urban center in its own right. By attracting the headquarters of Discovery Communications, and by moving the center of its "downtown" one block from that same busy intersection, thus creating an entirely new four block district, it successfully invited over 550,000 square feet of new private commercial space and over 500,000 square feet of new or renovated retail. Belief in this new imagination made it happen and created a dynamic new place that is clearly and appropriately connected to its transportation hub.

A third example of dramatic reinvention is the Fruitvale Village Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) stop in Oakland, California. The area known as Fruitvale had been experiencing disinvestment for a period of close to thirty years. The crime rate, vacant store fronts, unemployment, and poverty all indicated this was a troubled neighborhood. From BART's perspective, it was a good place to build additional parking capacity, but the Unity Council and citizens of the area had a different vision. They believed that by building a quality retail, service, and housing connection between BART and a dying commercial area, they could revitalize the modest retail strip on International Boulevard into one hundred percent occupancy. Adding to the creativity of the vision, the Unity Council developed a program for over 40,000 square feet of new retail that included neighborhood services and health care. These uses and new retail would in turn help to create the market demand for considerably more space that was already vacant and underutilized. This was the Unity Council's forward looking and counter intuitive imagination: the way to fill vacant retail space on International Boulevard was to create new retail and service space in Fruitvale Village, turning a busy but stark BART station into a center of commercial and neighborhood activity.

The Artist Relocation Program offers a new model of repopulating the downtown and bringing new stakeholders into the city.

Creating Process

All of this rethinking and imagination work also had dramatic process components. In Portland, the streetcar project could easily have been challenged by distrust of governmental action, the motives of the private sector, and the limitations of non-profit organization. In almost any other city, the giving of control over the planning (including alignment), design, construction, and operation of streetcar infrastructure to a non-profit organization led by a board that included developers who stood to profit from the decisions required a significant leap of faith. It was further complicated by partial support by governmental resources. But Portland has a long tradition of collaborative action and creative public and private partnerships. The use of advisory committees provided oversight along with safeguards in government contracting. All this, in addition to a series of meetings that included the business community, governmental agencies, major institutions, housing advocates and residents, ultimately resulted in a high level of support for a project that had the potential to benefit everyone. In the end, the general public as well as politicians heartily endorsed the process as one that was both fair and right for their community. In fact, the results clearly reinforce this understanding of partnering among business, not-for-profit agencies, and government as a vehicle to administer the public's business.

A different set of challenges faced the citizens and the Montgomery County administrators who oversaw the process of "re-centering" what is now downtown Silver Spring. They had experienced several failed development efforts over multiple years and administrations. Each effort was more grandiose and, in a way more desperate, fueled in part by previous failures. In this community, citizens became engaged in a dialogue about a "small starts" approach very different from the previous grandiose plans that presented themselves as "silver bullet" solutions to the problems of their downtown. Imagine public officials seeking election on the premise that a good process of engagement without a clear proposal of what should happen would ultimately result in a solution for their struggling city. These are exactly the processes entertained and accepted by the citizens of Silver Spring.

Still another set of challenges was faced by Fruitvale constituencies who ultimately embraced what was a modest community-based organization (the Unity Council) in a fight against a powerful authority that wanted a parking structure between their station and the community. Because of the clarity and efficacy of the process involving all stake-holders, several years later that same authority bent its own rules to give a subsidiary of the Unity Council, the Fruitvale Development Corporation, an exclusive negotiating agreement binding the City, BART, and the community to a new vision for the area. This vision became a reality very different from BART's original intent, but is one that is responsive to the local community on many levels.

Other 2005 Selection Committee Observations on Portland Streetcar Project, Fruitvale Village, and Downtown Silver Spring

The members of the Selection Committee made many observations about the transit related projects in this award cycle, some of which echo the dialogue of past Committees. In addition, they emphasized the importance of strategic transportation opportunities which encouraged urban infill development rather than more sprawl, the quality of design reflected in each of these projects, and the way in which each of them relied on consistent civic engagement as they adjusted the form and identity of their downtowns to reflect current challenges.

Build on Strategic Transportation Opportunities. All three transportation oriented developments took advantage of their strategic transportation opportunities, using them to effect the transitions in place that they desired. Portland is the most obvious, as they saw the need and opportunity to connect two important employment centers, urban housing, and downtown with one efficient streetcar system. Both Fruitvale and Silver Spring, however, looked at well-utilized transit stations that seemed to contribute little to their neighborhoods and believed that, with the strategic placement of amenities, employment

centers, key services and residents, the stations could be more fully integrated into the life of the communities. In all three cases, the transitions involved significant roles for the public, strong leadership, and confidence in the capacity of transportation nodes to help revitalize urban areas.

Design Quality and Symbols are Important. All three transportation related cases realized the importance of design and other gestures toward creating quality public space. Portland added four new "park blocks," building on a tradition of parks in the City. The investments in park amenity were a substantial acknowledgement of the importance of high quality public space in the life of new communities. Silver Spring worked with the architecture of the Discovery Center and its public park, the commons, and the Veterans Plaza on axis with the transit center. Its award winning "Five Senses Gardens" by landscape architect John Urban, and the plans for design of the Veterans Plaza, further reinforce the critical importance of design quality in the public realm. Fruitvale used a familiar California architectural vernacular, based on pedestrian scale massing and bright color to create inviting public spaces. It then put its front door at the BART station and drew people through its public plaza and market spaces to the commercial strip on International Boulevard, proving that sometimes relatively small changes in circulation patterns can have tremendous impacts. The commitment of all three transit based projects to design quality helped assure their enduring value and success.

Public Engagement is Ever Present. Finally, all three transit oriented projects put their trust in civic engagements processes. Portland built on its long tradition of community advisory commissions to provide the necessary check and balance to the private interests on the Portland Streetcar, Inc. board. Fruitvale leveraged the leadership of the highly regarded Unity Council and its ties to the community. And Silver Spring moved planning for the area into a very straightforward process of community consultation.

Portland Streetcar offers a finely crafted mix of people, process and place. The project is important because it demonstrates that cities can continue to improve themselves—it offers hope for the future of our urban centers.

ART BASED PLACES

The other two places awarded in this year's RBA cycle are art based interventions, something we have seen in other outstanding RBA winners. They offer dramatically different images of place, both based upon a belief in the importance of art to the life of their local communities. Paducah, Kentucky's Artist Relocation Program focused on attracting, building, and maintaining a community of mature and successful artists who are care about and belong to their neighborhood. The Heidelberg Project, by contrast, uses art in the service of social protest, focusing attention on the conditions of inner-city Detroit. Like the transit oriented places, the art based programs require participants and citizens in their respective cities to entertain dramatically different visions of place.

Imagining Place

The t-shirts of Paducah, Kentucky suggest it is the fifth most important cultural destination in the world, a bold vision for a town of 26,000 located hundreds of miles away from any major city. Yet it is precisely this kind of boldness and imagination that has fundamentally reshaped a dangerous and blighted historic neighborhood adjacent to the downtown. This area, Lower Town, was one in which fifty-one percent of the population were living in poverty, where seventy percent were transient renters, and where a large majority of the historic building stock was in deplorable condition. Add to the mix the fact that that drug-related crime was on the rise. Now imagine telling successful artists from all over the United States that this is the site where they should invest $300,000 to $400,000 in new or renovated home and studio construction in order to make this neighborhood into a wonderful community of artists. And yet it happened, largely because of the creative vision of Mark Barone and the willingness of town planner Tom Barnett to embrace a creative vision for this historic neighborhood.

Detroit's Heidelberg Project offers another powerful depiction of the role of imagination in shaping not just the future of a neighborhood, but the awakening of a city. In addition, for many the project pushes the frontiers of what constitutes art. Here one has to consider a largely abandoned and blighted two blocks in a sea of distressed neighborhoods on Detroit's east side. This is the place Tyree Guyton chose as the site and context for his paint, sculpture, and environmental art that has evolved in this location for almost twenty years. His work has rendered these two blocks the third most visited tourist destination in the City, and has been transforming the awareness of visitors, the citizens of Detroit, and the world about the plight of such places and the people that inhabit them. That same body of work made of largely discarded material is also shaking the foundations of the art world.

Creating Process

The Heidelberg Project and the Paducah Artist Relocation Program are even more remarkable for the participation processes employed in their making. Artist Mark Barone, living in the blight of Lower Town in Paducah, virtually willed colleagues, neighbors, and city government, largely unknown to him at the time, to join him in the making of the art community that the City now enjoys. He did it by forging a coalition with the City's Department of Planning, and working with the Director of Planning to develop a strategy to realize his vision through personal outreach, the internet, and art magazine ads. Through the process, bank loans were secured from civic minded lenders. While clearly significant funds were invested by the artists moving to Paducah, the initial loans amounts were often for more than the bank could expect if foreclosure were required. Barone and Planning Director Tom Barnett worked with the conventional tools of the municipal planner: comprehensive code inspection, historic review boards, and frankly modest city infrastructure investments. It is the simplicity and degree of success of the intervention that remains hard to imagine even as its success is undeniable.

Artist Tyree Guyton is at the center of the Heidelberg Project, where he has employed controversial art and action in his community – so politically threatening that it has been bulldozed by the City on two occasions. Even as it has been destroyed, it has increased in visibility, attracting still more local, national and international interest because of its controversy. Guyton's methods are unorthodox, but have created an enormous impact in Detroit, and around the country. The project is a powerful artistic statement, and an intellectual one that challenges viewers to see the beauty inherent in a neighborhood of discarded people and property. The Heidelberg Project is about the re-imagination of what has been thought to be without value. As such, the cycles of construction and destruction that have been part of the history of the project are a metaphor for the ongoing struggle of a disenfranchised community. The Heidelberg Project is also a form of performance art, even as it creates artifacts on the landscape and meaning in the lives of those who participate as spectators, commentators, destroyers, and promoters. It is a project that focuses attention on the distress and neglect so endemic in inner-city neighborhoods, in a way that has created community pride and strength. Involving community members, engaging visitors, and continually changing and expanding, it represents the resilience and ultimately the triumph of the human spirit.

Other 2005 Selection Committee Observations on Artist Relocation Program and the Heidelberg Project

Again, the Selection Committee revisited themes common to most of the discussions held in the twenty year life of the award program. These themes added depth to the Committee understands of the importance of art, in all its forms, as an agent for community revitalization, and as an essential life force in the urban environment. The members also talked about the crisis conditions of the art based interventions, and saw the artists and other participants in the project as people whose creative imaginations transformed crisis into opportunity.

History and Beauty are Transformative. The Selection Committee devoted a great deal of discussion time considering the ways in which art changes lives. The history of the Paducah neighborhood married with the artistic intention of the new residents has fundamentally changed the quality of the neighborhood, its relation to a revitalizing downtown, and the very understanding of how the people of Paducah think of themselves. The same is also true for the citizens of Detroit touched by the Heidelberg Project. It is impossible to look at an abandoned house in the city the same way after seeing houses that have been turned into artistic statements by Tyree Guyton's signature polka dots. A simple polka dot on an abandoned building now suggests the creative potential of structures that the city wants desperately to forget.

Persistence and Critical Mass are Key Elements to Success. The persistence of the participants in both art projects working to achieve a critical mass of residence, in the case of Lower Town in Paducah, and of visibility, in the case of Heidelberg, was singled out as an important lesson learned. As few as twenty new artists investing in the Paducah arts community is enough to literally change the shape of the blighted community and awaken the potential for such transformations in other parts of the city. The publicity on the art projects and programs of the Heidelberg community helped to establish a new language spoken by the people of Detroit about the possible future for the city and about the beauty inherent in what has been abandoned or discarded. With persistence and repetition come recognition, awareness and, ultimately, a different understanding of possible futures.

Finding Opportunity in Crisis. Both Lower Town and Heidelberg are places born of crisis. Both start with abandoned and blighted neighborhoods characterized by crime, desperate poverty, and blight. The artists in both communities saw opportunity in the problem and used that opportunity to reverse the momentum of neglect and disinvestment. The solutions, however, were not conventional; rather they required a re-imagination of place and potential that moved a set of crisis conditions into new directions. In Paducah, Lower Town had truly lost its reason to exist given changes in the riverfront economy of the City. The Artist

Relocation Program is a completely new identity for this neighborhood and creates a new connection to downtown. In the Heidelberg Project, the neighborhood is part of a much larger national tendency to abandon whole neighborhoods in the inner city. Guyton takes this tendency and forces those who view his art to see the beauty in what society discards, and to guide visitors toward a deeper understanding of the neighborhood and the stories of its residents.

Creative Economy in Action. The last theme shared between Heidelberg and Lower Town relates to the way in which both communities have engaged or added to the creative economy of their communities. Paducah has a large number of new artists, activists, and citizens added to its ranks; many now populate the boards of a number of cultural organizations. It has also extended the art based economy of Paducah by attracting visitors who come to see the diversity of art being created there. The Heidelberg Project has brought visitors from all over the world to Detroit and has become a major destination for visitors, second only to the Museum of Art and the African-American Museum. In the Heidelberg Project we also see a new non-profit board maturing and taking on the mission of the Project with aggressive programming, even as it transcends and adds value to the twenty years of labor by Guyton. Both of these projects are changing the political climate of their city, the view of the inner city by suburban dwellers, and the local economy through the small business they have established.

The Heidelberg Project is important to everyone because it celebrates hope in face of despair, models the transformative powers of art in the urban environment, and puts forward a new vision of urban space.

Conclusions: Rethinking and Re-imagining the Potential of Place

The 2005 Selection Committee considered the applications in all of their complexity and inherent contradictions. In the final analysis, the discussion among the Committee members affirmed the power of urban placemaking, and the importance of a frankly analytical as well as imaginative rethinking of downtowns and neighborhoods. This cycle of the Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence reinforces the understanding that successful placemaking often also depends upon the commitment of a wide variety of stakeholders, and a strong vision by guiding organizations, individuals, and government agencies. Above all, the places awarded in this cycle all demonstrate an understanding of the rich potential inherent in our downtowns and neighborhoods. Committee members emerged from their discussion with a clear affirmation of the resilience of our cities, and of the role of imagination in creating downtowns and neighborhoods that respond to critical urban issues. The RBA, through its distinguished Selection Committees, continues to play a unique and important role in acknowledging the power and complexity of excellent urban places, and in giving them the recognition they so richly deserve.