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Urban Transformation

2009 RUDY BRUNER AWARD FOR URBAN EXCELLENCE

BRUNER FOUNDATION, INC.

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Urban Transformation:

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE 2009 RUDY BRUNER AWARD

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INTRODUCTION

At the conclusion of each Award cycle, the Bruner Foundation reflects upon the themes that emerged. The Award is structured to invite such reflection and to capture the Selection Committee's discussions, adding to our ongoing conversation on the nature of urban excellence.

To encourage dialogue, the Selection Committee is given minimal criteria for selecting winners: they must be real places located within the 48 contiguous states. Other than that, projects may be of any type or scale, and may address any urban issue. Initially, this lack of pre-defined selection criteria can cause discomfort for Selection Committee members. However, the nature of the Committee's assignment – to select the finalists and ultimately the Gold Medalist – inevitably leads them to discuss their priorities. In response to the "raw material" presented by the submissions, Committee members draw upon their values and expertise. While some of the themes and issues reappear year after year, emerging trends and issues are also identified and the intellectual underpinnings of the Award are refreshed.

In 2009, the Committee recognized five projects that transformed urban places, bringing beauty and vitality to underused or derelict sites, while addressing the needs of under-served populations. Several themes re-emerged, including the quality of the vision guiding a project, the long-term viability of leadership, the strength of part-

nerships (or less formal relationships) among public and/or private entities, the development of new models for process or place, and environmental sustainability. The Committee also identified some new themes and priorities that they felt are important as we continue to build the national urban fabric. Both sets of themes are described in the following pages.

TRANSFORMING DERELICT OR UNDERUSED SITES

One common feature of the five winners is that all the projects transformed derelict or highly under-utilized sites. This type of transformative placemaking has potential applicability around the country. In some cities, misuse or disuse blemish an otherwise healthy urban fabric, while in other cities, entire districts and neighborhoods suffer. Such sites are crying for improvement and reintegration into the active and productive fabric of the city.

Inner-City Arts was a collection of under-utilized warehouses and light industrial buildings on the edge of LA's Skid Row. Through a series of skillful architectural interventions, vacant industrial space was transformed into a brilliant new home for ICA's innovative art education programs. The project has become a shining beacon for the children of Skid Row, many of whom are transient or homeless and have no other safe place for artistic expression.

Photo: Iwan Baan

Hunts Point was literally a dumping ground – a derelict, abandoned street right-of-way, so encumbered with trash that the polluted stretch of river it borders was completely hidden from residents. The community, and then the city, reclaimed the site and transformed it into a neighborhood park. Hunts Point Riverside Park gives local residents access to the river for the first time in many years.

Saint Joseph Rebuild Center developed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, a time of great need for the homeless in New Orleans. In an otherwise inhospitable environment – a church parking lot under an overpass, next to an elevated highway junction – the Rebuild Center creates a sense of place. A coalition of church-based service providers, working with a community design team from Detroit, created a series of simple, semi-outdoor spaces that knit service trailers together. The flexible and beautiful design transforms the site into a daytime oasis for New Orleans' homeless.

Millennium Park was once a set of open parking lots and depressed rail lines that separated Grant Park from the heart of downtown Chicago (The Loop). In a brilliant rethinking of urban space, this gap in the urban fabric was decked over to create a spectacular

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new public park with multiple arts venues and as many as 500 free events per year. As "the world's largest green roof," Millennium Park has become Chicago's new "living room," a destination for locals and visitors from around the world. It is reanimating the surrounding parts of The Loop, and claiming billions of dollars in direct and indirect economic impacts for the city.

The Community Chalkboard site was formerly a busy intersection devoid of pedestrian activity in a critical location at the eastern terminus of the historic Downtown Mall. Through the creation of an urban plaza anchored by the Chalkboard, the area has become a new public forum in front of City Hall, the Charlottesville Pavilion, and a new transportation center. The Chalkboard installation creates a visual and functional focal point for the plaza.

PROJECT IMPACT: EFFECTING URBAN TRANSFORMATION

The winning projects all bring substantial, positive benefits to the urban environment and to people who use them. Just as the projects vary greatly in size, there are also considerable differences in the nature, scale and quality of their impacts. Examples of impacts include the following which are described in more detail below:

- Improving the quality of life or of the urban experience – for individuals, specific groups, or the general public. Some of the projects generate shared experiences and/or new connections for the community.
- Improving access to services and amenities – especially for those who are underserved.
- Creating a place that people love and that attracts them to visit it.
- Generating improvements beyond the boundaries of the project itself. These may be physical development, economic benefits such as increased jobs, revenues, or tax base; or other kinds of contributions to the physical and social fabric of the city.

Improving the quality of urban experience. Urban and especially downtown environments often become degraded over time. Challenges may include lack of safety (real or perceived), crowding, pollution, traffic, lack of open space, and the like. Urban existence can be entwined with modern alienation, and tied to urban anomie, isolation, and a lack of real community and connection (which may be as prevalent in the suburbs as in the denser urban core).

Thus, a project that improves the quality of the urban experience, and attracts people into the city or to an area within a neighborhood,

represents a major achievement. The creation of opportunities for communal and shared experiences seemed particularly important to Selection Committee members. They took special interest in places that attract people of all ethnic and socio-economic categories. Several of the winning projects have achieved a great deal in this area (as described above in the section about their transformation of degraded sites).

Improving access to services and amenities. The Selection Committee was very interested in projects that provide access to services or amenities, particularly to populations or in areas that have been poorly served.

For ICA, the choice to locate – and stay – on the edge of Skid Row is central to its mission of bringing art education to low-income children and their teachers. ICA not only provides services (and an approach to teaching) that would otherwise be unavailable to these students, but also transports the children from their home schools to the campus, providing safe and efficient access to education in an enriched environment.

St. Joseph provides a variety of services to the homeless at a single site, making comprehensive care much more accessible. Its physical location is on the edge of the city center, but within walking distance or a short bus ride for most of its "guests." A formerly under-served homeless population is now well accommodated in an attractive, light-weight structure of decks, trellises and trailers.

Hunts Point Riverside Park provides a place for recreation, organized events, and educational programs in a densely populated, lower-income, minority community where open space and recreation facilities are very limited. Hunts Point can be reached by a short walk from an area of dense housing and commercial activity that also has a transit stop (and there is parking for those who might drive from further away).

On a much larger scale, Millennium Park provides a green and public place in the city. It is immediately adjacent to the Loop, with a very high density of office and residential uses. Accessibility is excellent – it is a center for public transit, with parking and a rail station underneath it, and is located a few blocks from the El. It has also been celebrated for its provision of accessibility to disabled individuals. Since it serves the entire city, the Selection Committee

wondered how effectively accessible it might be to lower-income residents, including those from the South Side – whether there might be cost barriers even to using public transportation to get there.

The Committee had somewhat similar questions about the Chalkboard and particularly the adjacent downtown pedestrian mall. They are located quite close to historically African-American housing projects, but there was little evidence that residents of the projects make much use of the mall. Still, when city-wide, national or international events stimulate the need to communicate directly and communally, the Chalkboard has become a place to debate public issues.

Broader impacts. While the main focus of the Award is on the qualities of each individual place, there is an obvious interest in how a place impacts its broader environment. Millennium Park commissioned detailed studies that document stunning impacts in terms of attracting revenue, business, and tourists, as well as catalyzing development around it. Hunts Point appears to have been a crucial first step in recognizing and reclaiming the ignored and degraded Bronx River and initiating park and open space development in this under-served area. ICA has provided a model for art education and is continually documented and analyzed for use in school curricula. The Chalkboard builds community connections in Charlottesville by establishing and protecting unfettered public dialogue on the issues of the day, and St. Joseph Rebuild Center

extends the reach of St. Joseph Church and its partner Catholic organizations to homeless populations in the area.

Scale and quality of impacts. Together with the nature, quality, or substance of a place's impacts, the Selection Committee considered the number of people who are affected by a place. On a given day, hundreds of community members may visit the neighborhood park at Hunts Point, or a similar number of homeless people may obtain services at St. Joseph, or busloads of students attend art classes at ICA. Over the course of a year, thousands may experience these places. By contrast, large segments of Charlottesville may be drawn to an event at the Chalkboard while Millennium Park attracts millions of visitors each year.

But the Selection Committee was also interested in considering the depth and quality of the impact, and how visitors or users are affected by a particular place. Is the experience pleasant and entertaining – or does it fundamentally change perceptions of the city or alter the nature of the urban experience? Even more, is the

experience transformative and life-changing for the individuals served? Along these lines, ICA was demonstrated to have a dramatic impact on the educational performance of the disadvantaged students and their teachers, and on their quality of life. Similarly, St. Joseph not only provides services to the homeless, but also offers dignity to people who are stigmatized by other segments of society. The fact that a project was aimed toward the underserved (Hunts Point residents, the homeless at St. Joseph, and the mostly poor and minority children who come to ICA) was felt by this Committee to be particularly meaningful.

Costs and benefits. Another approach the Selection Committee took to balancing these diverse impacts was to consider their cost-benefit – how much impact did they achieve, and at what cost? The goal is economy of means – to get the most bang for the buck. This also affects how applicable (or saleable) these models might be for other cities.

Of these projects, St. Joseph stood out for accomplishing a great deal with very little expenditure. It is a modest project, making use of trailers, trellises and landscaping to create an oasis that stands apart from its gritty urban environs. At the other end of the spectrum, Millennium Park marshaled tremendous resources and, arguably, spent them well and achieved a great deal. In considering these diverse projects it became clear that important and meaningful impacts can be achieved at any scale.

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VISION, PROCESS, AND PARTNERSHIP

How did these projects manage to dramatically transform their sites and create marvelous new places with positive impacts? Creative placemaking often relies on extraordinary **vision**—sometimes contributed by an inspired individual and sometimes developed in a communal process. In all cases, to make that vision a reality, hard work, unconventional partnerships, and community participation were needed.

Each of the winning projects had a visionary leader at its outset, and the quality of his or her vision was powerful enough to compel others to support the work. Through the process, often in response to issues raised in public dialogue and challenges “on the ground,” the vision evolved. In all of the winning projects, people seized unexpected opportunities and doggedly pursued their creative ideas with unprecedented levels of effort and persistence. In doing

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so, they elicited cooperation among public and private entities; community and city; citizen and government.

Public-private partnerships represent another long-term theme of the Award, with continuing interest in the range of ways in which these partnerships can be effective. In this set of winners, we see a variety of models. At Millennium Park, the city was the proactive leader in creating a framework for the place; private donors were subsequently encouraged to step in to sponsor particular pieces. ICA was generated by a private vision, but always served the public interest and coordinated with the school system and the city. Given the soundness and value of what the ICA offers, the city has stepped up and contributed (e.g., by continuing to fund transportation and classroom teacher time). In the case of the Community Chalkboard, the "process is the product" in the sense that the public debate generated by the private proposal was, in essence, the very theme the monument was intended to encourage. And at Hunts Point, once the community demonstrated what could be done with this strip of land by opening a connection to the river, the city parks department not only responded, but also took leadership in funding, design and construction.

Process is another focus of the Award. Generally fitting a "grass-roots" model, Inner-City Arts, St. Joseph Rebuild Center and Hunts Point Riverside Park all started with individual visions and expanded to include very broad-based input and participation. While inclined toward inclusive, democratic processes, the Committee noted that the top-down approach of Millennium Park was extraordinarily effective in its context. The Chalkboard embodied both kinds of process in the sense that it was generated by a foundation but, through the competition and engagement with the community, grew to be highly participatory. The lesson here is that all kinds of processes can produce quality places – but they must be appropriate to their contexts.

LEADERSHIP

The Selection Committee also examined the quality and longevity of leadership of each project. Issues include the strength of the leader and sustainability of the organization built up around them, as well as the question of whether the organization has evolved and adapted to changing circumstances. In all cases, and compared to past winners, the current projects appear to have moved beyond

dependence on a single visionary leader and into longer-term operational strategies, evolving organizational infrastructures to ensure their ongoing success.

ICA, for example, was founded by a visionary leader, Bob Bates, who was already teaching art in an elementary school when he was inspired to "create a place for children's art" in the midst of a social and industrial wasteland. Bob heeded that call, found local support, then gathered a team whose generosity and commitment to the idea helped to make it happen. Midway through ICA's history, the team added a strong executive director who has succeeded in growing the organization and spreading responsibilities through an expanded professional staff and board. ICA has evolved over 20 years through three major phases, reaching out to ever-wider circles of support, yet always remaining true to its founding vision.

In New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina devastated services for the homeless, simultaneously greatly increasing their numbers and level of need. Three Catholic service organizations came together to imagine how they could cooperate to fill the gap – and invited a talented community design group from Detroit to help them. Together, they envisioned a prototype homeless center that could be rapidly and inexpensively constructed, and would communicate through its design their desired message of care. Hard work included fundraising, growing a new organization, and the labor contributed by architecture students from Detroit.

In Chicago, the story is that Mayor Daley visited his dentist's office in a building on Michigan Avenue. Looking down from the chair, he saw a prime corner of Grant Park occupied by huge parking lots and rail lines that cut the park off from the city. The Mayor envisioned a major park project, and developed the idea as a millennium-focused project with Donna LaPietra. They enlisted strong leaders: John Bryan approached major donors who contributed generously, funding many of the signature elements of the park, and Ed Uhlir managed the complex web of agencies, design and construction firms, and artists, many with strong personalities and agendas.

The Community Chalkboard vision began as a concept of the Thomas Jefferson Center to sponsor a competition for a "monument" celebrating freedom of expression. Their vision was expanded by the selected submission, which took the notion of monument to a new level. It proposed to embody the act of free expression, creating a civic space where none had existed. Developing the Chalkboard involved a major public debate about just how much un-edited

public speech was acceptable and appropriate. It also required negotiating the precise site, obtaining the public commitment to construct the new plaza, and raising the money for construction. Project planners capitalized on a "perfect storm" of circumstances and opportunities, including the success of the downtown mall, the development of a new transportation center, and the integration of the Charlottesville Pavilion into the plaza.

At Hunts Point, Majora Carter reports being tugged by her dog through a dump and, on the other side of the rubble, "discovering" the river hidden behind industrial yards and fences. She was struck by the realization that the place could be a tremendous asset to the Bronx community, whose residents had very little access to open space or recreation. She did not wait to convince the city to act; rather, she inspired community activists to pitch in and start the process, devoting countless hours to the initial clean-up. Only when the site's potential could be demonstrated did the city get on board and become a significant partner in the development of the park. As momentum for the park was established, Carter moved on from her leadership role and other leaders came forward.

ARCHITECTURAL QUALITY

Given its substantial importance as one measure of urban excellence, design was discussed for every project. The focus was on the relative excellence of formal qualities – not in-and-of themselves, but rather in their relationship to social, environmental, and economic factors. In this sense, design quality is about how the physical fabric supports and expresses a place's function, operations and meaning.

Looked at from this perspective, the level of design of the 2009 winners was felt to be very high. The architecture of Inner-City Arts achieves a singular and nuanced integration of formal and programmatic excellence, making a strong visual statement about the value of children and the importance of the arts. St. Joseph Rebuild Center was also noted for its innovative architecture and as the project whose design is perhaps the most supportive of its mission. The Community Chalkboard was a highly innovative design that incorporated the act of free speech into the very fabric of its structure. Millennium Park integrated powerfully designed architectural, landscape and art components within a traditional (almost classical) planning context that created "rooms" for these elements, allowing them to coexist without clashing or competing.

TRANSFORMATION: NEW MODELS FOR PLACEMAKING

RBA Selection Committees look for **innovation**: projects that break new ground by inventing a kind of place that did not exist before, or radically transform the nature of a city or area, or shift the paradigm for how places can be made. Committees are extremely impressed when they discover a new model of urban placemaking among the submissions.

In this vein, the Committee found that ICA represented important innovations both in the way arts education is offered, and in how it can maximize its impact on the total child and his or her overall educational performance. ICA expands the importance of arts education at a time when schools find it increasingly challenging to support the arts within their curricula and budgets. Because this was accomplished in a facility that transformed derelict and vacant warehouses into beautiful landmark architecture, the Committee felt that ICA does indeed create a new paradigm, merging programmatic and formal excellence in a new type of place.

Some Committee members felt that St. Joseph Rebuild Center was "completely transformative" and "transcended the typology" of homeless facilities – especially in terms of its design and construction. They were particularly impressed with the innovative incorporation of trailers and open space. The structure sits lightly on the ground and has an outstanding ratio of effort and expense to effect. While the use of light, almost temporary structures, and the incorporation of extensive outdoor public spaces might not be possible in other climates, there are many urban parking lots across the country that beg for better uses and would benefit from this design sensibility. Saint Joseph's also provides a new way of thinking about rapid response to disaster situations.

Millennium Park has changed the face of downtown Chicago – a remarkable feat in a city with a rich history of architecture and planning. As a worldwide destination, the Park has also created a new identity for Chicago's downtown and forged new connections between the center of The Loop, the Chicago Art Institute, Grant Park, and the surrounding areas.

The Community Chalkboard was seen as a wholly new idea of what a monument might be: not only representing – but actually embodying the act of – free speech. It is tailored to its location through a simple and beautiful design that uses local materials and is symbolically connected to the city's history.

Recognizing that each urban setting is unique in its cultural, social, economic, political, and physical characteristics, Selection Committees are always interested in the possibility that a project can function as **a model**. What does it offer that can be used elsewhere? Does it present ideas that can be adapted to other cities' settings and challenges?

Among this round's winners, the Committee felt that ICA offered a model of arts education that could be broadly applicable, and that St. Joseph's approach to design and construction of light-weight, indoor-outdoor structures could also be applied – at least in many climates – in disaster situations. They also valued the way in which St. Joseph involved architecture students in the design and construction of the facility and thought this could happen elsewhere. The notion of a community engaging around a discussion of how to foster freedom of expression also seemed like it could have "legs," though its physical representation would likely vary greatly from place to place. Millennium Park offered many lessons that might find application elsewhere – from building over parking and transit lines (as was also done at The Park at Post Office Square – see the RBA book from 1993), to tapping major donors and including interactive artworks, although the scale of the accomplishment in Chicago made it unique.

CONCLUSION

Just as these projects vary greatly in size, there are also considerable differences in the nature, scale and quality of their impacts. Because the Selection Committee can only award a single gold medal, its members are forced to weigh these diverse issues, and to ponder whether one is more significant than another. Here, dilemmas arise: for example, is contributing to arts education (with potential long-term impacts on the child) more important that meeting the short-term needs of the homeless (which could also help them transition out of homelessness)? How can these impacts be compared to transforming a portion of a large city and engaging millions of users? What about the importance of creating a place that brings together people of all different backgrounds and all parts of the city to share experiences together – is that not exceptionally meaningful in today's cities, where groups may be alienated from each other?

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The Committee investigated these questions through a series of discussions that entailed a deep look at the purpose of the Award and the merits of each winner. In so doing, they selected a group of winners that contributes to our deeper understanding of the kinds of places that make our cities more robust, meaningful, supportive and enjoyable. Rudy Bruner Award winners all bring positive change to the urban environment and new opportunities to people who use these places. As their stories unfold, and the questions are asked, we learn more about the kinds of places and processes that make lasting contributions to our understanding of urban excellence.