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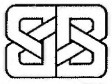
Partnering Strategies for the Urban Edge

2011 RUDY BRUNER AWARD FOR URBAN EXCELLENCE



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Partnership Strategies and the Public Realm: Lessons and Questions

It is not easy serving on an RBA Selection Committee. The initial discussions among Committee members almost always begin with a search for a familiar way to choose winners from an excellent group of applicants. The criteria for eligibility, however, require only that the project be a real place, not a plan or a program, and that it be sufficiently "mature" that its impacts can be observed. The Selection Committee members, therefore, are asked to find persuasive aspects of excellence within the projects in lieu of judging projects on a pre-determined set of measurements.

This approach does not favor large projects over small ones; it does not privilege the well-financed project over those that struggle for budget; and it is not fundamentally about any single discipline prevailing over all others in the making. More often the discussions in both the initial round of work and in the final debate leading to the designation of a Gold Medal winner revolve around the ways in which excellent projects must be responsive to a wide variety of urban, social, demographic, architectural and contextual factors.

It is inevitably a part of such discussions to look at both the range of constituents influencing the development of each new project, and the ways in which each new place will effect the urban built environment and its many stakeholders. As the complexity of place-making is revealed, the difficulty of managing a series of complex relationships in a manner that results in well-made and sustainable places becomes increasingly clear. Innovative partnerships played a key role in the 2011 winners, and the range of partnerships in the

five projects was notable. There were a total of 23 municipal or public agencies weighing in across the projects, as well as 18 private sector interests and over 30 not-for-profit organizations including philanthropic groups. The level of partnering does not appear to be directly related to the dollar value of projects or their overall physical complexity.

The case histories reported in this cycle of the Rudy Bruner Award all involve core responsibilities that might traditionally be understood as the purview of the public sector: public parks, schools, youth centers, and facilities for distressed populations. In these cases the public sector worked closely with non-profits, and citizen groups to achieve optimal outcomes for the public good. In challenging economic times, urban development includes an increasing number of such partnerships, and leads to new and innovative visions of place. In considering the 2011 winners we find some lessons and still more questions relating to these new models of partnership. Yet it seems that despite the questions raised along the way, capable partners working together can achieve results that would not otherwise be possible.

The 2011 winners include two urban parks, a school and related after-school programs in a youth center, a comprehensive program of services related to an urban homeless population, and the re-use of a railroad yard as both an urban park and development site. All of these projects involved challenges to conventional financing, required innovative partnering strategies and resulted the creation of new public space. None of these projects would have been successful without the partnerships that overcame initial resistance to development and incorporated disparate points of view. These inclusive strategies ultimately enhanced the public's capacity to perform, improved the quality of public and private services delivered, added quality space to the urban built environment, and improved the climate for business interests.

The significant role of citizens who were initially opposed to early project plans cannot be overstated. Dialogue with these groups, and ultimately partnerships formed with them resulted in projects that were far superior to those offered in the initial development plans. In Santa Fe citizen opposition to conventional development lead to a partnership among the Trust for Public Land, the City of Santa Fe, a private non-profit "friends" type organization, the Railroad and a private non-profit community development corporation who, working together, re-envisioned the project. The Brooklyn Bridge Park also has its origins in such resistance– in this case it was the struggle between municipal perceptions of how development should occur at the edge of the park, and how citizens choose to address park planning and development. Both of these projects demonstrate the importance of an informed and vocal citizenry, and also exemplify how such conflicts can be the basis for new and productive collaborations.

The projects in Phoenix, Dallas, and Chicago reveal other forms of partnering, also framed by discreet but influential acts of resistance and some extraordinary cooperation among municipal agencies, non-profit institutions, and private philanthropic activity. These strategies suggest a role for the private sector in the transformation of K-12 education, the elimination of homelessness, and in the transformation of urban cores. These cases struggled with conflict as part of project evolution but ended with collaborations that provided a foundation of trust and a renewed capacity to move forward.

THE SANTA FE RAILYARD REDEVELOPMENT

Imagine the citizens of the Guadalupe District in Santa Fe organizing a popular resistance to a conventional development plan that was embraced by municipal government, environmental groups, the business sector, as well as professional, and neighborhood constituencies. Despite long odds, however, their efforts were successful and the revised participation led to a very popular development viewed by many as a victory for a grass roots community of Santa Fe. The collision of interests within the development community, versus the aspirations of the City for a public realm less dominated by Santa Fe's tourist economy, led to a new ten acre park. The same confluence of development aspirations and the interests of non-profit organizations like El Museo Cultural, Warehouse 21, the Farmers Market, Site Santa Fe, resulted in a mix of uses in the Railyard project that was not part of the original development scheme but clearly added to the vitality and richness of the opportunities in Santa Fe.

The grassroots process employed after the large development proposal failed in Santa Fe led to an unusual alignment among diverse partners and a new role for the City that enabled much of the public space to be developed and maintained with private money. The irony in this story is that following the RBA site visit and reporting, the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement moved into the Santa Fe Railyard and faced opposition from a sympathetic but concerned Santa Fe Railyard Community Corporation. The occupants apparently knew little of the history of the popular roots of the Corporation and were actually protesting against the rules of Railyard and park uses

that the Community Corporation and their expansive grassroots constituencies had developed years earlier.

There were strenuous efforts by the City and the Community Corporation to work through the controversy created by the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement as it established residence in the park. There were multiple meetings with discussions about the rules of occupancy, debates about how best to protect the site and the occupiers, even as the protest was encouraged to run its course. The struggle began to feel like a conventional head-to-head of corporate interests versus the use of the public realm for public ends. But the discussion allowed the City and Community Corporation to tell the story of their work again, decades after their initial struggle, to a new generation of Santa Fe residents. In so doing there was a renewed enthusiasm for the origin story and a way to refresh memories of the public intention in resisting the initial corporate proposals for the site. It reminded the people of the human and social purposes behind the public-private partnership that created the development.

BROOKLYN BRIDGE PARK

Parks are a civic responsibility, or so our common understanding of municipal finance suggests. But the scale and potential significance of Brooklyn Bridge Park is in many ways unique. The capital costs were financed with public money, yet the ability to maintain it over

time is vested in a public/private "business model" that calls for some perimeter property farthest from the water to be privately developed and to generate revenue for Park operations. For some this is an inappropriate compromise on what should be entirely a public responsibility, while for others it is a creative solution to limited public resources for Park operations. In fact, the Brooklyn Bridge Park Defense Fund went to court to challenge the legality of funding the Park through housing revenues internal to its borders. The 2006 court decision affirming its legality has done little to quash the concerns about this blending of public and private responsibilities and the way in which the Park will be sustained remains hotly debated.

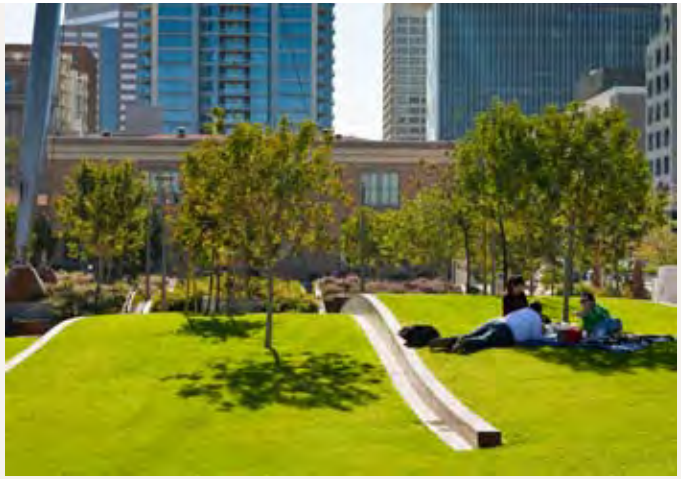
Other more modest partnerships involve not-for-profit locations for activities in the Park. While coordinated by the Brooklyn Bridge Park Corporation and the Brooklyn Bridge Park Conservancy, these organizations are seen to be part of the life of the Park, feeding its largely free programming with everything from kayak instruction and

sport events, to movies, theatre productions, opera, and concerts. Still another layer of educational programming occurs through the Bridge Community Council which has reached out to public and private schools, recreation organizations, and arts groups that now routinely use the Park. All the partners, some large and others very small, contribute to its vitality.

CIVIC SPACE PARK

Like Brooklyn Bridge, Civic Space Park used city funds to support much of the initial capital cost, and relies upon a municipal agreement with Arizona State University that allows ASU to operate and maintain the Park. The resistance to this project came from those who thought University maintenance and operations would privatize the Park and incorporate it into the ASU campus. In order to address the concern about the loss of full public use, a cooperative agreement between the University and the City was put in place with safeguards on access and use. In addition the symbolic naming, "Civic Space Park," suggested strongly the intention to create a park that was a true public amenity.

In order to ensure full activation of the Park as an urban amenity, and thus more fully revitalize the downtown, the City of Phoenix also sold bonds supporting the construction of student housing, recreation facilities, and academic buildings on the periphery of Civic Pace Park. The planning for the Park and the ASU downtown



campus has focused on creating a destination surrounded by campus activity, filled with programmed events for the general public, as well as offering a variety of passive spaces. The Park benefits from its location as a route between various points on its periphery, as well as the downtown. The program for Civic Space Park is still emerging and it remains to be seen if the programming partnership between the University and the City will fully activate the space.

GARY COMER COLLEGE PREP AND YOUTH CENTER

Charter schools everywhere have become part of the debate over how to improve upon the efficacy of public schools. In many states the charter schools utilize public school resources and are seen as an alternative to failing public education. And in many cities, charter schools have become a very significant new paradigm for public-private partnership.

At Gary Comer College Prep the program went beyond state funding formulas in their partnership, utilizing private funds to augment the public school mission. This funding allowed creation of Gary Comer College Prep, creation of a peer tutoring program at nearby Paul Revere Elementary, and development of a major new youth center offering a safe after school site for students in the neighborhood. The program for both GCCP and Youth Center were derived in breakfast conversations in the public school. The origin story of the project has its roots in contributions through the Comer Science and Education Foundation which discovered that the support it offered to the early years of public schooling had not resulted in increased student success in the public high school system. The result of their rethinking their intervention is the GCCP that is both an alternative to the traditional public school and a potential new model for helping public schools to succeed.

Another partner strategy employed in the College Prep and Youth Center was to align itself with the very successful South Shore Drill Team. By providing space for drill in the youth center the total complex has come to symbolize the potential for individual success and embodies a significant source of community pride in the otherwise grim social and economic conditions of Chicago's south side.

While it is necessary to provide tight security for GCCP due to crime concerns in the neighborhood, the program has extended itself outside the bunker to the community garden, the new public library, and newly renovated housing nearby. As a result new construction is now increasing near the school. All of this speaks well of the evolution of the partnership between the Comer Foundation, the Chicago school system, the Mayor and the Fifth Ward Alderman, and is seen to contribute substantially to a more positive attitude about the conditions of the Grand Crossing neighborhood.

THE BRIDGE

The Bridge is a story of how cities should never waste a good crisis. The human and economic cost of over six thousand homeless people on the streets of downtown Dallas had reached what several called crisis proportions. The business community simply wanted the problem to go away. They raised $160,000 to try to defeat the proposed downtown location for a homeless shelter, fearing that proximity of the homeless population would further threaten the

downtown environment. The coalition that worked to build the Bridge pushed back and successfully acquired their downtown site and permission to proceed. In the long run these warring factions came together to create a project that is making new inroads in the national problem of homelessness.

The Bridge not only overcame resistance to its development, but partnered with downtown interests to ensure the effectiveness of their project. The Bridge now raises over one third of its annual operating funds from private sources. These funds come from a wide array of businesses, individuals and organizations that would otherwise be burdened by more costly engagements of the Bridge populations as well as from a large cast of social support networks often engaged in such work.

The Bridge also enjoys support and recognition from the art community and related philanthropies that are appreciative of its award winning architecture. Partners come with a variety of motivations, and the Bridge constituencies have leveraged them to move on to a program of future expansion.

WORKING THE EDGES

There was a good deal of discussion among Selection Committee members about the design of edge conditions of each project. Civic Space Park was conceived as a seamless part of the urban fabric,

and concept diagrams demonstrate the continuous circulation patterns through the park and into the surrounding street grid. The soft edges appear to intentionally lack definition and minimize any thought of ceremonial arrival in the park. This was done in deference to the goal of weaving a site at the edge of downtown into the fabric of the city. The Santa Fe Railyard, like Phoenix's Civic Space Park, is also located at the edge of downtown, and aspired to be integrated into the surrounding neighborhood street pattern. This development also tended to express such integration by avoiding sharp definitions of the project's edge, and establishing porosity and multiple points of entry and exit.

Brooklyn Bridge Park, by contrast, was industrial. It was a site already set apart from the neighboring urban fabric both by use and by location. It is sandwiched in between the highway and the waterfront

with only a narrow throat on each end connecting it to the surrounding neighborhood. Even in this case, however, where a clearly defined arrival was possible, the designers choose to create softer links to its neighbors, through a bridge, and other street level access points, almost a feathering of the park's edge into the adjacent street pattern. In all three cases the definition of edge conditions was soft. To some of the members of the Selection Committee this was negative, "ill defined," while others argued it afforded a good expression of connection.

The design of the Bridge in Dallas and the Comer College Prep and Youth Center also struggled with boundary conditions. The Bridge was bounded by the expressway on one side and downtown on the other. And Comer College Prep and Youth Center was at the intersection of three separate communities joined by arterial roads. These facilities were both envisioned as healing the physical and social fabric of their community even as they sought to protect occupants from dangers lurking within these communities. The result is that these facilities had to embrace stringent security, even as they were also "beacons" of light and symbols of hope. The contradictions are evident. The street pattern is sustained through the Bridge but the complex is also fenced, blocking through traffic. The protection from street level gun fire at the school and youth center is clearly not the public expression of open to the neighborhood that, for example, the nearby library or gardens illustrate.

Neither the Bridge nor the Comer College Prep and Youth Center programs really had a choice. The school and youth center needed to be a safe haven in the roughness of South Chicago, and the clients of the Bridge needed protection from influences outside the control of the service providers in the facility. Both facilities address the opposing goals with sharp boundary conditions.

The open question for all five projects in this cycle of the Award is about the nature of boundary or edge. Are they in service of integration, functional separation, or both? Does a soft edge defeat a clear entrance condition? Does a hard edge defeat integration? In urban design terms the choice is likely a false one. Designers always aspire to do both by clearly identifying the order of the functional separation and their relationships, each to the others. This is where the architecture expresses its voice, establishing the landmarks and nodes that mark destination and the edges and districts that announce critical transitions.

WHO WINS AND WHO LOSES?

Who wins and who loses may be the central question when we blur distinctions between the legitimate interests of the general public versus those of smaller more identifiable constituencies. The passionate defense of public interest over commercial interests in park management at Brooklyn Bridge Park, or in the resistance to University management of Civic Space Park are grounded in a perception

of the loss of public control. When "Occupy Santa Fe" takes over the Railyard Park and is resisted by the Railyard Community Corporation with legitimate commercial interests in the park, how do we identify the tipping point when the commercial interests have gone too far in control of public space? The economic arguments that suggest private commerce (even non-profit interest) or University management over public space necessarily have to be balanced with the public realm.

The use of new institutional arrangements in making places, however, does have a profound influence on the nature of the places we make. The partnership with The Trust for Public Land that enabled the purchase of the site also delineated a strong functional separation on the site. The easement placed by the Trust during the land transfer became the vehicle that defined the park as a single use zone, enabling development of the park and framing its geometry. Brooklyn Bridge Park introduced private development at the edge to the Park farthest from the water, leaving water's edge and the many acres of open space behind it available to the public.

As semi-private charter schools utilize public resources to operate have they actually lessened the potential for success for public education, or are they providing new models that will benefit the broader system? As we raise private money to address the needs of the homeless have we weakened the ability of the public to meet its obligations to its citizens, or have we enabled the discovery of new models that will make public efforts more effective in the future? In times of tight resource constraints in the public sector, it is imperative that government avail itself of other sources of funds, as long as private funding does not interfere with government's most important mandate, to provide for the larger public good. Private funding sources also have the potential to relieve the public sector of responsibilities that have traditionally been theirs but that may no longer be affordable.

Previous RBA winners such a Chicago's Millennium Park and Yerba Buena Gardens in San Francisco join this year's winning projects in offering innovative models for how the public can leverage private interests in the public realm. Each story is unique and each raises its own set of questions about the relative benefits and constraints inherent in these public/private partnerships. The power of the stories in this year's Rudy Bruner Award demonstrates the fact that these issues remain controversial. They also embody new forms of partnership that grow out of the unique physical, economic, social and financial attributes of each urban setting. We salute this year's winners for a series of creative partnering strategies that engage an ongoing debate, and in so doing, have created a group of places that make a major contribution to sustaining the vitality of the public realm.