

Lessons Learned

The five 2013 Rudy Bruner for Urban Excellence (RBA) winners present a variety of ways to foster healthier living environments and lifestyles and bring people together to help to improve lives and strengthen communities. They repurpose existing, often blighted, structures and land in established communities and incorporate creative and innovative sustainable development techniques.

The diversity of the 2013 winners reminds us that urban excellence happens at all scales with all types of projects, budgets and timelines. Important change can result from the process of developing six or 220 units of housing, an 80-seat restaurant or an 85-acre park. It can happen with an investment of less than \$1 million or nearly \$100 million, in as little as five years or over the course of more than two decades. The diversity of the projects offers a lesson about the variety of paths that can be taken to address the seemingly intractable problems facing our cities, as well as optimism about our ability to affect real and lasting change.

The five winning projects take on issues that are both familiar and new. All overcame significant hurdles, such as securing financing in hard economic times, convincing public agencies to try new approaches, and gaining the confidence and participation of skeptical communities and leaders. Each one made a significant impact in its city, changing the physical environment for the better as well as perceptions of what is possible, inspiring hope and influencing future development, practices and policies.

At the same time, the five winners highlight themes that reflect the nature of urban development in 2013. They present approaches for re-connecting communities and bringing together people within neighborhoods and cities, within common spaces and for common purposes. They address universal needs, such as creating places that support healthy living and incorporate sustainable development principles, yet each does so with a process deeply anchored in the unique context and history of its place. These projects remediate past environmental damage, provide access to healthy food and green space, and create sustainable living environments – particularly for low-income individuals and communities. These goals were deeply embedded in the philosophy and approach from the very beginning, informing the design, development and ongoing operations.

The 2013 winners tackled these issues with strong leadership, participatory design processes and entrepreneurial approaches that reflect the places and times in which they were developed. They include large-scale initiatives that merged public funding from local, regional and national resources with private investment. They also include smaller-scale projects with “can-do” attitudes and DIY (“do-it-yourself”) approaches that illustrate the potential of new approaches and ideas, and reflect popular interest in locally grown produce and handcrafted products. Several include non-profit, mission-driven “social enterprises” – revenue-generating programs that contribute to the project’s long-term financial sustainability.

Places that Bring People Together and Improve Lives

Regardless of scale and approach, all five projects improve their communities by bringing together people who might not otherwise be in contact. These “third places,” as referred to by Ray Oldenburg¹,



Waterfront Development Corporation

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From the top: Inspiration Kitchens—Garfield Park; Congo Street Initiative, Louisville Waterfront Park

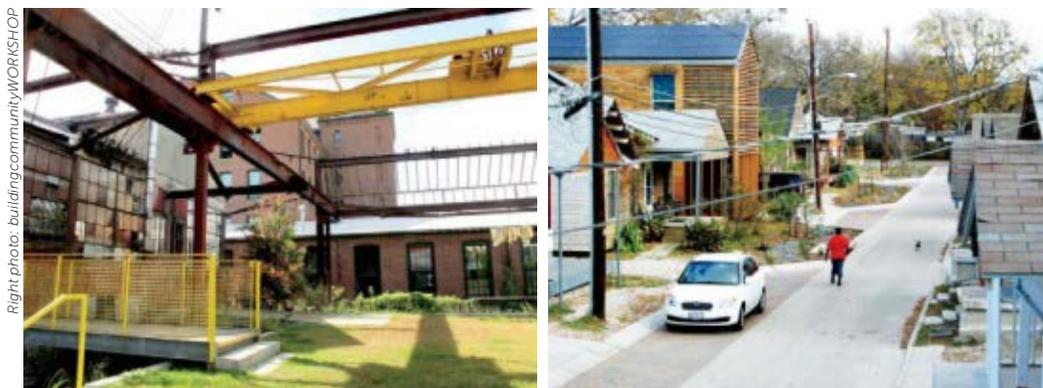
offer warm, open and accessible gathering spaces outside of home or work that serve as places of gathering and sanctuary.

For instance, at Inspiration Kitchens—Garfield Park on Chicago’s West Side, diners from a variety of income levels and communities enjoy affordable, healthy, gourmet meals in a warm, inviting restaurant. Congo Street Initiative engaged homeowners, design professionals, students and volunteers from across Dallas in the design and construction/reconstruction of six houses and a one-block long street that serves as the community’s “living room”. Louisville Waterfront Park provides a green space within the city where people of all races and incomes from across the metro area converge to enjoy the attractions of the riverfront. The Steel Yard’s campus in the gritty Industrial Valley of Providence provides a place for artists and craftsmen to create, trade skills, socialize, and collaborate with local businessmen to introduce a new generation to the industrial arts. And in the densely developed blocks of the South Bronx, low-income and market-rate residents enjoy the landscaped courtyard and roof terraces, and take part in community gardening at Via Verde.

Anchoring Projects in Place

While the five 2013 winners address needs common to many urban areas – such as workforce development, access to healthy food and lifestyles, affordable housing, waterfront development and environmental remediation – each is firmly anchored in its own place. Each solution was carefully shaped in response to the unique historical, social and physical conditions of its immediate community and city.

The transparent façade of Inspiration Kitchens—Garfield Park and even the restaurant’s name were informed by input from neighboring



The Steel Yard (left), Congo Street Initiative

residents desiring a warm, welcoming space reminiscent of kitchens at homes where they gather with families and friends. The newly reconstructed homes on Congo Street are tailored to each family’s needs yet retain the compact footprints and materials from the original structures that imbue them with character and meaning. Public art and view corridors through the existing elevated highway in Louisville Waterfront Park reconnect the city with its origins on the Ohio River. Historic gantry cranes and recycled steel integrated into the new, “urban wild” landscape are reminiscent of The Steel Yard’s original use, and the distinctive, metal clad exterior and green roofs of Via Verde step up gradually to address the massing of low-rise commercial buildings along Third Avenue and the adjacent brick housing tower. The lesson from these efforts, as from RBA winners in the past, is that good design is contextual, responding to local conditions and history; it rarely arises from cookie-cutter or off-the-shelf solutions.

The Increased Role of Landscape

Landscape architecture and design are playing an increasingly central role in urban development, as illustrated by the 2013 award winners. Landscape design was the primary focus of two projects – Louisville Waterfront Park and The Steel Yard – and significantly contributed to the programs and identities of Inspiration Kitchens—Garfield Park,



Congo Street and Via Verde. Together the five projects address a diversity of urban landscape concerns common in cities today, such as reclaiming urban waterfronts, remediating contaminated land, and managing storm water runoff.

The projects demonstrate responses to important ecological issues, such as in Via Verde's integration of green roofs and the use of on- and off-site plots for small-scale urban agriculture at Inspiration Kitchens—Garfield Park. They reveal the critical role of landscape in the regeneration of urban communities, such as the conversion of a former industrial land along the riverfront into an expansive 85-acre park that sparked investment on adjoining land and commercial areas in Louisville, or the transformation of a contaminated industrial site in Providence into 3-1/2 acre pocket of green space that has become a magnet for the community.

The 2013 winners highlight the role of landscape at all scales in fostering innovation and new approaches to infrastructure, such as introducing storm water retention and vegetable gardens in Chicago, or the permeable pavement and landscaped swales in Dallas. Moreover, landscape design provides opportunities for urban dwellers to re-connect with nature, in a stroll across the Ohio River or through a fruit tree grove on a green roof in the Bronx.

Leadership

Leadership is central to the stories of the 2013 winners, which illustrate a diversity of styles and approaches. Great urban projects are driven by the efforts of individuals and organizations that have a vision for what is possible, are able to activate the community and enlist the support of others, and show perseverance in the face of daunting challenges.

Louisville Waterfront Park (top); The Steel Yard

An underlying theme of RBA winners over the history of the award has been that successful projects yielding real and lasting change are seldom the work of a single individual, no matter how brilliant or visionary. Rather, excellence results from collaboration and the involvement of many people and organizations that bring talent, insight and resources to the process of developing, designing, implementing and operating urban places. Successful leaders seek out participatory processes that bring the wisdom of the community to the effort and, in so doing, cultivate a sense of ownership for the place that is created. Indeed, strong leadership and participatory planning are not mutually exclusive, but require a delicate balance of direction with openness to ideas and input from the community.

The 2013 winners exhibit individual and organizational leadership that had the dedication and energy needed to create something out of nothing – particularly in financially challenging times – as well as the confidence to cede a measure of control to community process. Such is the case with Gold Medal winner Inspiration Kitchens—Garfield Park. Inspiration Corporation was born of the vision of its charismatic founder Lisa Nigro, and over time evolved into a sophisticated multi-million dollar nonprofit organization that retains a clear sense of mission and community. Inspiration Kitchens—Garfield Park was the product of the organization’s careful strategic planning process, supported by the thoughtful philanthropy of Leonard and Gabriel Goodman, which incorporated community input and involvement.

Likewise, Congo Street Initiative would not have happened without the skills, dedication and inspiration of Brent Brown, whose philosophy of community-engaged design won the trust of homeowners, city government officials, funders, and a community of people

that contributed their time and skills to make the project possible. In Louisville, David Karem’s background and skills in government enabled him to lead a process that solicited broad community input and established a multifaceted organization that has overseen the development and operations of a new city park for nearly three decades. The Steel Yard was created from the vision and determination of founders Clay Rockefeller and Nick Bauta, who recognized the need to involve people who had the skills to build and lead the organization into the future.

The leadership that led to Via Verde came from the collective vision of the New York design community, led by the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects, working with city agencies. The result was two design competitions that brought together creative design firms and mission-driven developers and produced a winning design that approached affordable housing in a new way.

A key measure of the strength of an organization is its ability to survive changes in leadership, by attracting and cultivating staff and board members who can maintain its vision and advance its goals. Both Inspiration Kitchens—Garfield Park and The Steel Yard have experienced several leadership changes, including the withdrawal from daily operations of their founders as well as several executive director transitions. In each case the strength and capacity of the organization – including an engaged board of directors, talented staff, effective programs, financial stability, committed community partners, and strategic vision – enabled it to maintain focus and move forward. Waterfront Development Corporation has had the advantage of consistent leadership throughout several decades of development. It is yet to be seen who will replace its long-tenured president David Karem

when he decides to move on, although the finished state of the park and maturity of the organization suggests that new leadership might not require the same unique skill set that he possesses. It is uncertain what kind of future bcWORKSHOP will have without Brent Brown, given the degree to which the organization is powered by his unique personality and skills. However, it is clear that he and the organization are influencing an emerging generation of architectural designers and community organizers that are embracing “public interest” and “community-engaged” design as part of their practice.

Sustainable Development and Environmental Considerations

Sustainability and respect for the environment emerged as prominent themes among the 2013 winners. All five projects occupy and improve previously-developed properties. Three of them, including Louisville Waterfront Park, The Steel Yard and Via Verde, entailed substantial environmental remediation. The Steel Yard has been recognized as a model for brownfield redevelopment for its creative approach to environmental capping.

Three of the five 2013 medalists – Inspiration Kitchens—Garfield Park, Congo Street Initiative and Via Verde – incorporate LEED-certified buildings. Since the introduction of LEED in 1998, the number of LEED-certified RBA winners has grown. In 2014 LEED certification is neither unusual nor the only benchmark for environmentally sensitive development, but the innovative solutions encompassed in the certifications of the three projects are worthy of note. Via Verde incorporated into an affordable housing project a level of sustainable features and design and construction techniques not usually found, even in market-rate developments. Likewise, Congo Street Initiative demonstrates that it is possible to achieve LEED certification while renovating existing homes for low-income homeowners on a modest budget, gaining recognition as HUD case study as a result. More importantly, design decisions in these projects were not made expressly to score LEED points. Attention to sustainability has become part of the definition of good design. The features that received LEED points were the outcome of thoughtful sustainable design processes and broader ecological concerns.

Inspiration Kitchens—Garfield Park was not about environmental issues, *per se*, but sustainability provided the underpinning for every aspect of



AS220 Youth



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Clockwise from left: Lance Brown, Paul Freitag and Karen Kubey discuss the New Housing New York design competition; The Steel Yard founders, staff and volunteers are recognized at the award ceremony; residents participate in the planning process for Congo Street Initiative

the project – such as the very notion of bringing high quality healthy food to a community in a so-called “food desert” populated with fast food outlets and bereft of fresh produce markets. The project’s organic and permaculture gardens make a symbolic statement about locally-grown, fresh and healthy food, even though they supply a relatively small portion of the restaurant’s menu. The design for the restaurant was particularly thoughtful in its approach to sustainability, meriting its LEED Gold certification. In the reuse of an existing structure and materials, it provides a comfortable, energy-efficient space that makes use of technology such as solar thermal collectors and unusually efficient variable-speed exhaust hoods in the kitchen.

Likewise, Congo Street Initiative addressed sustainability for very practical reasons. While the five families owned their homes outright, they faced high operating expenses that stretched their tight budgets. The reconstructed, LEED-certified homes include power offsets generated by rooftop solar arrays, offering lower energy bills. Rebuilding Congo Street as Dallas’ first public green street was a response to the frequent flooding residents experienced over many years.

Green design was central to the planning and design of Via Verde, even inspiring the name. The concept for the initial competition submission, which remained largely intact through final design, used the metaphor of a plant tendril, winding up towards the sun. Working on a constrained, remediated site, the designers created a building that curled up and around, enclosing a courtyard and providing a series of rooftop gardens and green roofs that include a large number of photovoltaic panels. Additional features that contributed to the project’s LEED Gold certification included harvesting rainwater for vegetation, apartment ventilation systems that reduced the need for air conditioning, and



Congo Street Initiative bio swale (left), Via Verde rooftop community garden

facilities aimed at increasing residents’ physical activity, such as day-lit stairways, exercise rooms and bike storage areas.

The 2013 medalists tackled the environmental consequences of twentieth century industrial development, such as the brown field on which Via Verde was built and the remnants of industry on the banks of the Ohio River that became Louisville Waterfront Park. Nowhere, however, was the problem as significant and central as at The Steel Yard, where the primary design challenge was to find a way to remediate an extremely contaminated site adjacent to several regional waterways. The site’s industrial legacy had left the ground laden with toxic substances, including arsenic and high levels of lead. The challenge was to find ways to contain the contaminants, without compromising the “urban wild” character of the setting that was valued by the community. The organization’s leaders wanted to address the problem on site, rather than removing the toxic soil, believing that it would be unethical to “dump their problem on others.” Working with state agencies, The Steel Yard and its consultants discovered innovative ways to stabilize the soil and devise a variety of environmental “caps” that respond to the diverse environmental, programmatic and design needs of the site.

Healthy Living

Public health has become an issue of importance across urban America with a particular focus on the current epidemic of obesity, as exemplified by recent efforts in Oklahoma City led by Mayor Mick Cornett², a member of the 2013 RBA Selection Committee. The significance of this issue is reinforced by three of the winning projects, which addressed health issues within their respective local communities as central to their program, albeit in very different ways.

Inspiration Kitchens—Garfield Park was the most unique among RBA award winners, focusing on the role of nutrition by providing affordable, high quality, meals prepared with fresh ingredients in a restaurant located within a community with little access to healthy food or sit-down dining options. Meals utilize produce grown onsite and nearby and available for sale in limited quantities, demonstrating the practice of organic vegetable gardening in a community that lacks access to affordable fresh produce.

Louisville Waterfront Park supports healthy living by providing 85 acres of park land offering a variety of options for active and passive exercise for people of all ages. The Big Four Bridge supplies the added benefit of pedestrian and bicycle access across the Ohio River, eventually connecting to riverfront amenities and communities on the Indiana side when that landing is completed.

Via Verde took a broad-based and ambitious approach, becoming the first affordable housing project to integrate New York City's new *Active Design Guidelines: Promoting Physical Activity and Health in Design*.³ The development incorporates a series of design features – large and small – that have not been typical in affordable housing projects, to



Steven Gross



Clockwise from top: food preparation at Inspiration Kitchens—Garfield Park; Via Verde fitness center, pedestrians on the Big Four Bridge at Louisville Waterfront Park

encourage physical activities. These features include attractive, day-lit stairways; locating the laundry room on the main floor adjacent to the courtyard, rather than in the basement as is more common; an on-site health club and bicycle storage room accessible to all residents, albeit with modest fees; and a variety of interconnected and landscaped outdoor spaces. Access to healthy nutrition is provided by harvests from onsite fruit trees and vegetable gardens, supplemented with produce from local farms, along with recipes from the tenant gardening club. All of these are intended to increase activity and improve diet as a way to reduce obesity.

Scale of Approach and the DIY/Maker Movement

Among the 90 entries and five winners, the Selection Committee observed that a number of projects reflected characteristics of the “maker” or “do-it-yourself” (DIY) movement: places made possible by grass-roots, hands-on efforts of architects, artists, artisans and other community members to create physical objects and places – art, food, structures and public spaces – that improve lives and communities and bring people together.

Elements of this movement can be seen in three of the 2013 winners: Inspiration Kitchens—Garfield Park, with its focus on growing, making and serving good food; Congo Street Initiative, where six houses and a street were remade through a collaborative, hands-on effort of designers, homeowners and community volunteers; and The Steel Yard, where teaching and supporting the process of making artistic and useful objects is central. These projects illustrate the potential of modest, small-scale projects led by visionary “makers” to affect broader change.

This approach has been reflected in previous RBA winners such as Project Row Houses in Houston, Inner-City Arts in Los Angeles, the Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh, and the Artists Relocation Program in Paducah, Kentucky, among others. In 2013 the prominence of the “maker” movement was highlighted by the quantity and quality of submissions that embodied these characteristics, as well as the attention they received in the Selection Committee discussion. The Committee agreed that it was refreshing to witness the energy, enthusiasm and hope reflected in these efforts and by an emerging generation of practitioners.



Ceramics class and student fabricated bike racks at The Steel Yard

Moreover, these projects triggered a discussion about the value of different approaches given the size and scale of contemporary urban problems. Some argued that the nature of current needs – such as the tremendous shortfall of affordable housing in American cities – can only be addressed by large projects as exemplified by Via Verde. Efforts of this scale are needed and generally only possible when supported by government agencies and resources, often working in concert with private sector partnerships and investments as with Via Verde and Louisville Waterfront Park, where the regional nature of the development made multi-agency involvement necessary.

Others argued that large-scale efforts have limitations, rendering smaller, DIY and “maker” approaches particularly attractive in times of shrinking public resources. Via Verde took a great deal of time, effort and resources to realize, even with significant support from the City of New York to reduce bureaucratic roadblocks. In this era of diminished government involvement and funding, waiting for the stars of political support and funding to align can be discouraging. An antidote may be smaller, DIY efforts that are more nimble and less resource intense, and can be driven by a small group of dedicated leaders with community support, such as Inspiration Kitchens—Garfield Park, The Steel Yard

and Congo Street. They serve as a reminder that it is possible to affect economic, social and physical change incrementally and with modest resources. They can provide models that are inspirational to and accessible by others in different communities, and have the potential to “go viral” and achieve scale through replication. In that sense, the Selection Committee suggested that the future may be as much about “planting small seeds” as about “making big plans”.

Notes:

¹ Oldenburg, Ray (1989). *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day*. New York: Paragon House

² Cornett, Mick. *How an obese town lost a million pounds*. Filmed April 2013. TED video. http://www.ted.com/talks/mick_cornett_how_an_obese_town_lost_a_million_pounds.html

³ City of New York, *Active Design Guidelines: Promoting Physical Activity and Health in Design*, 2010. http://www.nyc.gov/html/ddc/html/design/active_design.shtml



Clockwise from top left: *Inspiration Kitchens—Garfield Park, Congo Street Initiative, The Steel Yard, Louisville Waterfront Park, Via Verde*
Photos (clockwise from top left): Steve Hall / Hedrich Blessing; buildingcommunityWORKSHOP; Annali Kiers; Waterfront Development Corporation Courtesy Hargreaves Associates, John Gollings; David Sundberg / Esto

2013 Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence

The Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence seeks to promote innovative thinking about the built environment and to advance conversation about making cities better. The award is dedicated to discovering and celebrating urban places distinguished by quality design and their social and economic contributions to American cities.

One Gold Medal of \$50,000 and four Silver Medals of \$10,000 are awarded each biennial. Projects must be a real place, not just a plan or a program, and be located in the continental United States. The Bruner Foundation publishes a detailed case study about each winner in order to make the creative ideas and thinking embodied in the project available to others.

This book presents the five 2013 Rudy Bruner Award winners. They include an 80-seat restaurant in Chicago, six houses and a one-block long street in Dallas, an 85-acre park in Louisville, a 3.5-acre arts campus in Providence, and a 222-unit housing development in the Bronx. All have transformed underutilized and overlooked urban spaces into vibrant places that bring people, skills, and communities together. In doing so, they challenge our assumptions about what is possible and inspire us with their optimism.

Gold Medal: Inspiration Kitchens—Garfield Park
Chicago, IL

Silver Medal: Congo Street Initiative
Dallas, TX

Louisville Waterfront Park
Louisville, KY

The Steel Yard
Providence, RI

Via Verde – The Green Way
Bronx, NY

For more information about the Rudy Bruner Award, including case studies about past winners, please visit us online at: www.brunerfoundation.org/rba.