

**LEARNING**  
ABOUT  
**URBAN EXCELLENCE**



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# Creative Community Building: 2003 Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence

Bruner Foundation, Inc.

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2003 Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence

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## LEARNING ABOUT URBAN EXCELLENCE

### CRITERIA FOR URBAN EXCELLENCE

The “simple” task facing each Rudy Bruner Award selection committee is to narrow a group of over 100 applications to five finalists then, in their second meeting, to elevate one of those to Gold Medal Winner. However, the Bruner Foundation intentionally asks each committee to undertake this process without benefit of pre-established criteria other than that the project be “urban” (though no particular scale is specified) and that it be completed, at least to the extent that it is substantially operational.

The Foundation has found that by newly appointing an expert, interdisciplinary committee for each award cycle, and by then posing this challenge to them, the stage is set for a dialogue on the nature of urban excellence. The process is designed to elicit from each committee an in-depth discussion of the factors they feel constitute an excellent project. This discussion evolves over the two selection committee meetings and results in a series of criteria against which they assess each application while they discuss the issues and challenges facing our nation’s cities.

As the 2003 committee reviewed the submissions, they articulated the elements that, in their view, contribute to urban excellence. Here are the factors they agreed upon:

- Excellent projects should have a **transformative effect** on individual lives and on communities.
- For a project to achieve a substantive impact, involvement of its community is essential. The committee looked for **grassroots involvement**, indicating that the community was engaged in taking responsibility for its self-improvement.
- All members of this year’s committee stressed the importance of architectural and urban **design quality** in reinforcing a project’s goals and in elevating it to the level of excellence.
- The committee looked for **innovative** approaches – they were interested in projects that found new ways to address the important issues our cities face – now and over the next 10 years or so.
- A project should demonstrate that it contributed to neighborhood **stabilization, job creation, and increasing people’s commitment** to their community.
- Projects that used innovative or **non-traditional sources of funding** were of high interest, as the committee felt that models are needed for how to get things done without large infusions of federal support.
- Excellent projects should have concepts or features that are **replicable**, so that others could benefit from their experience.

## NEW MODELS FOR URBAN INTERVENTION AND IMPROVEMENT

The 2003 winners, as a group, present new and innovative ways of thinking about intervening in troubled communities and new models for their stabilization and revitalization. The selection committee singled out two projects – the gold medal winner and one of the silver medalists – that focus their community revitalization efforts through highly creative approaches.

One of the projects, **Camino Nuevo Charter Academy**, uses a charter school not only to provide improved educational opportunity to mostly immigrant children, but to reach out to substantial numbers of families in a variety of ways. Parental involvement in their children's education, and after-hours use of the school itself for job training, health care, information and education sessions for parents and community members, expands the role of the school dramatically, engaging parents and siblings as well as the students themselves. Better education will provide upward mobility and increased earning potential for the students, while ancillary activities provide improved skill levels and opportunities for the parents. In this way, the school becomes an important community center, providing a reason for families to remain in what has been a highly transitional neighborhood.

The other new model of intervention is **Red Hook Community Justice Center**. Red Hook is designed not only to change the operation and perception of the justice system in the community

but, by offering a wide spectrum of remedial services and interventions to court participants, it also results in a safer, more stable community. Thus, Red Hook uses a highly unorthodox approach to community revitalization, responding to the social service, job training, and drug rehabilitation needs of some of the most troubled (and troublesome) residents – thereby transforming their lives and improving the milieu for everyone.

These two projects model new and innovative means of improving neighborhoods and communities, and show the promise of greater and more lasting success compared to more traditional approaches. In the past, even the recent past, one of the principal means of intervention has been by improving the housing stock and making it more affordable (through public housing and its successor subsidy and home ownership programs). While it is undeniably important for people to have a decent place to live, housing alone does not address other key issues that contribute to the health and stability of a community, such as employment, safety, education, and the like. More comprehensive approaches, such as providing housing with integrated services – like The Times Square (gold medal winner in 1997) – do attempt to address the entire range of needs for special segments of the population, but may not be able to address root causes of urban decay community-wide. At the other end of the scale, programs such as empowerment zones may be so large and unwieldy as to compromise their efforts at being systemic. It seemed to the selection committee that these two innovative approaches were able to strike a much-needed balance between

addressing root causes of community deterioration, improving peoples lives, affecting substantial communities – and yet still being small enough to be manageable and to allow real participation (see next paragraphs).

## LEADERSHIP VERSUS PARTICIPATION

Each of these winning projects benefited from visionary and effective leadership – providing the vision to conceive of something that had never been done and the charisma to galvanize others to support that vision. But each project also had at least some degree of participation by the many groups and individuals affected by it (sometimes through more official and established channels, sometimes at a more grass-roots level). These two poles – authorship and democracy – provide a potential tension and raise two related issues: to what extent does a charismatic leader define what is to be done (to the potential exclusion of others) and how are leadership and participation balanced and reconciled?

At **Camino Nuevo**, a particularly outstanding balance appears to have been achieved. Philip Lance, minister and trained community organizer, gradually connected with his selected community through providing religious services, helped them create two essentially self-governing businesses, and responded to their desire to improve on the highly unsatisfactory public school education system. To do this, he assembled a team that provided top level expertise in education, school management, design, and finance. Yet, at every step in the process, he and his team reached out to local residents and engaged them in planning and management.

**Red Hook** also provides an interesting case study. Originally the brain-child of the Center for Court Innovation and the Kings County District Attorney, the team made a very considerable effort in community organizing and engagement prior to formulating their plan. With very strong leadership and support at the highest levels of city government and the courts, local groups and citizens were involved in identifying issues and setting policy. Particular use was made of the local Community Board, which functioned as a planning advisory committee. The early step of forming the Public Safety Corps gave the Center access to significant numbers of community members and the means to reach more. Their active Advisory Board, a successor to the Community Board, continues to set policy and identify emerging areas of concentration for programs and services.

In **Providence**, the number of people who claim or are credited with authorship of the river relocation project is very large (reminding us of the old adage that success has many fathers while failure is an orphan) and it is impossible to attribute credit in a way that achieves complete consensus. In addition, given the nature and duration of the project, there was very considerable public input, including that mandated by federal and state funding and environmental review guidelines. Over time, organizations such as the Providence Foundation and historic districts, as well as major institutions (such as the colleges), active citizens, and design professionals became strongly committed to the project. The project also benefited greatly from leadership in high places such as the U.S. Senate, a succession of governors, mayors, and other visible

public offices. Clearly, in the end, this project required a balance between leadership, vision, risk-taking, and the development of broad public and agency support.

Grassroots participation does not always imply that the participants come from among the disenfranchised. **BridgeMarket** has a similar community board structure as Red Hook (it actually straddles two community boards) – but with much more elite membership. It also had the Sutton Place neighbor’s organization which initially fought the project, stalled it for a very long time, but ultimately probably contributed to its improvement, since it was, in substantial part, the involvement of the community that resulted in several cycles of redesign of the project and had a very direct impact on its final form.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD DESIGN

The selection committee placed great importance on quality architectural and urban design; thus, as a group, the 2003 winners reflect this priority. In the committee’s view, good design is not a superficial consideration or something added like window-dressing. Rather, appropriate and effective design reinforces a project’s overarching objectives, including social and economic ones. The committee’s vision of design was that it should not only be attractive, but also supportive of the user’s activities and functions – at the minimum, that design features not undermine the project’s goals. In addition, in the best projects, the committee looked for designs that embody and express the essence and meaning of a project, that are culturally appropriate, and that communicate what

the project is about. Thus, design has a responsibility for contributing to the quality of the built environment as well as for enlivening and enriching neighborhood fabric.

**Camino Nuevo** takes an innovative design approach to rehabilitating a defunct mini-mall. Working with a tight budget (and at a fraction of the cost of building a new school), the architects used limited means to great effect. They constructed a small bathroom module to separate the school’s courtyard from the street, creating a focus for school identity, while inserting a sculptural element in colors that resonate with Latin culture. Railings required for stair safety are also treated sculpturally, making it fun to go up and down and creating landings and places to sit along the way. The entire Burlington Street block, including both the elementary and middle schools stand out in this neighborhood as a beacon announcing the presence of a vibrant center of learning and community activity. It speaks of community vitality and strength and, in offering a handsome and well-designed environment to its users, provides a measure of dignity and legitimacy to an overlooked population. This is an excellent example of doing more with less – and creating a place that is meaningful to the school users and to the community.

The **Providence River Relocation** project is, in considerable measure, the vision of architects and urban designers – and this sensibility informs not only the overall concept and traffic planning, but the detailing of every element. Bridges, landscaping, paving, lighting, street furniture, historical plaques, and signage – all are

considered in terms of how they can be appropriate to the particular locus and historical context in which they are placed. For example, each of the many bridges is unique. Some are (or appear to be) cast iron, others are stone, and still others brick – depending on what would fit best in a given location. Great care and attention are paid to the visual, tactile, and social support aspects of each design decision as well as to imparting information on Providence’s proud history and architectural heritage. The principles of William H. Whyte were applied to make sitting, activity, and gathering places that could be expected to (and do) draw people to the river. The quality of the design in these new public spaces has contributed in part to the area’s success in attracting people back into the downtown.

At **BridgeMarket**, quality design is evident in many ways. The original bridge and interior arches are spectacular visual statements in their own right. The new enclosures, interior development (especially in the restaurant and home furnishings store), new entry pavilion, and park) are all carefully considered in terms of their relation to the historical context as well as making aesthetic statements of their own. All elements that touch the original structure are detailed so they could, if desired, be removed in the future. The newly constructed entry pavilion, while echoing the sweep of the bridge, does not try to mimic its historical character. The park is carefully considered in its detailing and planting. All this care and attention contribute to the visual success of the project.

The **Red Hook** planners and their architect also paid a great deal of attention to the ways in which design could reinforce their intended message to the community. Principal among these was to emphasize accessibility (lowering the lobby to street level), light, and openness so that community clientele would feel comfortable in the facility. The courtroom has windows, a very transparent and symbolic rail separating spectators from the judge, and light oak paneling – all of which contribute to minimizing the fear and awe that some experience when they go to court, while still maintaining dignity and respect. Red Hook also has a strong logo (which is used on signs, tee shirts and the like), designed pro bono by a famous graphic design firm.

**Colorado Court** addresses two important design challenges. First, the architect and developer were deeply committed to providing outstanding architectural design quality to the disenfranchised population who would reside in the building. They were also committed to developing an energy-efficient building that models green solutions. The resulting design effectively addresses these objectives. Among the project’s challenges, and one of the reasons for the committee’s interest in it, was the integration of solar voltaic panels and other energy-efficient technologies into what is usually an extremely modest building type (SRO housing). The placement of the solar panels and the choice of the more attractive blue amorphous type are visually powerful, even beautiful, and create not only an efficient energy source, but a signature design identity for the building. Colorado Court has been recognized nationally for its success in combining these two objectives.

## ART IN THE URBAN SETTING

Art and its impact on the urban environment has been an ongoing theme of RBA winners. The 2001 gold medalist the Village of Arts and Humanities in Philadelphia, 1999's ArtsCorpLA, and 1997's Project Row Houses in Houston all stand out in this regard. In 2002 and 2003, the Bruner Foundation co-sponsored a series of symposia with Harvard's Loeb Fellowship titled "Transforming Community Through the Arts". Some of this year's winners also reflect the important role art can have in urban revitalization.

Art is very important in **Providence** where sculptures and other artworks embellish the riverfront. Many of these are displayed as part of an annually rotating exhibit organized by the city while others are permanent. Performances are also important in drawing people to the area. They range from more traditional music and dramatic offerings to the completely unique "WaterFire" display where a dramatic ceremony of lighting braziers along the river is accompanied by carefully selected music to create what observers have reported to be an extraordinarily powerful, shared and urban experience – one that brings large crowds of people to the area.

At **Camino Nuevo**, art and dance programs are integrated into the school curriculum, exposing all students to their expressive and transformative powers. These are experiences that inner city students may or may not get in the city schools (though Los Angeles does have a strong program at Inner City Arts). Student artworks are, of course, in evidence everywhere. Similarly, the highly visible

and creative design of the building itself makes a statement about the importance of esthetics and its impact on the inner-city.

Even **Red Hook**, the community justice center, incorporates the arts. It sponsors programs in creative writing and poetry for neighborhood children, and a very powerful series of portraits done by a neighborhood artist features the judge and other staff from the center.

## HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Historic preservation has also been an important theme of past award winners. This year, several of the projects entailed preservation or adaptive reuse of historic properties.

**BridgeMarket** restored part of the landmarked Queensboro Bridge and most notably the Guastavino arches beneath it to create a stunning and beautiful series of "found" or rediscovered spaces. Their beauty and historical interest draw people from all over the city and contribute to the success of the commercial ventures now housed under them.

**Providence** is one of America's oldest cities (the Statehouse and the entire downtown are landmarks and other nearby areas such as College Hill contain many historically important buildings). Intervening in the heart of this city required a carefully considered strategy, and the river relocation project succeeded not only in preserving a variety of historic structures within the project area and along the river, but in echoing historical features appropriate to its interventions in various locations without trying to reproduce replicas

of historic bridges or buildings. The incorporation of informative historic plaques at many locations is also effective in helping visitors understand the story of how the river area evolved over centuries.

At **Red Hook**, a building with historic character (though not listed on any register) was sympathetically converted to a modern use. It is worth noting that this building was selected in no small part because of its historic importance to the community as a school many residents remembered or even attended. This speaks to the importance of significant structures in the collective memory and identity of a community. Special attention was paid to the stone façade, which was cleaned and repointed. New windows with divided lights were selected to be sympathetic with the original style. Community members have expressed great delight in seeing this “old friend” come back to life in a new re-invigorated identity.

## TRANSFORMATION

The winning projects have powerful impacts – transforming lives as well as the physical and social fabric of their communities.

**Camino Nuevo**, in gradually taking over, cleaning up, and renovating one side of an entire street, contributes greatly to the visual improvement of its neighborhood. But more remarkable are its impacts on the children and families it reaches, some of the poorest in Los Angeles. Having an active community-based school is providing a focal point for their family life and a means of upward mobility for their children. Camino Nuevo reaches beyond schooling to providing job training, parenting skills, and even health care to its residents, thereby extending the

transformative effects of the school and building community through multi-level interventions.

At **Red Hook**, one of America’s most notorious neighborhoods is in the process of transformation, in substantial part as a result of the justice center. On the streets and in a mammoth housing project, graffiti is being cleaned up and trash removed. Crime is down and people feel safer. Even more, individual lives are being touched by the justice system in a way that is very different from business as usual. People who break the law are being given the opportunity to address their problems, rejoin their community as contributing members, and break what is too often a cycle of repeat offending. By helping people get education, drug treatment, and jobs, it assists them in moving from poverty to self-sufficiency.

**BridgeMarket** took a decrepit and nearly abandoned site that divided two neighborhoods on New York’s Upper East Side and was avoided whenever possible by pedestrians – and recaptured its stunning historical resources. Although it is difficult to make a measurable impact in a city the size of New York, BridgeMarket establishes access to the river via a formerly inaccessible street, further enhances the visual prominence of the Queensboro Bridge, and has transformed derelict under-the-bridge space into a new treasure of preservation. In the process, it creates a draw for activity and connection between neighborhoods.

In **Providence**, the physical transformation of the downtown area could not have been more dramatic. From the “armpit of New

England”, Providence has become a magnet for economic growth and development – and for cultural and recreational activities along its once-buried rivers. The relocation of the rivers and the attendant programming has literally transformed a downtown, bringing new life, new commerce, and a new identity to an historic city.

By combining energy efficient and environmentally responsible development with social housing, **Colorado Court** transformed the model for what could be accomplished in SRO housing. One goal achieved by the project is to positively impact people’s perception of affordable housing, to demonstrate that it can make a positive contribution to the neighborhood and to the city, through quality design and through innovative energy systems. In this sense, **Colorado Court** has created a positive and recognizable image for affordable housing in an upscale community.

## REPLICABLE, ADAPTABLE MODELS

The selection committee was concerned that projects provide models (or at least features) that could be applied in or adapted to other contexts. The winners have a great deal to offer, in terms of focus, process and outcomes. Of course, each project is unique – and it is the way in which a model is applied – or a new model emerges – to fit the unique circumstances of its place that provides the richness and interest which contribute to urban excellence.

**Camino Nuevo** can serve as a model in two distinct ways. First, it presents a new route for intervention in challenged communities, by

using the school as the path for revitalization. Given the importance of education and the challenges it faces nationwide, the school can become an important focus for community improvement, engaging parents (who make up a broad cross-section of community residents) and offering the students a path toward upward mobility. Second, **Camino Nuevo’s** intensively participatory process also provides potential lessons. The process began with the evolution of a leader who grew to be intimately connected with and trusted by his community. Because of this connection, he was able to be responsive to emerging community needs, and to actively engage community members in pursuing solutions – two apparent keys to the project’s success.

**Red Hook** also provides a model for a non-conventional route to urban (and human) revitalization. The notion of a community court as the context for community intervention could be applied in many distressed neighborhoods (and it also provides a new approach to solving problems endemic to the justice system itself). Their process, again, was intensely participatory, engaging citizens and working closely with existing community-based organizations – helping the justice center to become one of the premier foci for help and improvement within **Red Hook**.

**BridgeMarket**, unique in its historical character and circumstances as well as its urban context and institutional framework, may provide an inspiration for preservationists and urban developers, if not a replicable model.

**Colorado Court** is a model for how to combine and apply energy efficiency and green building concepts to low income housing (when available resources permit). In addition, it is inspiring to see what can be achieved aesthetically within the limitations of this building type.

Finally, **Providence** shows what can be achieved in a troubled older city with extraordinary vision and long term commitment by many individuals and entities willing to coalesce around that vision. It also demonstrates model urban design features (and especially thinking) that can be applied to historic downtowns and river reclamation projects nationwide.

## CONCLUSION

With each round of the Rudy Bruner Award, a new selection committee evaluates a diverse set of projects submitted for its review. Each award cycle sets the stage for a fresh examination of what is happening in the urban scene – and a picture begins to come into focus revealing continuing and emerging issues, new approaches to addressing them, the ways in which regulatory and funding constraints and opportunities are dealt with, and how unique circumstances collide to generate healthful, safe, nurturing, exciting and wonderful urban places. The richness of the dialogue generated at the selection committee deliberations is inspiring and extraordinarily beneficial in defining issues and trends. Taken together over the past nine rounds, the awards represent a growing body of knowledge about people, places, issues and approaches to creating excellent urban environments. Each group of winners

makes its own contribution by providing new ideas and supporting earlier hypotheses.

Despite the uniqueness of each project, we observe the substantial continuity of themes from past cycles. These include the balance between leadership and participation; how to achieve quality design; preservation; the use of the arts; and issues of replicability, all of which have appeared in multiple cycles of the award.

The emergence in this round of a new focus on using services such as education and justice as the primary focus for urban intervention is stimulating and exciting. To hear not only civic leaders, but ordinary folks, speak with glowing enthusiasm about the potential of a school or courtroom to change their lives and improve their neighborhoods inspires us to continue and expand the dialogue.