Lessons Learned

Jose Cotto

Skateboarding youth led a do-it-yourself effort to create Parisite Skatepark in New Orleans (above). In Memphis, an abandoned warehouse was transformed into Crosstown Concourse, an inclusive, vertical, mixed-use village (next page).

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE: THE 2019 RUDY BRUNER AWARD FOR URBAN EXCELLENCE

Each cycle of the RBA encompasses substantial discussion about urban development and what we mean by "urban excellence." "Lessons Learned" essays like this one synthesize observations gleaned from Selection Committee deliberations and draw upon research and secondary sources (including websites, news articles, and project documents) used to determine the winners and develop the case studies. Additional insights come from the numerous conversations and observations that took place during the site visits and case study process. These essays are intended to provide critical reflection and insight into the complex process of creating excellent urban places, pique curiosity, and inspire further discussion and exploration.

As with past cycles, the observations and lessons learned from this year's winners are both unique and timeless. They reflect our perception of and responses to critical urban issues and challenges within the socioeconomic and political context of America in 2019. They also inform our understanding of the evolution of cities and the impact of place-based planning and development over time.

This round in particular prompted consideration of how approaches to addressing these issues and our critique of them have evolved. Renewed interest and investment in cities over the past decade have precipitated unprecedented development and rapid market change in many urban centers. This, in turn, has sparked concern about the unintended consequences of success and the negative impact on populations most at risk, such as low-income and minority residents. Fears of gentrification, displacement, and growing socioeconomic disparity—while not new—are prompting a more critical look at urban development and place-making strategies, including the roles and responsibilities of developers, funders, and government entities.

Not surprisingly, the 2019 medalists share attributes with other RBA winners over the past 32 years: the critical role of vision and leadership, the value of collaborative partnerships, the benefits of engaging and empowering communities affected by the projects, the need to anchor projects in their distinctive culture and place, and the transformative power of design. These elements have enabled the people behind the projects to tackle tough urban challenges, overcome seemingly insurmountable hurdles, and create positive change in their communities.

"Changing the Narrative"

Over the course of the 2019 RBA selection process, the committee gravitated towards projects that "changed the narrative," challenging assumptions and changing attitudes and perceptions about people, places, and urban development. The committee agreed that urban excellence is "more than a beauty contest" and the physical design of a place. They paid particular attention to the issues that each applicant addressed and the social impact on people both within and beyond the physical footprint of the project. They selected projects that address and elevate long-term challenges faced by cities of all types and sizes across America—large and small, on the coasts, in the heartland, and in major metropolitan areas as well as rural districts. While remarkably diverse in type and scale, each of the five medalists offers a rich, compelling story that resonated with the committee, illustrating how thoughtful design and place-based development can change the narrative of a community.

The five 2019 medalists all addressed critical issues of our time that matter to cities across America, including climate change; obsolete and underutilized infrastructure; economic and social changes affecting urban centers, including shifts in manufacturing and retailing; increased demand for arts, culture, and outdoor amenities; and growing socioeconomic disparity. In the process, they turned deficits into assets, reimagining and repurposing outmoded, underutilized infrastructure—an abandoned retail distribution center, neglected highway and railroad underpasses, an overgrown waterway, and a declining town square bypassed and overshadowed by interstate development. They did so by employing scrappy and unusual approaches that challenged conventions and "danced with the rules," illustrating that innovation is happening in unexpected places and in unexpected ways.

Changing Attitudes, Expectations, and Perceptions About People and Places

Each of the winning projects created a "narrative shift"—a change in the perception of the community about what is possible as well as a change in how those from outside the community perceive the city and its residents. This includes the capacity and confidence residents and civic leaders feel and the positive results that they have experienced. There is, in this, a restoration of or a new-found pride that these residents feel for their cities.

Unlike the 2017 RBA cycle, the majority of the 2019 medalists were not spearheaded by government or public-sector entities. All but one, Sulphur Springs Downtown, were initiated by individuals and organizations outside of the public sector and accomplished with minimal government support. Even Sulphur Springs Downtown, which was government-led, was accomplished largely through the dogged efforts of one individual, whom the Selection Committee praised as an "entrepreneurial bureaucrat." The not-for-profit sector made four of the five projects a success, and in so doing challenged perceptions about who can bring about the urban transformations citizens want and need. For example, after what the skateboarders accomplished with Parisite Skatepark, New Orleans will not likely discount what a passionate group of young residents can do. Similarly, Houston is now likely to have an expanded definition of what might be possible after the success of the park system managed by Buffalo Bayou Partnership.

- **Crosstown Concourse** in Memphis was initiated through an unlikely partnership between an art history professor, an artist, and a businessman. Together with local development experts and nonprofit partners, they crafted and implemented an ambitious vision to redevelop an enormous former Sears warehouse and distribution center into a mixed-use, vertical urban village. Rather than take the more common path of redeveloping the building for commercial mixed-use, they sought to create an inclusive community infused with arts, education, and wellness tenants and resources. They enlisted long-term commitments

Crosstown Arts

Warren Jagger

Beyond Walls' lighting and public art installations have changed perceptions of Lynn, Massachusetts.

David Lloyd

In Houston, a historic waterway was reengineered as part of Buffalo Bayou Park, a resilient landscape and public amenity.

from eight socially-minded founding tenants, which enabled them to secure private financing for the venture. City and county agencies contributed approximately 10% of the $210 million project budget.

- **Beyond Walls** in Lynn was the vision of Al Wilson, who started the initiative as a volunteer effort to reactivate downtown Lynn through public art and lighting installations. Wilson nimbly navigated and leveraged local connections to gain support from community leaders. He organized events that generated significant media attention and secured substantial in-kind and cash contributions from local individuals, businesses, and foundations. More than 90% of total project funding came from local private sources.

- **Buffalo Bayou Park** in Houston was catalyzed by Rich and Nancy Kinder, a husband and wife pair of local philanthropists who made a $30 million gift to significantly expand and enhance an existing city park along the bayou in the heart of downtown. They charged Buffalo Bayou Partnership, a nonprofit, with the responsibility of designing, implementing, and maintaining the park. The partnership raised an additional $25 million of the $75 million total costs from private sources and secured a critical, long-term agreement with the city to fund its maintenance.

- **Parisite Skatepark** in New Orleans began as a volunteer, do-it-yourself effort by skateboarding youth who claimed vacant land along a railroad and built a skatepark. When the property owner demolished the park, the skaters partnered with faculty and students at Tulane University's Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design to craft a replacement park that they built on city-owned land. Construction was funded entirely with private donations and in-kind labor, and the park is maintained by volunteers.

- **Sulphur Springs Downtown** in northeast Texas, while government initiated and publicly funded, was made possible through the persistent efforts of one individual, Marc Maxwell, the city manager. At the behest of the city council, he sought out professional expertise to develop a

plan to revitalize the city's downtown center. Through online research, he found livable streets engineer Ian Lockwood who, through a series of short, intense workshops with local leaders, developed a 100-year vision for the redevelopment of the city's civic plaza and main streets. The majority (87%) of the construction was paid for with municipal funding and bonds.

Innovation Is Happening in Unexpected Places

Unlike the majority of RBA cycles, 2019 did not include any winners in large East and West Coast cities (such as New York, San Francisco, or Seattle), and all but one (Beyond Walls in Lynn, Massachusetts) are in the South. Even so, the cities where the five 2019 medalists are located are quite diverse, ranging from a small, rural city in northeast Texas to the fourth largest city in the United States.

- **Sulphur Springs, Texas** (population 16,000): A small city midway between Dallas and Texarkana, Sulphur Springs, like many small and rural communities in America, saw its once-vibrant downtown slowly decline to over 80% vacancy as businesses relocated to outlying sites along bypasses and the interstate. The revitalization of its downtown has infused the city with new life, attracting visitors from the region and beyond and interest from civic leaders of other small cities in Texas looking to renew their urban centers. Once derogatorily referred to by locals as "Suffering Springs," Sulphur Springs is now known as "Celebration City."

- **Lynn, Massachusetts** (population 94,000): A colonial-era, former industrial city once known as the "shoemaking capital of the world" and a longtime gateway for immigrants, Lynn has struggled to regain its economic footing and improve its image and downtown after the loss of much of its manufacturing industry. Beyond Walls' murals, lighting installations, and events have generated widespread interest, drawing long-term residents and visitors alike to downtown. The project also attracted support from leading arts and culture funders interested in building capacity, developing models, and increasing expertise to assist area organizations with public art initiatives. Now, thanks to Beyond Walls, this new attention is changing perceptions, and the place once

Jose Cotto

At Parisite Skatepark, a small-scale rain garden provides a model for managing stormwater.

Cindy Roller

New pedestrian-oriented infrastructure in Sulphur Springs Downtown revitalized the center of a small Texas city.

referred to as "Lynn, Lynn, City of Sin" is increasingly associated with art and creativity.

- **New Orleans** (population 393,000): After losing half its population in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the city has had limited public resources to meet community needs—especially investments in parks and recreational amenities in its poorest neighborhoods—and to respond to growing impact from climate change. In the absence of public leadership and resources, skateboarding youth partnered with a local university to develop a skatepark on city land. The skatepark, the first in the city, provides a much-needed amenity in a low-income, predominately Black community and helps to counter the negative perception of skateboarders. The park's design incorporates a rain garden offering a small-scale, adaptable model for managing storm-water in a city on the front lines of climate change. The collaborative partnership with Tulane University offers an example of how universities can extend their resources to communities while offering valuable learning and personal and professional development opportunities for students and faculty.

- **Memphis** (population 650,000): Like many other mid-sized urban centers, this Mississippi River town is positioning itself to compete with other metropolitan areas for new investment and development. It is doing so by capitalizing on its multicultural creative identity while struggling with the legacy of racial and socioeconomic segregation and disparity and the highest rate of poverty in the nation. Crosstown Concourse illustrates how very large and abandoned facilities that become liabilities—in this case, a retail warehouse and distribution center—can be adapted to new uses and become community assets once again. Its very success challenges traditional assumptions about mixed-use development and what combination of uses, building designs, and financing strategies will or will not work. Art, education, health care, housing, office, and retail space all coexist within an open, inclusive, vertical community. The building has garnered national interest, becoming both a regional attraction and a local site for community gathering, drawing a broad mix of people of different ages, races, and socioeconomic classes.

- **Houston** (population 2.3 million): One of the 10 fastest growing cities in the country, the Bayou City is wrestling with the combined impact of climate change and decades of unchecked suburban sprawl, as evidenced by five 500-year flood events in as many years, including catastrophic flooding during Hurricane Harvey in 2018. Buffalo Bayou Park's innovation was to make a historic flood control project a place of very public recreation that also aspires to mediate ever-more-serious future flood events. The park helped to increase awareness about the value of planning and investment in public amenities in a city known for its lack of zoning and urban sprawl.

Turning Deficits into Assets

As the Selection Committee observed, all of the projects faced challenges familiar to many communities across America: the impact of climate change, obsolete and underutilized infrastructure, loss of manufacturing and changes in retailing affecting traditional urban centers, increased demand for recreational amenities, and growing concerns about equity. The five winners offer powerful examples of innovative approaches to addressing these issues that can be applied regionally and nationally.

- **Abandoned manufacturing and retail centers and warehouses** are present in many cities, large and small, across the country. Like former steel mills in postindustrial cities and empty grain elevators across the Midwest, these structures that were once important sources of economic success and community pride have instead become looming symbols of loss. Crosstown Concourse reimagined and repurposed a former Sears regional distribution and retail center into a new community commons.

- **Elevated highway and rail infrastructure** crisscross many cities, resulting in underutilized spaces and dark underpasses that bisect and separate communities. Beyond Walls and Parisite Skatepark illustrate ways to rethink the unintended consequences of transportation arteries by making better use of the spaces beneath underpasses, transforming them into more appealing places with public art, light, and activity.

- **Outmoded flood control infrastructure** in our cities dating from the previous century is failing to keep up with the demands of the increasing levels and intensity of rainfall and runoff associated with climate change and unchecked development. Buffalo Bayou Park demonstrates how an existing waterway can be re-engineered to carry 30% more water while restoring natural ecology and enhancing the urban landscape. New bridges, trails, and amenities promote outdoor recreation, connect neighborhoods with downtown, and contribute to the public realm of the city.

- **Fading urban centers** in many small cities and towns are the byproducts of businesses moving to newly developed areas on the outskirts, often along highways and bypasses. The exodus from these traditional business districts is often exacerbated by the creation of surface parking lots and the conversion of two-way streets to one-way pairs to facilitate the movement of cars and trucks through and around downtown. The City of Sulphur Springs reclaimed its historic square and civic center by transforming a surface parking lot at its heart into a landscaped public plaza surrounded by pedestrian-oriented streets restored to two-way movement with traffic-calming measures. The shift of service and retail to the outskirts of the city along the bypasses became an opportunity for an entertainment, restaurant, and boutique retail strategy to blossom downtown, a strategy that is reinforced with year-round event programming. In Lynn, Beyond Walls used public art, lighting installations, and mural festivals to beautify and activate downtown and draw people back to the city.

Practical, Replicable Design Approaches

The 2019 award winners, working with modest budgets, all prioritized design as an essential part of their approach to excellence. While none of the projects were seen as perfect nor particularly innovative exemplars of design, each is a compelling, authentic response to the unique, functional needs of its program and aspirations of its community. Together they illustrate how simple, familiar design strategies and processes can be employed and adapted to work effectively at different scales and in different settings.

- **The application of livable streets principles and measures**, such as "road diets" (reducing the number and/or width of traffic lanes), traffic calming, and pedestrian-friendly streetscapes to create safe and inviting urban environments. These, in turn, can help attract people and businesses and renew and strengthen urban centers like Sulphur Springs Downtown.

- **The creation of resilient landscapes** to help cities address the growing impact of climate change. Stormwater management can be engineered in a variety of ways, ranging from the small-scale rain garden at Parisite Skatepark to the more ambitious creation of a space "designed to flood" at Buffalo Bayou Park, which incorporates multiple stormwater management methods, including fluvial geomorphology engineering to understand the movement of water and inform the design and installation of silt benches that ease cleanup after major storm events.

- **The installation of relatively inexpensive public art**—such as lighting and murals—to enliven infrastructure and blank walls of buildings to add beauty, increase the sense of safety, and attract new interest. Beyond Walls, like Parisite Skatepark, literally makes previously overlooked building walls and underpasses opportunistic sites of art, light, and programming. Crosstown Concourse makes use of artwork and salvaged artifacts from Sears Crosstown to animate building lobbies and corridors and connect present occupants with its past.

- **The thoughtful organization of uses and creation of spaces**, inside and out, to connect and cultivate community. At Crosstown Concourse, the arrangement of building uses and programming and approach to vertical circulation, including the careful insertion and design of three new atria, increase the legibility of wayfinding and connections among and between building tenants and the surrounding community. At Buffalo Bayou Park, the creation of a variety of linear activity zones along the waterside trails offers different opportunities for outdoor recreation and interaction, and new pedestrian bridges link people and communities across the bayou.

The renewal of Sulphur Springs Downtown is inspiring other small cities in rural America.

The Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design

Students collaborated with skaters and members of the community to design and build Parisite Skatepark.

- **The engagement of residents and property owners** in development by hosting events and offering incentives to encourage participation and private investment. A partnership with the Albert and Tina Small Center at Tulane University enabled Transitional Spaces to engage local skateboarding youth and architecture students in the design and construction of Parisite Skatepark. Before construction started at Crosstown Concourse, the developers hosted onsite events with artists and the community to ignite interest and draw people across the city to the building and neighborhood. In Lynn, Beyond Walls negotiated agreements with downtown property owners to use blank building walls as canvases for large murals and vintage neon signs and hosted annual mural festivals that drew thousands to the city. They secured permission from the local transit authority to install colorful lighting to illuminate dark underpasses. In Sulphur Springs, the city offered matching grants to building owners to promote private investment in façade renovations on buildings facing key streets, further leveraging streetscape improvements to enhance downtown.

Addressing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion and the Unintended Consequences of Success

The 2019 winners also offer ways to employ design in the service of equity, diversity, and inclusion. The techniques vary in response to the unique set of circumstances presented by each project—its vision and goals, available resources (expertise, time, and funding) and capacity, and the broader socioeconomic context.

Crosstown Concourse achieves this through its very intentional mix of tenants and programs that attract a diverse socioeconomic mix of people and thoughtful building design that encourages interaction and a sense of community. Parisite Skatepark addresses the needs of a very specific underserved community of skateboarding youth throughout New Orleans while offering its immediate neighbors a gathering space. Buffalo Bayou Park and Sulphur Springs Downtown were conceived as public amenities that are free and open to all. Beyond Walls introduces beauty into a gateway community that suffered from disinvestment and decline.

Cities that have experienced a steady loss of viability have seen property values decrease over time, often over a period of decades, resulting in a shrinking tax base necessary to fund public services. The municipalities that govern such cities and their business communities aspire to stop the downward turn and restore a healthy market by attracting new development that increases property values and tax revenues. The problem so many of them face is that each effort to improve a place makes those least able to afford to live there more vulnerable to displacement. As a result, the level of concern about the potential for gentrification and displacement invite a skeptical view of "market change" by those at risk and their advocates. What was once thought of as a measure of success in urban development has become increasingly problematic. This concern factored into conversations about Beyond Walls, as pressure from the strong real estate market in neighboring Boston causes for-profit developers to look more closely at Lynn.

There are increasing expectations among those concerned about displacement for developers, funders, and private sector participants in urban development to do more to guard against gentrification and displacement and protect the most vulnerable populations. This requires programs and policies that will mitigate displacement and encourage the engagement of those affected by development. Measures of success will require both positive market change and protections for those at risk.

Who's Driving Vision and Investment?

Creating great outcomes from urban development and ensuring that everyone—especially those most at risk—benefits requires leadership from many sources. In this cycle of the RBA, the Selection Committee noted that four of the five projects succeeded with strong leadership and investments from the private sector. This observation stands in contrast to the 2017 award winners, which tended to highlight leadership and investment in urban infrastructure from the public sector. Much of the private-sector involvement was philanthropy driven, often through nonprofit organizations. This was true for all but Sulphur Springs Downtown.

Additionally, assessment of all of the winners elicited some reservations about elite white leadership driving development and controlling much of the

Beyond Walls mural festivals and tours draw residents and visitors to downtown Lynn.

Crosstown Arts

Onsite programming has been a critical part of building community at Crosstown Concourse.

processes (financial, political, philanthropic, and professional). Even though the projects achieved a level of racial diversity in participation in the final product, they did so without fully engaging, enabling, and protecting the communities they sought to serve. Curated inclusion is not enough. Truly equitable development must enable those in the community to not only be at the table, but to also lead the process.

The core leadership that made each of the winning projects possible were primarily white and mostly male. Importantly, these organizations acknowledged the need for diversity and inclusion and made efforts to deliver services and build teams to achieve it, even as a largely non-diverse leadership team made the final decisions. This stands in direct conflict with a fundamental principle of engagement that argues that the people most affected by decisions should have the most influence in such decision making. In virtually all of these cases, there was no clarity as to how leadership and decision making would evolve and cede leadership to those most affected by the project, either through capacity building or through the identification of those already in the community with the capacity and passion to lead.

One of the fundamental issues raised by this cycle is how to make projects like the 2019 award winners broader catalysts for change within and beyond the scope of their current efforts—projects that enable a fully democratic practice of placemaking and address broader social issues and their implications, including the unintended socioeconomic consequences of their success. Who is responsible for such approaches to projects, and how are they best held accountable? How can we take what we've learned from these observations and lessons learned and develop a more robust approach to truly equitable engagement?

A Call to Action

The readers of these case histories may wish to consider the need for audacious public sector leadership and investment to complement the private sector leadership that may be available in their communities. Working with multiple streams of leadership and funding will enable still more ambitious and visionary work as well as increase the opportunity for more just and equitable public engagement and consequences.

"The five winners have changed the rules of standard practice and elevated issues that matter, addressing ongoing and long-term challenges faced by cities across America."

The five winners have changed the rules of standard practice and elevated issues that matter, addressing ongoing and long-term challenges faced by cities across America. All of them involve rich stories and meaningful successes. Many of these efforts were initiated by "bootstrapping" grassroots engagement by the community and economic development that turned deficits into assets with profound impacts on their communities, both within and beyond the physical footprint of the project.

The 2019 medalists have highlighted the need for multipronged, collaborative, public/private approaches to address equity and serve the underserved. They speak to the desire for more inclusive and equitable development, and they have triggered questions about the roles and responsibilities of developers, funders, and local, state, and federal governments to address those questions and create programs and policies to level the playing field.

These same medalists are changing the narrative about urban design excellence as they bring innovation to unexpected places. They make manifest many ways to turn distressed urban infrastructure into significant community assets even as they raise good questions about how we might assure such projects are not just used by but are actually led by the public they serve. Finally, these award winners and all of those recognized through the RBA process since 1987 challenge our thinking about how we define excellence in our projects and learn from precedents in other places.

This is an excerpt of:

Changing the Narrative

The 2019 Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence

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