

## CONCLAVE ON CITIES

By Gail Greet Hannah

Some call them 'hot'. Some call them 'cool.' Cities are on a roll. They're being rehabilitated, revitalized and re-inhabited--and landscape architects are major players in the process.

Journalist Jon Gertner, in *Money* magazine, calls winners in the urban revival "hot" cities. Michigan governor, Jennifer Granholm, calls them "cool" and wants a bunch of them in her state. After decades of suburban flight, cities large and small are regaining their allure. The renewed interest in living and working in urban places, coupled with the growing concern for environmentally responsible development, offers special opportunities and challenges for landscape architects.

In June Landscape Forms, manufacturer of award-winning furniture and accessories for outdoor environments, hosted a two-day meeting in Kalamazoo, Michigan to discuss urban revitalization. Dubbed a "Conclave on Cities, the event was moderated by Metropolis magazine editor-in-chief Susan Szenasy and attended by thirty-two landscape architects, architects, urban planners and government representatives from across the country. Richard Heriford, Landscape Forms' Vice President of Marketing and mastermind of the conclave, says "The subject was a natural for us. Our products are in the center of cities, from New York, Chicago and Atlanta to small towns all over the country and we make it our business to be informed about the issues affecting the landscape architecture profession."

Confirmed urbanite Susan Szenasy set the tone for the discussion. "For years now," she declared, "I've been looking at these wonderful American towns that have been neglected and literally thrown away because of another vision of the world: the vision of the car and the mall and the diaspora of people. And now it's very gratifying to see these cities and small towns coming back. What we hope is that we make them into something that's genuine. Not some sort of Disneyfied idea of what the American town is, but what is real to a particular place."

Participants from two dozen cities described projects aimed at reviving defunct urban spaces and restoring their vitality and unique character. There was broad consensus that the basic conditions required for successful urban revitalization include diversity: ethnic, economic, age and lifestyle; tolerance and openness; robust residential as well as commercial development; good public transit; and fluid connections between downtown business, medical and university campuses and the street life of the city.

Peter Lazdins, ASLA of Design Plus, noted the importance of walking the talk, describing his firm's purchase and rehabilitation four years ago of a historic freight depot in downtown Grand Rapids for its 74-person practice. "We decided to stay in the downtown area because we wanted to invest in the community and be part of the synergy that was developing there," he explained.

Participants emphasized the importance of leveraging local resources. Willis Winters, AIA, an architect with the City of Dallas Parks and Recreation Department, described his city's Trinity River Project, a 6000-acre urban park containing a river and chain of lakes, that leverages neglected natural resources to enhance downtown Dallas and promote development of underused property outside the watershed. Lori Singleton, ASLA of Hamilton/Anderson, pointed to her firm's Detroit Rouge River project as another example of the successful reclamation of waterways to spur urban revitalization and development. And Bob O'Boyle, FASLA of O'Boyle Cowell Blalock & Associates, cited storm water management projects that his practice turned into popular water features that have stimulated activity and investment in downtown Kalamazoo.

William Mellix of Synterra, Ltd. discussed his firm's master plan for 500 acres of the former 1200-acre Philadelphia Navy Yard. Rehabbed historic structures, new corporate buildings and a marina with 250 slips are reinvigorating a huge tract of land that was once a city within a city. The redevelopment capitalizes on existing infrastructure, including an efficient inner-city transportation system. Monte Wilson, ASLA of HOK in Atlanta, pointed to successful community initiatives following redevelopment of public housing for mixed income use and to HOK's master plan update of the Georgia State University campus targeted to ensure that Georgia State "grows, interacts, connects and remains a part of the downtown." Debra Smith of the City of Kansas City Planning Department cited guidelines for a 140 square block downtown streetscape that focus on creating a sense of continuity between the old and the new. Rehabilitated lofts and warehouses, office-building-to-residential conversions, and a thriving arts district that now attracts up to 10,000 visitors for monthly open house events are all part of the mix.

Ann Mullins, FASLA, Landscape Architect at the University of Colorado and former principal of Civitas, reminded fellow participants of the time and preparation required for ambitious projects, and the critical role that business and government play in the process. "In Denver a succession of mayors worked for nearly 20 years to put together the pieces for the parks in the Platt Valley," she explained. "Basically it was the businessmen and politicians who put together the land and the public transportation so that we could design the parks that worked." Amy Butler, of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, described the state's 'Cool Cities Initiative,' a comprehensive program of grants, loans and services targeted at helping communities revitalize their down towns that offers assistance on a range of issues from paving and green roofs to brownfield remediation and tax credits.

Several participants remarked on the changing process in urban projects. "It's not as top down," explained Ken Smith ASLA, Principal of Ken Smith Landscape Architects. "It's bottom up now and much more opportunistic and collaborative." Lance Lowery of SWA Group in Houston made the case for community education, transparency, and working through a public process to achieve broad support from constituencies that come to see themselves as co-authors of the plan. Several participants talked about the importance of including young people in the urban transformation process. Judy Cunningham, ASLA of Mesa Design Group discussed her firm's mentoring of students from nearby pueblos. Others noted the impressive creativity brought by kids involved in brainstorming new approaches for their urban environments. "We can't always get kids in the room," explained Tom Balsley, FASLA of Thomas Balsley Associates. "The people on these

task forces are often over 50 and can be quite conventional in their ideas. When that happens our strategy is to ask them to vote on behalf of their grandchildren.”

Finally, Elliot Rhodeside, FASLA, of Rhodeside and Harwell, offered his strategy for success in urban redevelopment and sustainable design projects. “It takes courage, commitment and creativity,” he said. “Courage to put out the really strong ideas, commitment to stand by them and creativity to work with the community to educate and get the buy-in you need to push the ideas forward.”

The conclave was the first of several events to engage landscape architects and other professionals in substantive discussions of issues, challenges and successes in urban revitalization. The meeting made it clear that landscape architects are playing very influential roles in the exciting revival of the American city.

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