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Land Matters

What does this transformed schoolyard have to do with making landscape architecture a more visible, more influential profession?

By itself, probably not much. But suppose this schoolyard was part of a school-system-wide program for transforming most or all of the schoolyards in a large American city, and a landscape architect was the instigator of it all? Would that not give landscape architecture a more powerful role in community affairs and people's daily lives?

That's just what happened in Denver. There, Lois Brink, Affiliate ASLA, a professor of landscape architecture, created a public–private partnership with the potential to transform all the elementary school playgrounds in the city. It began as a grassroots effort to turn the
asphalt wasteland of the school Brink’s children attended into a vibrant area with a garden and more kid-friendly play and learning opportunities. In her studio class at the University of Colorado Denver, Brink challenged her students to engage the community in rethinking the space. When she had a plan in hand, she and other parents began raising funds to actually implement it—but after six years, they were still coming up short.

So Brink took a bold step: She ventured out of the safe confines of the university and approached the chief operating officer of the Denver Public Schools. He not only liked the plan but thought the idea was transferable to other schools. He and Brink went to the city and the Gates Foundation for funding, then formed a public–private partnership, the Learning Landscape Alliance—headed by Brink—that coordinated planning, funding, and construction. Local landscape architects were hired to draw up construction documents. The idea caught on with the public, and taxpayers passed a bond to transform more and more schools. As of this spring, 50 schoolyards had been completed, and a bond that would fund improvements for the rest of the district’s elementary schools will be put to a vote this fall.

Consider the Learning Landscape Alliance as a prototype. If other landscape architects took the initiative to rebuild schoolyards—or any other public landscape type for that matter—in their home cities, what would that do for the profession? One caveat: It might require landscape architects to venture into the scary arena of politics. Are landscape architects, including academics, ready for that?

More broadly, is this the kind of contribution this profession adequately celebrates or values? Currently, landscape architects reserve their highest reverence for one-of-a-kind built landscapes. There may be good reasons for this: The best of such built landscapes are invariably beautiful. Sometimes they are even embraced by the public. Taken together, these one-off projects seem to constitute the image that the profession wants to present to the world.

But equally compelling, if less imageable, are landscape systems that alter, in a much more sweeping way, the places we and our families live in every day. Yet too often, these large-scale initiatives remain unheralded. Denver is a good example. Until our writer visited some of the schoolyards with Brink and began researching the initiative, I had no idea of its magnitude. How can some of the profession’s most notable achievements be communicated to the public if they remain well-kept secrets? What other grand civic initiatives, with landscape architects as major players, are out there waiting to be discovered?

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