TOO COOL (JUST) FOR SCHOOL

In Denver, a university-sponsored initiative is renovating schoolyards and opening them to the community as parks.

By Daniel Jost, Associate ASLA

During the late 1990s, a majority of the public schoolyards in Denver lacked adequate play areas. Most of the schoolyards had vast stretches of asphalt and pea gravel and little shade.

“Our old playground was so bad. It was a gravel pit!” exclaims Thomas Barela, a gym teacher at Colfax Elementary. “During the hot months, with the hot gravel, it was tough. The kids didn’t want to get out there and exercise a lot.” And when the kids did play, they were often injured. “I used to have lots of injuries from the gravel,” says Barela. “Gravel in knees and cut elbows.”

There were other problems as well. Many of the playgrounds had equipment that was not age-appropriate. Some were so small that they could only safely serve a few classes at a time, and few met Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements.

To deal with these challenges, Denver has launched a program that is not only improving schoolyards but building a sense of community in neighborhoods throughout the city. At an average cost of $450,000 per site, the Learning Landscapes Initiative is converting once-desolate public schoolyards into mini parks that welcome the community after hours and facilitate both learning and play. Young students aren’t the only ones

Kids jump down the boulder stairs at Southmoor Elementary School’s new playground, top. Children are often involved in the planning stages, making drawings of how they’d like their schoolyard to look, right.
The plantings at Ellis Elementary are raised, above, to provide seating and discourage foot traffic. Lois Brink, Affiliate ASLA (center, below), a landscape architecture professor at UC Denver, helped spawn Learning Landscapes, which is improving schoolyards throughout Denver.

A Quick History
The Learning Landscapes Initiative is directed by Lois A. Brink, Affiliate ASLA, a landscape architecture professor at UC Denver. The project began in 1992 as a grassroots effort to improve Bromwell Elementary, the school that Brink’s children attended. In her studio class, Brink challenged her graduate students to engage the community in rethinking the space.

“It probably took a community and a school like ours to get it done the first time,” says Frank Bingham, who was Bromwell’s principal at the time the landscape was constructed. “The district tended to have a bit more deference to us than they might to some schools because of the very strong parental support and the link to the business community that some other schools don’t have.” Bromwell is in Denver’s posh Cherry Creek North Business District, and there was a long-standing relationship between the school and art gallery owners nearby.

Even so, it took six years before ground was broken at Bromwell. By 1998, a group of parents, including Brink, had raised $250,000 to improve Bromwell’s schoolyard. However, that was not enough to complete the project. In an attempt to secure additional funds, Brink approached Craig Cook, who was the chief operating officer of the Denver Public Schools at the time. According to Brink, Cook loved the idea. “We need to do this in other places,” he told her.

Around that time, UC Denver was encouraging its faculty to be more actively involved in the surrounding community,
particularly disadvantaged urban areas. Brink saw an opportunity to fulfill this mission. Garden Place Academy, an underperforming school in Denver’s industrial crescent, was chosen to be the next project. Meanwhile Brink and Cook approached representatives from the city of Denver and the Gates Family Foundation for funding.

The pace picked up after that. In the spring of 2000, the Learning Landscape Alliance was established with the help of a federal community block grant supplied through the city of Denver’s Department of Housing and Neighborhood Development Services. An entrepreneurial public–private partnership, the Learning Landscape Alliance would be responsible for coordinating the planning, funding, and construction necessary to improve 23 schoolyards in the next three years. Funding for the program would come from a variety of sources including the city, foundations, the school district, the community, and others, with no one group contributing more than 25 percent. The alliance was run by a six-member steering committee with Brink at the helm. The committee included officials from the Denver Public Schools, the head of Denver’s Department of Housing and Neighborhood Development, and the executive director of the Gates Family Foundation.

While some of the work would be done in a traditional way, with landscape architects providing the final construction documents and contractors doing much of the construction, landscape architecture students and the community at large would be engaged in many different phases of the projects.

The first schools renovated were locat-
ed in poor neighborhoods in Denver’s industrial crescent. Denver’s mayor, Wellington Webb, and his administration had identified 16 underserved neighborhoods for capital improvements, and elementary schools in each of these neighborhoods were chosen to receive new “learning landscapes.”

A second round of schools was renovated using funding from a general obligation bond passed by local taxpayers in 2003. The program has now grown to encompass around 60 percent of the elementary schools in the Denver Public Schools. As of spring 2008, construction on 50 schoolyards had been com-

pleted, and a bond that would fund improvements for the rest of the district’s elementary schools will be put to a vote this fall.

While the Learning Landscape Alliance dissolved after the first 23 schools were built, the partnership between the Denver Public Schools and UC Denver lives on. It is now simply known as Learning Landscapes.

Learning Landscapes continues to be involved with the planning and design of schoolyards in Denver, and its involvement does not end once the projects are built. Learning Landscapes has obtained funding for a Technical Assistance Program. The assistant director, Rachel Cleaves, helps communities find partners that assist in programming, maintaining, and improving the spaces. According to its website, Learning Landscapes is currently working with 21 different public and private partners. Among them are Denver Scores, an after-school program where kids can play soccer or participate in creative writing; Denver Urban Gardens, a gardening group that maintains the children’s vegetable gardens at some schools over the summer in ex-
change for gardening space of their own; and Slow Food Denver, a group that works with vegetable gardens and teaches children and parents about cooking and healthy eating. AmeriCorps and other volunteer groups are brought in for workdays on existing landscapes.

A Community-Based Vision

Among the factors that led to the initiative’s creation was a 1995 court decision that eliminated forced busing in Denver. For 20 years, students had been bused outside their neighborhoods as part of a federally mandated desegregation program. While the program’s effectiveness at improving race relations can be debated, it undoubtedly weakened the connection between the city’s neighborhoods and the public schools located within them. During this period, most elementary schools in Denver locked up their schoolyards after hours.

When busing was stopped, students
began attending their neighborhood schools again. Brink and others saw this as an opportunity. Public elementary schools account for a large portion of the publicly owned green space within the city, and they are often present in areas with few public parks. A paper by Brink and graduate student Bambi Yost, Student ASLA, explains that “rather than sitting empty and abandoned after school hours, as they did during previous decades, neighborhood schools could serve as landmarks and civic centers celebrating the cultural and historic character of each distinct neighborhood.” Elementary schoolyards in Denver are now open to the public after school.

“They’re really breaking some new ground,” says Robby Layton, ASLA, of Design Concepts Landscape Architecture, which has been involved with a number of the projects. “I think it changes people’s whole perspective of the concept of schoolyards. This project shows that these urban green spaces can really have much more value than they do right now. School districts, as a reaction to all the things they’ve faced in the past few years, have sort of entrenched themselves. They’ve put up a wall. But schools are in a position to be the focus of the community, and I think it gets the community to support them more.”

Brink believes that it is essential to involve the community in a civic process that begins before anything is designed and continues long after the project is completed. Prior to the construction of the learning landscapes, students, parents, and teachers are involved in creating a vision for the site. They are given pictures of possible design elements and asked what they value. Their responses are compiled into a wish list of elements they’d like to see on the site.

The community is not only asked to dream; it is actively involved in making these dreams a reality. Each school community is responsible for raising 1 to 2 percent of the construction costs needed to build its learning landscape. Getting individual community members involved in funding the project gets people excited and creates a feeling of ownership within the community. Schools go about this in different ways. Rosabella Guzman is the parent liaison for Munro Elementary. She says her school raised money by holding fun fairs. “Every Friday was Fun Friday,” she explains. “We sold nachos and other stuff.” Other schools had the children sell candy bars or collect pennies to support their playground.

Community members were also involved in the construction of the learning landscapes. In many cases, enlisting the community to help was very successful. “We had teachers, parents, and some of my personal friends out here working,” says Barela of a community work day at Colfax Elementary. “We actually laid the sod, me and some teachers and custodians.” They also laid 6,000 bricks, planted trees, and spread out the wood chips used in fall zones. However, sometimes it was hard to find volunteers, particularly in the beginning. Yost remembers one time when she and Brink had to go door to door in the neighborhood, trying to find people to lay sod. Though it can occasionally be difficult to organize volunteers, neighborhood involvement is an important part of the process. Like the community fund-raisers, it creates a feeling of ownership in those who participate.

Parents, students, and neighbors are also involved in the continuing improvement and maintenance of the landscapes. Children often create artwork such as tiled pots, banners, and murals that are displayed in the schoolyard. Many young children seem to enjoy sweeping, so there are brooms available at recess for them to sweep the paths. Brink says it’s a great physical activity, and while some parents would be angry if they saw their kids picking up trash, parents don’t seem to mind seeing their children sweep. Sometimes, the children help to maintain the landscape without even looking as if they’re working. At Bronwell, a native prairie area was originally going to be burned once a year. However, the Environmental Protection Agency forbade it due to air quality concerns, so now the school just allows the children to play in it for a few months each year, and this provides the disturbance necessary to keep it healthy (being raked off during part of the growing season is also essential for its survival).

Some of the community maintenance is more structured. Many of the schools with gardens have garden clubs after school that the kids can participate in. There are 30 kids in Eagleton Elementary’s garden club, which meets once per week during the school year and two times a week during the summer. Norma Vasquez is the after-school coordinator at Eagleton Elementary. She lives in the neighborhood and has a daughter who attends the school. She is actively involved with the vegetable garden there. “My kids help me,” she says. The produce of the garden is used to teach parents and students about healthful eating. The parents in that neighborhood have been very supportive of the garden, and this year it is being expanded with a section where they can grow vegetables for themselves. “A lot of the parents come from farms in Mexico. They have grown up in the fields, so they know about growing vegetables,” says Vasquez. Sometimes older couples whose kids are grown will even come and help.

The learning landscape has undoubtedly helped to create a stronger sense of community in Vasquez’s neighborhood.

Engaging Graduate Students

Part of the reason the Learning Landscapes Initiative has been so successful at engaging the community is the participation of Brink’s MLA students. As part of an agreement with the Denver Public Schools, a three-semester sequence of courses was developed. During the fall semester, students learned about design theory, engaged with members of the community, and created a master plan. In the spring studio, students produced design development drawings and cost estimates. A summer class allowed some students to participate in hands-on construction activities, working alongside contractors and coordinating neighborhood volunteers. All of the classes were interdisciplinary, open to both landscape architecture and architecture students. Brink originally taught all three courses, but later artists and other landscape architects from the area were involved in teaching.

Due to the scope of the program and the amount of funding pledged, it was necessary to plan many schoolyards each fall. Rather than having all of the students work on the same school, each school was assigned one or two students, who created a master plan for the site. In the spring, many
students continued working on the same site. Students didn’t have to take all three courses; however, to preserve a sense of continuity, those students entering the later courses were asked to respect the community design process and the previous students’ work as they developed their designs.

At first it was difficult to attract students to any of the studios. “Most grad students don’t want to do playgrounds,” says Brink. “There’s sort of a disdain for it.” It was actually such a concern that led Brink to forge an agreement with the Denver Public Schools to fund the studio if there were not enough students to satisfy the university’s size requirements.

Yost, a graduate student, tells a slightly different story. She says that Brink’s reputation as a taskmaster played a role. “The students are afraid of Lois. Lois makes you work. She’s a very tough, demanding instructor.”

Whatever the reason for their initial unpopularity, there has been no problem filling the studios in recent years. One of the reasons may be how well they were funded. A university stipend was provided to each of the students to pay for the materials and supplies necessary for the studio. Students in later studios were also able to receive AmeriCorps funding for their participation. While many landscape architecture programs are involved in their communities, few have taken advantage of AmeriCorps funding in this way. It seems like something that could be further explored by those landscape architecture programs that have difficulty providing adequate financial aid for graduate students.

Many of Brink’s graduate students have also discovered that those who take the sequence leave school with real-world experience. Yost says that working with Brink has shown her how to negotiate and fight for the rights of the children at public meetings when their interests are not being represented. She also values the construction administration experience she received in the summer studio. “I’m much more confident doing a design/build in the field than I am in the office doing simple graphics,” says Yost. “I’m confident with heavy equipment. I know how to budget and talk to guys in the construction field.”

How many recent graduates can say that?

A Mix of Ingredients
Since different communities choose different sorts of elements for their learning landscapes, no two are quite alike. However, they share some similar goals. Their first focus is the elementary schoolchildren who attend the adjacent schools. They strive to provide places for children to play and exercise in both structured and unstructured settings.

When it is possible, elements that support the curriculum are integrated into the landscape as well. The designers strive to create multigenerational spaces that attract users from throughout the community.

Playgrounds. Every learning landscape has an off-the-shelf playground made by a company on the school district’s list of approved manufacturers. Many of the playgrounds are integrated into the landscape with planting, but planters near playgrounds need to be raised a bit to discourage foot traffic. Usually, two different playgrounds will be constructed within close proximity, one geared toward younger children and one for older kids. The capacity for each play area is determined using a form Brink has developed. The school’s gym teachers are often involved in the process of selecting equipment that will provide the most chances for physical activity. As the initiative has progressed, simple playgrounds with platforms and a slide are giving way to playgrounds that offer chances to climb and build upper-body strength. At some schools, old pieces of play-
ground equipment have been reused with slight modifications and improved safety surfacing. Extra effort is taken to fit swings into the sites, as they tend to be very popular.

Boulders. Boulders have become a staple of the learning landscape play areas. They provide obstacles for the children to navigate and sitting areas where they can gather. Brink says that three-to-five-ton boulders are ideal. Smaller boulders may present a tripping hazard. At first, the district was concerned about using boulders for liability reasons. There was a big meeting debating whether they could put large stones on the playground sites. Eventually it was decided that boulders less than three feet tall would qualify as seating areas and taller boulders would require fall zones.

Barela says the boulders have been a success. "It wasn't too sure about them at first, but I've never had an injury on those boulders. They jump from boulder to boulder and play hide-and-seek." Boulders can also provide a learning opportunity when designers use a variety of different stones including examples of igneous, sedimentary, and metamorphic rocks.

Custom Play Elements. Other non-traditional play elements may reflect the history of the community. A mound with rubberized surfacing at a school called "struggle hill" recognizes the redlining that kept African Americans out of that community for many years and provides a place for playing king of the hill.

Sports Fields and Ball Courts. Nationally, lawn playing fields are a standard feature at most elementary schools, but most of the fields at the Denver schools were pea gravel prior to the initiative. The new fields are usually irrigated sod fields. Brink says sod is ideal as it stays cool in the hot summer months; however, Astroturf is used on some sites where the fields are small and receive lots of use. The fields are used by gym classes for a variety of games including football, capture the flag, and soccer. Hard surfaces and equipment are also provided for games such as four square, basketball, and tetherball.

The design of four-square courts is a creative enterprise. Instead of putting numbers in the squares, the designers put the names of oceans, cities, or mountain ranges. One four-square court uses the state bird, flower, animal, and dinosaur.

Learning Opportunities. Maps, compasses, and words are often painted on the asphalt outside basketball areas, providing possible opportunities for learning and creative play. At Eli's Elementary there is a political map of the United States, and at Bromwell there is a full-scale model of the solar system integrated into the paving that continues out into the community.

Natural Areas. A popular feature at many of the schools is a restored natural area, often with native grasses and herbs. Jonathan Wolfer, the current principal at Bromwell, says the native grass area there is very well used. "The native grass area is the biggest success. The kids love playing in the area." The areas are used for bug collecting and all sorts of imaginative play. Brink says the kids like to chop up the plants and make "potions." Another popular activity is "memorial building." On the day I visited, I found numerous "memorials" created out of small rocks and pieces of plants arranged on rocks. Some are quite artistic, miniature Andy Goldsworthy-style installations. Many schools would discourage children from ripping leaves off plants; however, Brink has convinced many teachers and principals to give the children free range in the natural areas. "They're the wildlife in here and you gotta let them go," she says.

When the naturalistic plantings are raised as they are at Bromwell, even disabled students canascrve in them. They can touch plants and pull things apart just like the other kids. Brink has encouraged the use of tactile environments like the grassland at Bromwell for this reason. Creating mounds also allows children in wheelchairs to maintain eye level with their non-disabled peers. Brink says a three-foot mound provides a comfortable scale for small children, while allowing adults to look over it. Accessible paths, ramps, and play equipment are also provided as required by the ADA.

Habitat areas are incorporated into the curriculum at some schools. "We bring our science classes outside for studies of tree varieties, grass varieties, and habitats," says Wolfer.

Outdoor Classrooms. The landscape is also used for language arts classes. Some sites have outdoor classrooms where teachers can read to students. "We'll have small reading groups taking place outside where it's quiet and calm," Wolfer says. However, Wolfer acknowledges that teachers at his school may have more opportunities to take advantage of the landscape than many underperforming schools. "We're a high-achieving school so there's not the pressure for test performance," he explains. "Classes feel free to go outside whenever they see fit." This may not be the case at some schools.

Fences/Gateways. To keep balls from flying into the street, many of the playgrounds have tall fences. However, artistic gateways are constructed to welcome the community into the space after school hours. Many of these gateways become neighborhood landmarks. The gateways are all unique. Simple differences help to create a unique sense of place.

Artwork. Fences are often decorated with murals painted on plastic canvases tied to the fence. These murals are created by the schoolchildren in art classes and after-school clubs, though sometimes an adult volunteer is involved in transferring the students' work to the mural and integrating multiple drawings. Banners created by the children are hung from poles around many of the sites. Local artists have even contributed artwork to some schools. Kinetic weather sculptures are found on at least two sites.

Seating/Shade. Many of the children who attend the school will come to play with their parents outside school hours and during vacations. Shaded seating with views of the playground is provided for teachers and parents so they can keep an eye on their children. Brink convinced the district to plant poplars and other fast-growing trees at many of the schools so that shade could be provided right away. Shade structures are also used on every site, but they do not always have fixed seating because some of the structures are also meant to serve as stages where performances can take place.

Teens. The playgrounds are often popular hangouts for teenagers during the evenings. Teens will take advantage of the basketball courts and seating areas. While most
of the sites successfully integrate people of various ages, a few sites get taken over by gangs on weekends, including Munro Elementary. Brink is trying to come up with ways that would encourage more mixed use of these facilities. She's encouraging “working with gangs rather than eliminating them...giving them a space to hang out where other folks can hang out, too.”

It is interesting that very few sites have had issues with graffiti. In fact vandalism in general has decreased at those elementary schools where a learning landscape is installed, according to a study by Yost.

“At the beginning we were kind of afraid that high school students would mess with the garden,” says Vasquez. “A lot of teenage students come and play basketball. There were a couple who were doing graffiti..... They saw the parents were coming every single day. They knew we were watching the garden.” Vasquez pauses a moment. “And you know what? I think they were watching the garden, too.” According to Vasquez, many of the neighborhood teens have also come to take pride in her community’s learning landscape.

Creating Opportunities for Professionals

Once the students complete the master plan and the design development drawings, the construction drawings for the landscapes are completed by professional landscape architecture firms, using the students’ work as a starting point.

Some professional landscape architects had mixed feelings about the idea of working from students’ plans, especially in the beginning. Jill Gaschler, ASLA, of GP&L Land Design, who has been involved with 25 learning landscapes, says she had no problem building on student work when they had a good concept, but some students weren’t as attentive as others.

Landscape architect Kerry White, ASLA, also had doubts at first, but she came to love working from the students’ plans. “With the very first project, I was uncomfortable with it. It’s kind of an ego thing,” admits White, who worked on 13 learning landscapes. “But I learned how to make it a very collaborative process. It actually influenced the way we worked on other projects in the office—not having one person do the design and carry it through but getting multiple perspectives.”

The community input embedded in the plans was often very valuable. White explains: “[The students] had time to delve into the background research that you’d always like to do as a landscape architect. Unfortunately, projects aren’t always funded that way.”

However well intended the students’ plans, changes to their layouts were usually needed to deal with the realities of the site. There were often conflicts with underground utilities and rights-of-way. Maintenance concerns, safety, and grading often needed further consideration as well. “We definitely try to reinforce their intent, but many times we change the layouts,” says Gaschler. “They will put things right where there’s a grease trap or an underground drain.”

“A couple of times, we actually hired the student as an intern to continue on with us, so they got to continue the process,” Layton says. At least two students had a chance to work on their own plans. Many additional students were hired as interns based on their experience with the program and given their first taste of a professional office.

Landscape architects involved with Learning Landscapes say it has changed how they approach schoolyard designs outside Denver. “I think a lot of other places got a learning landscape even though they didn’t know it,” says White. Gaschler says that it has changed her approach to urban schools in particular by encouraging her to “reinforce the curriculum, add habitat, and [do] other things that may not be typical for an urban school,” even for smaller schools. Layton says the program has helped him convince other school districts to try more innovative design elements.

Looking Forward

Master plans have now been completed for every elementary school in the Denver Public Schools. However, Brink has not stopped to
rest. She and her graduate students have been conducting research on the landscapes to see their effect on graffiti (it’s down) and active play (it’s up). In the future, Brink hopes to do a comprehensive study of play equipment—what works and what doesn’t.

Administrators with the district say that opening up schoolyards to the public when school is not in session has been a success. “It reinforces the point that the school is an important part of our community,” says Wolfr, who has been principal at Bromwell for the past three years. “There are some parents of younger children who’ve come on during school hours.

We just remind them that it’s prioritized for our children during school hours, but they’re welcome to come back at 3:30.”

Of the numerous sites that Landscape Architecture visited, only one had a gate that could be closed and locked. Generally, Brink says that limiting the number of entrances is more important than providing a gate that would keep visitors out during school hours. “When you walk through the gateway, all eyes are on you. If you’re gonna walk through, you better belong here.” Brink says that 70 percent of the schools do not have any sort of gate. This includes numerous schools in Denver’s industrial crescent.

However, a few schools have gates. Many of these schools, like Calfoa Elementary, are located on small sites on busy arterial roads, and it would be difficult to
keep balls from flying into the street if the gateway did not close. Most of these gates are not locked. Some schools have requested gates that can be locked during the school day as a security measure due to repeated problems with custody disputes or perceived threats of crime. These schools are still open to the community after hours, though occasionally no one will remember to unlock the gate after school lets out.

Brink was on sabbatical this spring, working on a web site that would help other school districts understand what it would take to start a similar program. This work is being funded by a two-year grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. She hopes to have the web site completed by this fall. She is also courting officials in Boulder with the idea of establishing a similar program there.

If that happens, the residents of Boulder have something to look forward to. “The results speak for themselves in terms of decreased student conflict and discipline problems,” states Bingham. “I’ve been to several of the other schools, and the before-and-after contrast is so stark. They’re now these beautiful green artistic environments where students can play and learn. In some neighborhoods it’s really the prime place for kids to play on the weekend or even in the summer.”

**PROJECT CREDITS**

**Steering committee of Learning Landscape Alliance:** Lois Brink, Affiliate ASLA, coordinator, University of Colorado at Denver; Allen Balzarek, Charles Burdo, Mike Langley, Denver Public Schools; Jerry Garcia, City and County of Denver; Tom Kaemeyer, Gates Family Foundation. **Funding:** Buell Foundation, Caring for Colorado Foundation, Central Denver Ironworks, Cherry Creek Art Festival, City of Denver Community Block Grant Program, Cordillera Asset Management, Daniels Foundation, Denver Broncos, Denver Foundation, Denver Nuggets, Denver Public School Alumni, Denver Public Schools, DPS Elementary School Fund Raisers, El Pomar Foundation, Elementary School Fund Raisers, First Bank/Roger and Margaret Reisher, First Data Western Union Foundation, Gates Family Foundation, Greater Outdoors Colorado, Head Start Program, Hensel Phelps Inc., Kaboom, Kellogg Foundation, Kronke Sports, Land Title, Musser Funds, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, Kaiser Permanente, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

**Resources**

- Learning Landscapes web site: www.learninglandscapes.org.

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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 schoolyards. 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. (For more information, see “Too Cool (Just) for School,” page 40.)

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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