

FEATURE | Stephanie Landregan, FASLA

Reconnecting Urban Populations to Nature

As the majority of our populations have shifted from rural communities to urban centers and the separation from nature becomes more significant, the role of urban design must now take on a new meaning and importance.

Today's built environment will result in even more density and the further infill of remaining "vacant" land. As such the economic value of development needs to be balanced with the human need to socialize and offer respite within nature. As a landscape architect, performance measures for a site are as much about the air flow, the sunlight, and the bird-song, as they are about the "penciling out" on paper of a particular project. My profession of landscape architecture considers urban design to be a synthesis of the built and natural environment; one that is bounded and the other that is boundless.

In the emergence of modern urban design in the 1950's and the theories of Jane Jacobs, Edmund Bacon and Kevin Lynch, building architects, landscape architects and city planners were concerned that city making had become sterile and commoditized. Activists, planners and design professionals embraced urban design as an opportunity to address the real needs of people within their community by advocating for an environment of not just architectural structure and a transportation grid, but of beauty and delight. It was during this period that landscape architecture's role in urban design became firmly established and rooted. Recently the most significant develop-

ment in the practice of urban design and the associated role of the landscape architecture has been the germination of Landscape Urbanism. This has been a fundamental shift in communities where the larger context or broader landscape requires a realignment that cannot be satisfied by buildings alone. Further it emphasizes a swing from the private realm of development to the public realm of community where public space is by right and not by gift. It is a holistic approach that is driven by the shared civic realm, public natural amenities and land planning principles.

So within the context of American city movements and with projects such as New York's High Line Park, Seattle's Olympic Sculpture Park, Santa Monica's Tongva Park and originating with Central Park, the ultimate public space, public realm, and urban design expression may just be the grand urban park. Central Park was a social experiment that was a uniquely democratic solution to rapid urbanization, addressing the "nature deficit" of New York City. The High Line works because it gathers all diversity of people in a space, interacting culturally while connecting them to the past. Olympic Sculpture Park is a deliberate gesture that reestablishes the connection of an urban site with the natural environment.

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Tongva Park demonstrates similar intentions, but with a specific nod to *Olmstedian* design principles of enclosure by installing mounds that harken to the dunes of past, paths that provide intimacy, and connections between the built and the natural and vistas out to the Pacific. Tongva Park draws you in, or lets you stroll the perimeter. Thomas Gordon Cullen says, "...a city is a dramatic event in the environment." Why not have urban design be a dramatic natural experience within a city? Isn't that what makes Central Park, the High Line, Olympic Sculpture Park and Tongva Park so magical, so necessary for us to seek as a place of respite and escape?

With contemporary urbanism constantly evolving, landscape architecture offers a new paradigm and organizing principles that represent today's urban environment. Because as we infill to accommodate an inevitable density, we need to leave room for natural processes, expose these wonders, and restore some semblance of these natural systems. We must capture rainwater in our designs at the sacrifice of a solid surface; allow trees to create a shade canopy at the forfeit of a particular sign, all in an effort to let our cities breathe with life. We must not lose sight that we are creating timeless, authentic places that will ultimately satisfy us for many years to come. We must look beyond the boundaries of the site and understand nature is and must continue to be woven into the fabric of the city. **SL**

Stephanie Landregan is the Director of the UCLA Extension Landscape Architecture Program and a Planning Commissioner for the City of Glendale.