By tackling some of the most daunting problems of the city, landscape architects are rising to new prominence.
PARTICIPANTS

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Elizabeth Padjen: The last time ArchitectureBoston devoted an entire issue to landscape architecture was in 2003; our roundtable discussion was titled “Burying Olmsted.” At that time, much of the buzz in the profession was focused on what might be called the artful landscape: landscape _cum_ art installation. But the participants in that roundtable also mentioned Millennium Park in West Roxbury — where soil from the Big Dig was used to cap an old landfill — as an example of cutting-edge thinking about ecological landscapes, and they bemoaned the lack of attention such projects were receiving. It’s astonishing to see how the profession has changed in just seven years — not only in terms of the kinds of projects that are gaining wide recognition, but also in terms of a new focus and a new energy. Terms such as landscape urbanism, ecological urbanism, and agricultural urbanism are now commonplace and are even leaking into the public lexicon. One of our editorial board members recently stated, “Landscape is suddenly the most relevant player.” Let’s start by talking about this new excitement. Where does it come from?

David Gamble: More and more, the public recognizes the fragility of the environment — look at the recent floods in Nashville and the oil spill in the Gulf. Part of the landscape profession’s rise to the top is due to the general recognition by the public that landscapes are living organisms and that we need to think very carefully about how we inhabit our environment. This increase in consciousness has helped landscape architecture play a much larger role in the public’s eye than it might have otherwise.

Laura Solano: Landscape architects are especially skilled in understanding systems, and that’s why we are deeply involved in this search for an ecologically responsible life. It’s easy to say that this focus has suddenly boiled up, but in fact, it’s been a long time coming. Frederick Law Olmsted, in the 19th century, understood systems perfectly; his talents were multivalent: he was a civil engineer, a surveyor, and an author, as well as a landscape architect. In the early to mid-20th century, Jens Jensen and Aldo Leopold were writing about these issues, but there wasn’t an audience. And then Ian McHarg blew the doors open in 1969 by introducing the idea of ecological planning.

Wendi Goldsmith: Olmsted espoused the merit of Central Park long before other people ever imagined today’s development pressures. Yet he rallied people behind a vision and was very clear about doing it for reasons of air quality, exercise, civic interaction, and creating a shared space that would reinforce community. His design of Boston’s Emerald Necklace was intended to solve some very practical stormwater flooding management problems. Both projects place landscape architecture at the foundation of what we now call sustainable community design.

Shauna Gillies-Smith: The public has long understood that landscape architects work with living elements. But a recent and significant shift is that we are starting to realize that cities are also living organisms, so the systematic thinking that has been part of the landscape discipline is now being translated to new strategies for the urban condition as well.

Jill Desimini: And of course, landscape architects bring an understanding of people and the designed experience. That means they are skilled at making spaces that work for their inhabitants that also address the complexities of urban, ecological, and infrastructural systems.
Wendi Goldsmith: I think that’s right. The whole green design movement started with a focus on energy systems within the building: insulation and the efficiency of HVAC systems. And then, bit by bit, it grew to include water use, glazing, building positioning, which then evolved into new ideas about things like light and lighting, water conservation and reuse, and integrating graywater management with building plumbing. Fairly quickly, sustainable design started to bleed into the landscape and to encompass infrastructure, including power generation, and people began to understand that it’s not just about the building and what goes on inside it: We need to look at what goes on outside, on site, and what goes on beyond the site. Now we’re thinking about buildings in relation to the grid, to watersheds, and to water supplies. What I am observing is a new relationship, maybe eventually a new field, where science and engineering and landscape design all merge. Our society is just beginning to recognize the value in such an approach.

The emphasis in landscape urbanism should be on the urbanism.

Jill Desimini
Shauna Gillies-Smith: Landscape typologies have evolved to a fair degree, and landscape architects today feel that they can take on a much larger territory than was their traditional purview: designs for entire regions or decommissioned airports or large post-industrial sites or whole infrastructure projects. That’s by necessity, because landscape systems don’t end at the property line. I always have a hard time making the distinction between landscape architecture and urban design, probably because I’ve been trained in both fields, but I think that is one area where they are different: It’s very hard to put a circle around what defines a landscape.

Elizabeth Padjen: Is the landscape architect encroaching on the traditional turf of the urban designer? Do you envision the end of urban design as a discipline, perhaps being absorbed by landscape architecture?

Shauna Gillies-Smith: That could be a very politically dangerous idea to agree or disagree with, depending on your perspective. Clearly, both disciplines will continue to evolve. I just finished teaching what turned out to be a very exciting studio. It was called an urban design project, but it addressed landscape, ecology, and environmental dynamics. The project site was on a floodplain with a daily tidal fluctuation of about six feet; we also projected an additional rising water level of six feet over 100 years. So the students had to think simultaneously about accommodating fluctuating water levels and about creating urbanism. Typically,
when we think of zoning, we think of it in a horizontal way, or as vertical envelopes of height limits. But the most critical aspect of this project was the first 10 feet of the city. The challenge was to design that sectional relationship intelligently, to foster a vibrant urban life on a ground plain that must accommodate so much natural variation.

David Gamble: The design professions in general have done themselves a disservice in trying to delineate distinct territories and in believing that a project needs to begin with the urban planner, then go to the urban designer, then the architect, then the landscape architect, and so on. That type of linear thinking is one reason why we haven’t been able to foster strong interdisciplinary collaborations. Major design competitions around the world now tend to be dominated by teams including very diverse disciplines, such as landscape architects, planners, economists, and historic preservation architects, because there is so much interdisciplinary discussion that needs to occur when you look at complex urban areas. I do think that the architecture profession today has much greater respect for a landscape architect’s sense of process than it did a generation ago. The work I’m doing in China now as an architect is entirely in the service of a landscape-architecture firm that is planning large regions of the country. It’s a scenario that stems in part from the client’s intuitive understanding of the nature of their ecosystems and the desire to work with their natural settings, which requires the landscape architect’s understanding of geography and place.

Laura Solano: And that’s not an unusual scenario anymore. Clients are unbelievably sophisticated now, and they do their homework in terms of the composition of the teams they hire. In my office, we are the prime for about 80 percent of our work, big and small. Many of our teams have 12 or 15 consultants, often representing narrow areas of expertise: planners, architects, historians, ecologists, soil scientists, hydrologists, and biologists. Strong collaborations offer tremendous educational opportunities.

LANDSCAPE URBANISM

Elizabeth Padjen: Landscape urbanism is at least partly responsible for the profession’s new energy. What exactly does it mean?

Laura Solano: Charles Waldheim, who is now the chair of the department of landscape architecture at Harvard, coined the term. He has said: “Landscape urbanism describes a disciplinary realignment currently underway, in which landscape replaces architecture as the basic building block of contemporary urbanism.”

Elizabeth Padjen: That’s a shot across the bow. What are some examples?

Jill Desimini: I’d like to respond first by saying that at the core of landscape urbanism is the idea that looking at, understanding, and designing urban processes will lead to making a new kind of city that is capable both of self-regenerating and of changing the way we experience the place we live. The emphasis in landscape urbanism should be on the urbanism. With that in mind, I would point to Toronto, which has hired a number of landscape architects as leads for very big projects that are changing that city, especially the waterfront. These include West 8’s reconfiguration of the central waterfront, work by Field Operations on Lake Ontario Park, and the design by Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates for the Lower Don Lands as a new metropolitan precinct. Landscape architects are also working on large projects in other cities. New York’s Freshkills Park project — the transformation of 2,200 acres of landfill on Staten Island into a new public park and urban habitat by Field Operations — is another example of an innovative approach to revitalizing and repurposing a piece of the urban fabric. The key now is to focus even more on the design of the city itself. Landscape urbanism positions landscape and landscape methods as a driver for urban infrastructural change.

David Gamble: Part of the momentum also comes from the shifting economics of cities. More and more cities over the last generation have been looking to old industrial sites or waterfronts as places to grow; large parks become the catalysts that drive economic redevelopment.

Elizabeth Padjen: But the idea of landscape, particularly in the form of public parks and open spaces, as a catalyst for development...
isn’t new. You can even find it codified in the 16th-century Spanish Laws of the Indies that was the basis for town planning in the Spanish colonies: put the square in the middle of the town and build out around it. What’s different?

Shauna Gillies-Smith: Landscape urbanism takes another approach — more profound in some ways — and looks at a larger force, a river, for example, as a generator of urban form and urban typology.

Jill Desimini: David is right that many cities are revitalizing industrial sites, and a lot of them are on waterfronts and thus have an ecological component. The difference is that landscape urbanism starts with looking at these sites in terms of the environmental systems that can serve as generators for the project.

Laura Solano: It’s about healing; taking derelict or brownfield sites and making them useful. We take a piece of land that nobody cares about any more, and turn it into something that people can identify as a place that has personal meaning and community value.

Shauna Gillies-Smith: I think it’s important to not conflate landscape and parks. It’s true that the idea of building a public park that is a catalyst for development is an old trick. But only part of landscape is parks. Part of it is plazas. Part of it is open space. And part of it is the system of stormwater management that gets built into our streets, into our yards, into our housing units. What is exciting about landscape urbanism is that it can define new types of space that not only accommodate ecological systems, but also define ways that we as individuals can relate to landscape and to ourselves in different ways.

Wendi Goldsmith: Not long ago, the words “landscape urbanism” would have sounded like an oxymoron. We worked on a project recently with Laura’s firm and with the architect Steve Holl that is a perfect example of this change in thinking. This project involves brownfields restoration, a large public-works facility including a major green-roof project, the preservation of some public open space, and programming that includes a significant public education and events component — all while making very tangible contributions to natural habitats in the south-central Connecticut region. It completely merges architecture and engineering and landscape architecture. I can’t think of any earlier examples in the US with the same level of interdisciplinary entanglement. The hydrology of the site accommodates these major functional components, but reverts the site back to its pre-development “water budget” in terms of its hydrological performance. So there’s this incredible melding of function and beauty and education that also transforms a stigmatized landscape into something that sets the stage for a new pattern of development in the region.

THE SCHOOLS

David Gamble: A number of design schools have been very strategic about raising the profile of landscape architecture within the school, which is reverberating within the field itself. More landscape-architecture programs are opening up, in part because some leaders in the profession are finding ways to excite a new generation of students who want to shape the physical environment. They’re raising the profile of the profession from within the academic community.

Elizabeth Padjen: Conversely, the schools must also be responding to a market interest.

Shauna Gillies-Smith: All of us who are in academia know that it’s the students who are really driving the sustainability agenda. No question about it. And that generation’s interest in the environment is one of the really big pushes behind recognizing, first of all, that our world isn’t static and, second, that we need to find a different way of working with it instead of against it.
Laura Solano: One of my students gave a presentation on a recent project in Korea that turned 600 acres of landfill into a park. The park ended up as a reflection of the trash pile: it was essentially a pyramid with the top cut off. This student’s discussion centered around what might have happened instead if a landscape architect had been involved from the beginning: there would have been a grading plan for placing trash, there would have been systems to promote decomposition, and the nearby wetlands would have been engineered to support a river watershed. These kinds of issues capture the attention of students; they know that there are huge problems to solve, and they know the answers lie in innovation.

ROSE KENNEDY GREENWAY

Elizabeth Padjen: Let’s say that, instead of having just been completed, the Greenway project is just now in the concept phase and the initial planning has been undertaken by a team of landscape urbanists. What are some of the substantive changes we’d be seeing?

Shauna Gillies-Smith: One obvious answer is that there would be a very clear, probably somewhat artful but potentially also didactic, approach to stormwater, so that one would actually see how water is moved and treated. We would probably also see some form of urban agriculture — not necessarily community gardens, but perhaps some form of urban foraging.

David Gamble: I suspect that the engineering for the tunnels would be done in the service of a much larger vision of connectivity and continuity. Whatever you think about whether or not there should be development along the Greenway, there is still a very painful sense that it is not as robust in its role as it should be.

Jill Desimini: It could perform in so many different ways. It could even have a greater social or economic agenda. Right now, it’s very neutral, and there’s nothing very neutral about a landscape-urbanist vision.

Shauna Gillies-Smith: Thinking of it as a landscape in isolation — what you would do to decorate the top of the tunnel — is fundamentally not a landscape-urbanist approach. Thinking of the whole tunnel and the buildings along each edge in conjunction with the landscape, ecology, and the social program is much more appropriate to a landscape-urbanist approach.

Laura Solano: There have been so many disastrous tries at linking architecture and landscape along the Greenway; it suffers for a lack of integration. But I’m convinced that, over time, it’s going to be redone, because we know it’s not right. The Greenway Conservancy is doing some useful and valuable things, like organic maintenance and developing a tree farm to supply trees for the Greenway, but management can’t fix the things that are inherently wrong with it.

Wendi Goldsmith: This is a case where some of the most important concerns were put last on the list. Lots of people other than landscape architects, let alone landscape urbanists, were calling the shots. And so, many other aspects of the project crystallized before there was actually anything resembling a final program for how the Greenway would operate, or how it would look and function.

David Gamble: The Greenway has served a purpose of sorts. All across the country, cities are facing similar problems of deteriorating highways and infrastructure and are recognizing the value of trying, even at a smaller scale, to take advantage of new opportunities to reconnect their cities. Other cities will learn some lessons from what happened in Boston and try to do it in a more synthetic way.

Elizabeth Padjen: If we were to re-do the Greenway now, I suspect we would keep part of the superstructure of the old Artery and rework it as an artifact or walkway.

Laura Solano: I agree with you. There was something sublime about driving up over the city streets.

Shauna Gillies-Smith: That sublime quality is one of the appeals of New York’s High Line, along with a nostalgia for the big old industrial superstructure as you’re floating through the city. And the elements are beautiful: the furniture is beautiful, the planking is clever and smart, and the planting is rich and a strong contrast to the more controlled environment. There’s no question that the High Line would have influenced thinking about the opportunities for the Greenway.

BURYING OLMS TED, AGAIN

Shauna Gillies-Smith: I want to re-visit the idea of burying Olmsted, because it is important to recognize the significance of the constructed landscape. Part of the interest for me in the High Line isn’t so much the aesthetic of it, although it’s an amazing place, but that it calls into question what landscape is, and it calls into question the naturalization of landscape. When most people think of landscape, they usually think of the backyard garden or the national-park backgrounds in TV ads for SUVs. But by recognizing that what we are creating in both our green spaces and our hard spaces is a constructed landscape, we are held to a different standard. Our roads are landscape: they are designed landscapes. Our sidewalks, our traffic medians, our rooftops are designed landscapes. We learn to ignore them. But there is a lot of economic and design investment in all of those elements. The importance of burying Olmsted is that we need to recognize that our landscape is completely constructed, and that consequently, both our landscape and our work as designers must be held accountable.