Railyards Park
Santa Fe, New Mexico

Ken Smith Landscape Architect
Frederic Schwartz Architects
Mary Miss, artist
New York, NY

Above
View of farmer's market from plaza with water tank in background

Opposite Page
Park plan
Image: courtesy Ken Smith Landscape Architecture

Competitions Winter 2008/2009
After more than fifteen years of discussion, community action, planning and design, the Santa Fe Railyards Park, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, held its grand opening in mid-September, 2008. The twelve-acre park is a part of the fifty-acre former Santa Fe railyards and warehouse district, now undergoing transformation into a twenty-first century festival marketplace and arts and cultural corridor.

The guiding principles for the park vision came out of the 1997 Community Plan and the 2001 Railyard Master Plan. The plans stated that: "the architectural quality of the railyard should be authentic, gritty, rugged and not be sanitized or perfumed in character." This is a tall order for designers, particularly in Santa Fe where sanitized, perfumed grittiness is the foundation of the city's image. The site, in fact, was a gritty, authentic and rugged place before any intervention, and was used by people and prairie dogs.

The vision also stipulated that: "using a variety of simple, utilitarian materials, in creative ways, the landscape and built features of the Railyard Park and Plaza reflect the site's evolution from an agricultural site, to a railyard warehouse district, to a community commons and gathering space." Specific elements were to include the provision of attractors to enliven the space, design of a large-scale water harvesting system, and the creation of good social space with places to gather, places to sit, and spaces with different things to do. Perhaps the principle that most strongly affects the design outcome was to "Provide for a range of alternatives for each design element so that a rigid style is not evident."

The Trust for Public Land organized and managed a design competition for the park that was announced early in 2002, and the competition jury selected four finalists. Ultimately the team of Ken Smith Landscape Architect, Frederic Schwartz Architects and Mary Miss, artist, won the commission (see Competitions, Fall 2002).

This project involved a multitude of participants, from the early days of the park's conception, through every stage to the final construction, and this involvement will continue in the stewardship of the park. How does one evaluate a project that underwent such intense scrutiny by so many constituencies, over an extended period of time? Is the client pleased with the end result? Do the designers feel satisfied with their creation? Did the built project achieve the goals continued on page 20
stated in the vision? Does the general public like the park? Finally, how would the design critics evaluate the project?

For anyone who has wondered if postmodernism is dead, or if this theoretical approach ever found application in landscape architecture, I can report that it is alive and reasonably well in Railyards Park. The principles and vision statements above inherently embrace a postmodern ethic, and the talented team of designers on the project have produced a design that attempts to capture the essence of the vision.

The park design avoids symbolic expression of the grand, the heroic, the ceremonial and a unified narrative. Instead, it favors fragmentation, plurality and democratic gesture. For example, there is no grand entry into the park. Multiple means of entry tip out unobtrusively and unceremoniously onto the sidewalks surrounding the site, providing many opportunities for people to filter into the park environment. The designers did not locate and define a ‘center’ in a geographic, geometric or symbolic sense. There are many small centers that provide the locus for a range of activities and experiences, including a children’s play area, sitting areas, picnic areas, demonstration gardens, and small informal performance spaces. There is no hierarchical order of movement, with a main path and sub-paths, but rather many equal paths that offer choices and varieties of experience.

One exception to the absence of ‘grand gesture’ is an 800 foot long alameda, or allé, defined by a high, wood trellis structure, running the length of the alameda, eventually to be covered in vines. The experience of this long walkway is a powerful one, and, in a traditional design language, one would expect the axis of the alameda to form a spine or armature providing the major structural element for the design. In this case the designers resist the unifying potential of the axis, and instead the alameda becomes yet another fragment within the park that suddenly ends, releasing the visitor into an ambiguous other space.

The use of materials and systems in the site design clearly reflects the designers’ process of engagement with local agencies and communities to understand the high desert environment and the unique place that is Santa Fe. Capturing and re-using water, for example, is a fundamental strategy that must be employed in all site design for the central New Mexico region. Water from precipitation is collected from three acres of rooftops and stored in cisterns providing 110,000 gallons of storage, including a 35,000-gallon water tower located beside...
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ABOVE
View to open field

RIGHT
View to plaza at Paseo de Peralta street crossing
BELOW, LEFT
Alameda looking south
BELOW, RIGHT
Passenger platform
OPPOSITE PAGE
Plaza on market day
If there is any attempt to unify the spaces within the park it is with the use of the limited number of materials...

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the Rail Yard Plaza. According to Brian Drypolcher, the project manager with Trust for Public Land, the stored water will be able to provide a little over 30% of the total irrigation required for the ambitious but attractive planting in the park.

The range of materials used in the site design, like in the high desert landscape, is limited. Stone walls and stone gabion walls, wood ramada structures, crusher fines surfaces, drought tolerant planting with just a hint of turf grass, and smatterings of metal reflecting the railway industrial image fill out the palette. Wood notoriously degenerates quickly in the harsh desert environment, and may be over-used in the design. The gabion walls are designed and placed effectively, particularly as a separation between the park and the still active rail tracks. The stone walls in the more developed end are somewhat crude and over-scaled in places, and the faux rock wall in the play area is inconsistent with the general attempts at authenticity. If there is any attempt to unify the spaces within the park it is with the use of the limited number of materials, in the thoughtful design of elements like benches that are distributed throughout the site, and in the beautiful and integrated lighting design that creates a wonderful night-time environment while respecting the strict dark sky ordinances.

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ABOVE
Rock garden

LEFT
Circular Ramada

OPPOSITE, ABOVE
Performance green

OPPOSITE, BELOW
Alameda looking south
There are a couple of problematic areas in the site design. The first is a poor connection between the plaza along the front of the farmers market and the park site. This is complicated by a road, Paseo de Peralta, that intercepts the path of movement, and that currently accords privilege to the automobile over the cross movement of pedestrians. Once you do cross the road, you find yourself in a parking lot along the side of the Site Santa Fe building. It is not clear that the pedestrian needs to take a jog in their route up Paseo de Peralta towards Guadalupe to enter the park through the alameda.

The other observation is that, notwithstanding the intentional resistance to a narrative, one of the goals of the client and the designers was to express the evolution of the site from native American settlement to its newly revealed urban park form. This, in principle, is expressed in the relatively unstructured space at the southwest end of the park, set against the more intense, formal development at the northeast end. What seems to be missing is any form of transition through the site that might help to reinforce this metaphorical journey.

The project client, Trust for Public Land, is very happy with the park. It was a long process, but they feel that there was a high level of community input, and that the final project achieves the goals that were set out.

Ken Smith, one of the lead designers, feels that the team was successful in designing a twenty-first century park that acknowledges the geographic, historic and cultural character of Santa Fe. One of the very important measures of success is the public critique, and so far people seem to be using and enjoying the park. Of course, it is still brand new and needs at least a couple of seasonal cycles of use to begin to realize its potential as a vibrant and active space for Santa Fe.

A landscape, if well designed, matures and gets better with age. Plants fill in, trees grow, materials develop a patina, and a good fit develops between the use patterns and the space. The Railyards Park shows promise to mature into a significant urban landscape. Whether Santa Feans are prepared to embrace this new twenty-first century park will be seen in the years to come.

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