Landscape Urbanism in Practice:

SWA Group
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by John Wong and Sarah Peck, SWA Group, July 2010

While the practice of landscape architecture is not a new phenomenon, the idea of landscape urbanism and its increasing importance in the realm of public dialogue is gaining unprecedented attention. Prominent thinkers in landscape architecture and beyond are engaging in thoughtful inquiry about the process of design in landscape architecture and its increasing relevance for urban matters, city planning, and regional design. Today, the idea of “landscape urbanism” reflects the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of design work and the expanded scope of landscape architectural work.

Landscape architecture is more than background scenery, a simple aesthetic, an oasis for the wealthy, or an isolated park. It is not about making isolated destinations or confined “urban parks” without regard for city context. Landscape architects and landscape urbanists are involved in place-making, systems analysis, process considerations, economic development, community development, regionalism, and sustainable city development.

Landscapes urbanism focuses on systems that interact across environmental and human conditions, suggesting that these larger systems of ecological, social and geological processes create the background for understanding urbanization and human habitation around the world. Recently designed and built project work demonstrates the physical results of this changing design inquiry. Beyond changing the discourse regarding landscape urbanism, landscape architects are actively engaged in an evolving practice that tests, challenges and creates new spaces for urban living, working and recreation.

Designing, creating and maintaining cities and urban spaces

It is with a renewed interest in cities – and the underlying ecological, environmental, and landscape structures that are woven throughout cities – that SWA Group finds itself at the forefront of an exciting period of inquiry regarding what it means to create dynamic, exciting and evolving landscapes and urban environments. One lens for understanding landscape urbanism is by studying trends of people and the critical intersections/interactions between design elements that create an exciting and dynamic city.

More recently, remarkable population declines in some of the world’s historic cities shattered the idea of city longevity and prompted designers to question the integrity, value and function of cities: what components make cities work? In particular for landscape architects and urban designers, what role do landscape and ecological systems play in creating healthy, productive and integrative urban frameworks?

Landscape urbanism embraces the human and environmental processes that influence city creation, development and longevity. In practice, landscape urbanism is the process of collaborative, complex decision-making about how physical space should be designed. By engaging in an ongoing, evolving practice and pursuing built work around the world, SWA Group is continuously seeking to understand and redefine what it means to design new and better forms of human habitation. What follows is an initial list of some of the key components that reflect this design approach – a list that is continuously changing and being redefined through practice:

- Landscape urbanism design is focused on people and the way people and landscape interact.
- Landscape urbanism understands the need for sustainable, green design and the need for long-lasting landscape systems and structures.
- Landscape urbanism reflects the idea that the process of design is dynamic and not static. A design is never finished; it only sets the stage for future occupation, change, inhabitation, and the dynamic complexity of a place. There is not a “finished” design, only a design that has begun to be occupied.
- Landscape urbanism looks at the individual components and the critical intersections/interactions between design elements that create an exciting and dynamic city.
- Landscape urbanism is about creating a sense of place.
- Landscape urbanism is contextual: it respects and reveals the history and personality of a place.
- Landscape urbanism design is flexible, adaptable, and changing over time.

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Santana Row, a town center development near downtown San Jose, California, has been successful through its understanding of the interplay between commercial, residential, and social environments. The project included completely upgrading the infrastructure of the area, adding transportation circuits, integrating parking, providing comprehensive wireless internet access throughout, and layering into the project a setting of landscape parks, plazas, and streetscapes. The design expresses the interplay between landscape architecture, architecture, and planning details through a variety of building elevations, planting designs, and mixed use urban functions, which together give the town center life. The street remains narrow, giving the space a “European” flavor, allowing for a dense, interactive pedestrian realm in a new center within San Jose.

Gubei Gold Street
Shanghai, China
Gubei Group Co, LTD. - Photographs by Tom Fox
The creation of a three-city block pedestrian mall in Shanghai, China, was a pedestrian oasis in the midst of 20-story high rise residential towers. Bringing life to the residential area by activating the street level, this project interweaves retail, open space, residential life, and human occupation at the ground plane. Centrally located in the densely populated Gubei district, Gold Street provides a framework for the interconnected social ecologies in these progressive neighborhoods. With little differentiation between indoor and outdoor spaces, the landscape design creates a fluid connection between building and open space, putting into form the notion of an “outdoor living room” for public and civic engagement.
Hangzhou Hubin
Hangzhou, China
Hangzhou Hubin Commerce and Tourism District Redevelopment Inc. - Photographs by Tom Fox

West Lake in Hangzhou, a World Cultural Heritage Site, is a cultural center and important tourist destination in China. Hubin Road, a multi-lane highway that borders the lake, became a significant barrier to access for the historic cultural lakefront. In a concerted effort to ameliorate this obstacle and revitalize the district, the design team developed the “Urban Design Master Plan,” establishing a vision for public and private realms that unite the history and inherent beauty of West Lake in an urban, human-scale development. Key strategies included creating vibrant multi-purpose streets and public gathering spaces, solving mobility needs, creating pedestrian-scaled spaces, celebrating the culture by preserving or reconstructing historic architecture, and attracting and sustaining high quality mixed-use development. This project was winner of the first Urban Land Institute’s Global Award for Excellence.

Katy Trail
Dallas, Texas
The Friends of Katy Trail - Photographs by Tom Fox

The Katy Trail, a portion of the abandoned M.K. and T. Railway, represents a remarkable resource for the residents of the Dallas Fort Worth region – serving as a unifying element for the many users living nearby. As both a transportation and recreational corridor, the bicycle and pedestrian trail allows people to interact, move and connect with nature, people and place. The trail links approximately 20 neighborhood areas to the Central Business District and the American Airlines Center.
Nanjing Greenland International Commercial Center
Nanjing, China
Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP, Architects
Nanjing Greenland International Commercial Center Co. LTD. & Nanjing State-Owned Assets Greenland Financial Center Co., LTD. - Photographs by Tom Fox

Nanjing Greenland International Commercial Center is an urban high-rise commercial site that encompasses existing parks and the adjacent historic Drum Tower to the South. The 450 meter main tower is central to the site; the ground plane landscape design is comprised of concentric rings of mixed trees and linear water features. To activate the ground plane and civic-commercial center, the design includes wider sidewalks, urban parterre gardens consisting of hedges, colorful perennial flowers, and abundant seating to capture the commercial vibrancy of the street. Critical to the site design was creating space for pedestrian movement and flow between the ground floor retail stores and the adjacent streets.

Burj Khalifa
Dubai, UAE
Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP, Architects
Emaar Properties PJSC - Photographs by David Gal

Burj Khalifa landscape design includes the park plazas, oasis gardens, water fountains, and streetscape for downtown Burj Dubai – a new urban center in metropolitan Dubai. The design challenge included creating a setting for the tower by providing public access while also integrating solutions for the complex grading over garage structures, utility configurations, limitations of soil depth, structural weight limitations, drainage layout, and air ventilation connections. The achievement of this project was a cohesive vision from the tallest point of the building down to the ground plane and its close design relationship to the region and neighborhoods. The goal was to design the groundscape to serve and connect the occupants, visitors and the population of the region.
Guangzhou New City South Center Axis
Guangzhou, China
Heller Manus Architects
City of Guangzhou

This project, a 3700-acre master plan featuring a central green axis, an ecological park and a lake that together serve as a “lung for the city,” defines the type of urbanism that looks at the importance of green spaces and ecological functions as an integral part of design from concept through completion.

Three different types of park spaces are proposed along the central green axis from north to south. Each open space type responds to the type of adjacent city blocks, the urban fabric, and the continuous green fabric throughout the city. By providing abundant, continuous and diverse open spaces, the project serves a complex number of interrelated functions: it is recreational, restorative, provides ecological habitats, connects hydrologic systems and balances dense urban environments with diverse pockets of open space.

Changsha FuRong District Eco City
Changsha, China
City of Changsha

The design opportunity of Changsha was capturing the essence of the fundamental landscape site characteristics: rivers, lakes, and hills. These natural elements help root the development of a new city within the natural landscape elements as a framework for growth. Creating a new city that is sustainable and contextual is the design challenge: SWA Group believes that the most sustainable practices work with what is there before inserting anything new. By identifying the natural characteristics unique to the region and amplifying the existing landscape, the master plan creates a sustainable environmental framework that respects the unique ecology of the place. The urban design challenge of the new city design was creating and fostering connections between different places separate from one another to create livable, human spaces.
Qianhai Bay
Shenzhen, China
Shenzhen Planning Bureau

The scheme for Qianhai Bay is a series of connections between economic, ecological, and social opportunities. Located at a key point between the Pearl River Delta estuary, the site’s waterfront location is an intertidal zone where “mixing” naturally occurs. SWA's site plan drew inspiration from this idea of “mixing.” The site returns a portion of land previously taken away from the sea, creating an edge framework or membrane between urban buildings and a new, interwoven shoreline edge. The master plan filters these water corridors in a shallow, linear system of braided marshlands. The proposed interface between sea and land is porous and fragmented, creating a structure for the surrounding development. This urban design plan looks at the ecological framework of the site, developing a flexible scheme for the building and landscape plan that responds to the use and function of surrounding delta and estuary.

Huaqiao Intercity Railroad Station
Kunshan, China
Huaqiao International Service Business Park
Assets Operation Co. LTD.

The design of a railway station within an existing vibrant commercial district involved understanding the transportation needs, creating access corridors, and designing landscape areas as places to slow down in the midst of a busy railroad station. The south, more formal plaza space faces out towards the forecourt of the business district south of the station. The north plaza is less formal and serves as a casual respite and backdrop for the waterfront retail district opposite the station. A broad mid-block pedestrian promenade connects the two districts and the two halves of the station through the station’s center. In redesigning the station, the project becomes more than the design of a railway station: it integrates into the existing urban fabric, connects people across and within the site and provides multiple recreation opportunities in addition to its main function as a city train station.