MacArthur Park Connections Master Plan wins 2009 Minnesota ASLA Merit Award

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MINNEAPOLIS, April 7, 2009. The Minnesota Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects has recognized the MacArthur Park Connections Master Plan with a 2009 Merit Award. The plan describes a vision of the park not as an autonomous landscape but as the anchor for a larger urban landscape network. The planning strategy extends sustainable landscape design practices used in the park into local neighborhoods and surrounding districts. The result of this vision is an outdoor public room connected to the city by linking the actions of recreation, transit, commerce, entertainment, and everyday life.

Led by William Conway, AIA principal in Minneapolis based Conway+Schulte Architects and UMN School of Architecture Associate Professor, the project team included: Tom Oslund, oslund.and.assoc., George Wittenberg, University of Arkansas Little Rock Urban Studies Program, Stephen Luoni, University of Arkansas Community Design Center, Chris Suneson, McClelland Consulting Engineers, and Jon Commers, Donjek.

The City of Little Rock’s oldest municipal park, MacArthur Park is named in honor of General Douglas MacArthur, who was born in the park’s 1840’s Arsenal Building. Until the 1960’s the park was surrounded by a range of housing types and was integrally connected to the culture of the community. In 1961 the Central Little Rock Urban Renewal Project inserted the Little Rock—North Little Rock Expressway (I-30) and 8th Street Expressway (I-630) into the neighborhood. These additions transformed the park from a center of community life to an island of open space bounded by high-speed traffic corridors. Today, fewer than 16 residential units face the park.

Four primary landscape elements define MacArthur Park as a new outdoor public room: thickened threshold, open lawns, expanded pond, and loop paths. These elements create a sequence of memorable spaces that expands the presence of site-based institutions while providing a framework for sustainable design practices used in the renovation of the park.

The neighborhood planning goal is to align the park’s capacity to support denser and higher quality urban housing, commercial, and recreational land uses with improvements to the park grounds. Planning for its four area neighborhoods extends the park landscape, constituting a larger urban landscape network with MacArthur Park as its focus. This urban landscape network connects tree-lined streets, boulevards, neighborhood pocket parks, active recreation
facilities, plazas, and other pedestrian amenities.

The awards jury recognized the “innovative approach used by the design team” in particular “the renovation of the park to extend and rehabilitate adjacent neighborhoods.” Citing the “effectiveness and excellence of the graphic presentation and descriptive text,” the jurors lauded the well-executed theme and “big ideas” that are “easily understood by the target audience.”

The project was initiated by the MacArthur Park Group a committee of residents, city officials, stakeholders and business leaders dedicated to the renovation of the park and surrounding districts. The project team was selected through a public interview process that produced a shortlist of three nationally recognized firms. The year long project included stakeholder meetings, public workshops and presentations and an on-line wiki that made project information available for public review and input.

The project, integrating architecture, landscape architecture and urban infrastructure dovetails with Conway+Schulte’s design philosophy that an architect’s responsibilities extend beyond the design of buildings by engaging the communities that they inhabit and fostering human interaction. “We create buildings and spaces that are as inspiring and beneficial to the communities in which they are built as they are to the clients for whom they are built,” states Conway.

William Conway brings a broad range of experience to architectural practice from design to construction skills. Working in the public realm Conway has realized projects from the urban scale to public art installations. Conway received his Master of Architecture degree in 1989 from Yale University. In addition to being a Fulbright Fellow he was a visiting artist at the American Academy in Rome. He has been an Associate Professor of Architecture at the University of Minnesota since 1999 where he teaches urban design seminars and design studios.

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