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Outdoor Classrooms at Eib's Pond and Roy Wilkins Parks

JC There's one design project I really think is worth looking at [Eib's Pond and Wilkins Park Classrooms]. It's such an intelligent project, that's why I feel strongly about it. WM I thought it was a beautiful piece. Architecturally,

its superb. JC It's not only that it's beautiful. The way in which they use the building, the structures, actually concentrates a lot of things about the larger landscape. There is a lot here about the processes of learning. The

way certain apertures are cut into walls and rooms has a lot to do with tying the structure very specifically to the local horizon, the wetlands, the landscape condition. SL And it's participatory project. They worked

Designated "natural" landscapes within urban parks are special places that provide relief from the structures of urban life. As such, they have great potential as community resources, offering urban dwellers a chance to better understand the complex ecological and social environments that surround them. Unfortunately, such landscapes are some of the last places people look to build community strength. A lack of clear program ideas, definitions of path, and places of destination often cause these natural areas to slide into neglect.

The problem can be particularly acute in parks bordering underserved and low-income communities. Here, a lack of political and financial resources may create difficulties preserving even the most typical park features, let alone sensitive natural areas. Indeed, in such areas of many American cities, natural landscapes are often more than just neglected—they may be fearful places, harboring a variety of dangers for nearby residents.

Two outdoor classrooms designed by Marpillero Pollak Architects of New York City set out to address this problem in small parks in Staten Island and Queens, New York. Both seek to create new spaces of opportunity and pride, where people may establish new and meaningful connections with the natural environment. Submitted as a single design entry, the classrooms drew high praise from jurors, eliciting such superlatives as "sensitive," "intelligent," "beautiful," and "superb."

A Complex Interaction: Natural, Urban, and Social

Marpillero Pollak Architects became involved with the outdoor classroom projects through partner Linda Pollak's relationship with The Parks Council, a New York City nonprofit. MPA is a small firm that includes architects, landscape architects, and urban designers. Pollak was initially asked to serve on a jury for the Council's Winslow Award, and later became involved with its Green Neighborhoods program.

In 1998 Pollak's connection to the organization led to work by the firm on a new strategic plan for Eib's Pond Park on Staten Island, and to the design of a small bridge/bench at the narrows of the pond. The bridge helped the firm understand how small, appropriately designed structures could greatly strengthen people's understanding of place, context, and path in such natural settings. To explore these ideas further, MPA agreed to design an outdoor classroom at the park for the Council on a pro-bono basis. This, in turn, led to the second classroom project, also for the Council, at Roy Wilkins Park in Jamaica, Queens.

Both outdoor classrooms are simple structures, but they

are informed by careful consideration of relationships between social and natural worlds. Specifically, research into the natural qualities of both parks, their history of use and abuse, and the character of surrounding neighborhoods led MPA to seek design interventions that might transcend categories of architecture and landscape architecture. The idea was to create places that were simultaneously "natural and urban," and/or "natural and social"—and so allow the parks to become more of what they already were.

In the design process, such a philosophy was immediately reflected in concern for the relation between the edges of the structures and the larger landscape. Large in-situ models and an abundance of site photography were used to establish an in-depth understanding of topography and other important qualities of place. Sectional studies were also used to focus on how each structure might become an integral part of its landscape.

In both projects, MPA became interested in how visitors might experience qualities of pond, forest, and park both at the immediate edges of the new structures and through views to more distant natural and urban features. Both classrooms were primarily intended as resources for nearby schools. But they were also seen as general community resources that might allow people of all ages a more intimate experience of their environment at a variety of scales.

Neglected Space to Community Place

The classroom at Eib's Pond Park was finished in the Fall of 2000. The park itself consists of several ponds and grassland on the last remaining seventeen acres of a wetland originally carved out by glacial action. Through the years, as New York developed around it, the area was transformed from a dairy, to a golf course, to a military training camp, and a World War II prisoner of war detention center.

Most recently, as a city park, it has suffered from neglect and served, among other things, as an informal dumping ground. Cut off from the rest of Staten Island by a freeway and a railroad, it is today bordered by low-income housing, a public school, and a recently built tract of suburban-style homes.

As part of MPA's design strategy, each side of the Eib's Pond classroom was developed with its own program. That facing the main portion of the pond was provided with a pier allowing visitors to venture out over the water. A slotted deck here also becomes submerged during periods of high water to illustrate the constantly changing nature of the pond. A second edge offers a new perspective into an existing birch tree that is an important bird habitat.

with the students and neighborhood youths on trying to construct a space. There was a lot of appropriate involvement of the community, and it was very sensitive to the environment. **ALS** In social design criteria I think this is the best. **WM** I found it interesting that they built prototypes or

mockups to scale of the facility. It's a research method that is not used very often. They did mock-ups out of foam core and mock-ups of real furniture. It makes a lot of sense in this case, where they could sit and talk about issues of construction and design.



This side also features a “nesting wall,” to which are attached birdhouses built by local children.

The other two edges, meanwhile, orient to the pond's grassy shore. One receives a ramp that connects to the park's larger path network, bringing visitors out to the classroom (and through it, onto the pier).

Overall, MPA felt there were several benefits to an open-frame structure. The appearance of transparency might provide users with both a sense of safety and a measure of privacy. A flexible layout was also considered important since the classroom space needed to be usable by several groups at the same time without creating conflicts.

Part of MPA's work at Eib's Pond included consultation with a diverse group of interested parties to ensure that what was designed, and even where the classroom was sited, would be meaningful and useful. These included teachers and schoolchildren at nearby P.S. 57, and interested community residents as part of the Fox Hill Tenant Association. Among other things, these conversations helped MPA understand the importance of siting the classroom within easy walking distance of the school. It also brought a number of new ideas to the project. Among these is a “water table”—a workbench with a slotted top that can be used to hold containers for sampling pond life.

From Pond to Forest

MPA's work at Eib's Pond and its connection to The Parks Council soon led to the firm's second project in the New York park system. The site for this second

classroom, at Roy Wilkins Park Natural Area, was in a very different landscape. However, the decision was made to use a similar language to create a sense of position within the natural world.

The Wilkins classroom is situated at the edge of a three-acre wood that is part of the larger 54-acre park. MPA wanted the classroom to provide a gateway to this wood. Thus, as completed in 2001, the entire project consists of a path that leads up a ramp, through the classroom structure, and out to a viewing platform into the tree canopy.

As at Eib's Pond, the classroom is organized through differing treatments of its edges, which allow visitors to explore their relationship to the forest in a number of ways.

Particularly impressive is the way its roof accentuates the effect of filtered light through the tree canopy above and around them, allowing visitors the sense of being in the trees themselves.

Building Process

The choice of materials and methods of construction became an important part of MPA's work on both projects. Each had to be realized on a budget of about \$25,000, a constraint that had important impacts. For maximum cost effectiveness, MPA eventually chose to build the classrooms using recycled plastic lumber, corrugated translucent plastic roofing, and redwood framing cut and milled from a sustainable forest.

Eib's Pond Park outdoor classroom. Photos courtesy of MPA.

The use of small-dimension lumber allowed both projects to be built by hand by local AmeriCorps youth. MPA did worry, however, that the use of standard framing sizes, such as 2x4s, might result in the classrooms being misinterpreted as unfinished. To remedy this impression, they chose to use off-size lumber for the open-frame portions of both structures.

Pollak says MPA never intended to oversee the construction of the projects. But as The Parks Council shifted its agenda, the firm took on this added responsibility, directing the work of a construction crew of AmeriCorps volunteers from surrounding neighborhoods. Every week Sandro Marpillero would use a framing model and sketches to explain the next steps in the building process. Eventually, such a hands-on method yielded important benefits, allowing experimentation and adjustment throughout the period of construction.

The use of local volunteer labor and the unforeseen involvement of the firm in directing the construction of the classrooms ultimately strengthened the connection to place, Pollak believes. In particular, it helped give the structures a sense of having emerged from their communities, rather than from the intervention of outsiders.

Larger Considerations

In the previous issue of *Places* (15.3, p. 45), Galen Cranz and Michael Boland discussed the emergence of the “ecological park” as a new type of public space, one based on “providing solutions to ecological problems and expressions of the human relationship to nature.” Both classrooms clearly embody such an attitude toward integrating human use into the ecological well-being of a park—and a city as a whole. And by fostering a more intimate relationship between people and their natural surroundings, the hope is that they will eventually generate wider appreciation for the benefits of such natural areas within cities.

To achieve this goal, however, MPA had to question the notion that the natural landscape is best preserved by keeping people away from it. Their vision was rather of a place that would allow maximum public contact with and experience of the environment—without harming it.

Furthermore, by allowing urbanity of form to coexist with an intimate experience of nature, the classrooms foster a dynamic, sensual experience of place. This gives them great potential as spaces of community interaction, cultural learning, and memory.

The projects at Eib’s Pond and Roy Wilkins Parks have also helped MPA foster an interest in the power of “not-buildings”—that is, buildings with a floor area ratio of zero. MPA believes that “not-buildings” have the power to be multifunctional, and to make a big difference in a community. Such structures function well for multiple agendas by layering ideas and relationships in ways that enhance their power and meaning, Pollak says. As such, they can become both parts of landscapes and communities, and artifacts within them.

In the years to come, MPA hopes to carry on such work. The firm has already designed other such projects for private clients. And since completing the classrooms, MPA has applied for grants from the Design Trust for Public Space to continue its relationship with Eib’s Pond Park by designing and developing a plan for the park’s thresholds.

— *Chris Sensenig*

