



Time as Catalyst: Finding Community in Industrial Landscapes

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We often hear “timelessness” as a project design goal. This is a reaction to the failures of public-realm modernism and postmodernism to provide spaces for people. It is a cry for the comfort found in familiar things and forms. The fact is that virtually anything old enough necessarily becomes timeless, however rooted in meaning its historic forms may have once been. While we don’t always know exactly what decorative elements applied to landscape mean, they are culturally familiar, even comforting. These decorative moves reflected in site structures and furnishings often matter a lot to the community at large. They are the “stuff” of cultural familiarity, a type of plant, a bench, a shelter, a sign, a light pole, a drinking fountain.

We are also facing a demographic conundrum with the baby boomer generation, now in our forties and fifties, distorting the overall picture we see on everything from the look of our cities and parks to our preoccupation with health, safety, and comfort. And of course baby boomers and pre-baby boomers are usually the people with the time and interest to get involved in a community process for a project. What is culturally familiar to the baby boomer generation is often communicated to us as visually preferred in public spaces.

With the near-complete rejection of formal historicist pattern-making (save perhaps among the *new urbanists* with their stage-set romanticism) in favor of a meaningful, site-specific overlay approach to public

realm landscape design, “site specific” and “authentic” have been the mantras of much of the landscape design profession. Every site is layered with urban archeology, regardless of whether its pre-settlement “natural” condition has been completely buried over the course of its history or still retains some meaningful vestige. Site specific landscape design is all about a response to those layers—some visible, some not—both natural and cultural. Whether the relevance and meaning inherent in those revealed layers are legible in the final designed, built place is another matter. And whether the design approach itself can survive an open public design process is an even larger challenge. Our work at the Port of Los Angeles during the last four years has been a good example of these challenges.

The Port of Los Angeles is America’s busiest port with record volumes of cargo moving through the 7500 acre harbor. It is located in San Pedro Bay just 20 miles south of downtown Los Angeles. The Port encompasses 43 miles of waterfront and features 26 cargo terminals. This seaport handles 42% of all cargo operations for the United States and is directly responsible for more than 300,000 jobs in the Los Angeles region.

The time line for the development of the Port stretches back more than 100 years and spans the evolution of this coastal landscape from tidal bay, marshland and river outlet to a constructed industrial waterfront with few

remnant traces of its natural origins. Similarly, the communities that live near the waterfront reflect periods of immigration that responded to commercial opportunities and wartime expansion through the 20th century. The dramatic growth in trade with Asia since the eighties further accelerated the transformation of this landscape.

As the Port of Los Angeles expanded, the diverse communities in San Pedro consisting of Latinos, Japanese, Bosnians, Croations, Russians, African Americans, Phillipinos, and just about anyone else you can think of, were progressively cut off from access to its waterfront. When we were brought in to plan and design this project we encountered an angry and distrusting community who were convinced that the Port would never listen to their concerns and needs, and had a history of major lawsuits as the means by which their conflicts with the Port were resolved. By definition, we as the Port's consultants, were the enemy of the community too. The story of how we built trust and respect with the community over time is a story of patience, listening, and responding to their ideas through design in real ways, while being true to fundamentals of site, its history, its connections, and more importantly, reconnections that needed to be made. The political and visionary forces (the Mayor of LA, the Councilwoman, the Senior Port Engineer, and a local community activist) that came together at this point in time also enabled rapid progress to take place.

We were charged with taking on the first planning and implementation steps of the Port of Los Angeles' From Bridge to Breakwater waterfront development. This project is a 30 year plan to develop 400 acres of Port property along the eight mile stretch of waterfront from Vincent Thomas Bridge to the Federal breakwater in San Pedro. Its goals are to re-establish public open space and



improve environmental quality, re-connect the community to the water, provide commercial and economic benefits to downtown San Pedro, create new economic opportunities for smaller water related businesses, accommodate the expanding cruise industry with its changing infrastructure needs, and triple the amount of existing open space. This development which is the largest of its kind in the United States, will dramatically enhance the experience of landscape and time in this unique working waterfront.

There is a hunger in our age for uniqueness, not just to be *different* but to be *real*. There is a desire to be grounded in place, to connect to our environment in ways that deepen our understanding of the world and ourselves. When a community is actively engaged in the design dialogue, when their intimate knowledge of a place and its history are sincerely and deeply mined, the built outcome—expressive in some way (or many ways) of those most important qualities of place, culture and nature—will be embraced, and the literal legibility of the site (the why and how of each line on the ground) will not really matter.

The design “rules” that emerged from the definition of **site** that took place early in the design process guided decision-making

throughout the project. Both the Port of Los Angeles and the community took an active role in defining **site** (What is relevant? What is unique?), and bought in to our big form making moves, such as the lines of the wharves and the piers, the backdrop of the cranes and containers, and the soft water's edge where the head of the bay met the water. This definition became a powerful and efficient tool in decision making, and a type of site specific check list.

What we have created to date in Los Angeles is almost two miles of waterfront promenade, which connects the community to major destinations such as the World Cruise Center, downtown, and at completion, the coastline, its beaches, and coastal walk. The first piece of the waterfront that we designed was inspired by cruise ships. The Promenade is developed as a series of cruise ship inspired sub-areas (Bon Voyage Plaza, Upper Deck Promenade, Lower Deck Promenade, Viewing Decks, and Recreation Deck). Each sub area has its own set of recreational opportunities, interpretive educational elements and art which help to make connection between the Promenade and cruise ships. The character and the experience are meant to recapture some of the romance historically related to cruising.



We were also involved in identifying art opportunities within the project which resulted in art tile benches involving six local artists and a major environmental public art piece by Doug Hollis. An interpretive graphics and wayfinding program was also developed in close collaboration between the landscape architects and graphic designers. The elements developed here for Cruise Ship Promenade will carry forward through the future waterfront development. Community inspired elements in the first piece of the waterfront included the Angel Light. We were able to locate the original manufacturer of the light, originally made in the forties for the Matson Cruise terminal that preceded the World Cruise Center. The story of the light harkens back to a former period of passenger shipping between Los Angeles and Hawaii, yet is not slavishly historicist nor going down the slippery slope of design theming. It has real meaning to the community and reinforces its place in time.

The second piece of the waterfront promenade along Harbor Boulevard is a big green connection move that ties into the downtown street grid of San Pedro. It is a generous park-like linear promenade punctuated with plazas, and accommodates light rail, bicycles, and pedestrians. It is everything you imagine in a promenade, but is still fundamentally born of the industrial landscape in San Pedro. We worked with the community to weave their stories into this part of the promenade. A granite story rope set into the paving records how people came to be here, their tragedies and their achievements. It is a real place, and again establishes its place in time. Will further development next to the promenade in the future impact its big design moves? No.

The third piece of the waterfront that we have designed, but is not yet constructed stretches further west for another mile or so along a stretch of the waterfront that interestingly, is occupied by a tourist retail and restaurant

complex called Ports O' Call. Every city has its version of Ports O' Call. This is truly a "themed" development, and an excellent example of going down that slippery slope of design to an unsustainable place. Ports O' Call, which aims to capture tourists and locals, has struggled financially from the outset, with its owners blaming poor connections, but in fact it has very little to do with connections. The life expectancy of a place like this is measured in several years if you are lucky, and at best only until the next new themed experience turns up. Our plans improve connections, but more importantly, provide new parks, new meaning and new reasons for people to come to this part of the waterfront.

San Pedro Waterfront has been primarily occupied by port-related industrial uses in the past and an environment comprised of massive super-scale structures and buildings has characterized the area. In order to create positive open space within this environment, our design team has worked carefully with scale to develop a waterfront featuring a few simple but bold moves while creating enough variety and richness to provide a pedestrian-scale experience. The primary reason for a visit to the Promenade is to experience the theater of the working harbor at close range. And while the public spaces provide for comfort, recreation and information the intent is to not detract from the majesty of experience that is unique to this large-scale working waterfront.

I may not see the final completion of the 30 year plan for the Los Angeles waterfront, and I know there will be many twists and turns and evolutions of the plan prompted by economic cycles, politics, environmental, and post 9.11 security issues, much like in Battery City in New York, or on San Francisco's waterfront. However, by reconnecting the community to the waterfront, and building a real design response to the community's desire for familiar elements and forms, we know that we are on the right track. The community has taken ownership of this waterfront, and talks with pride about it. And the Port and its industrial rhythm of shipping and container movement will continue to provide a constantly evolving mega-industrial context to the community's waterfront through time. °



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