

BEATING THE PROPERTY BARRIER: BUILDING COMMUNITY TO BUILD ECOLOGY IN CITIES

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ABSTRACT

Many cities are under increasing pressure to maintain crucial ecosystem services with limited public open space, yet private residential landscapes often occupy an additional, untapped quarter of the urban land base (Evans, Newson & Gaston, 2009; Gaston, Warren, Thompson & Smith, 2005; Loram et al., 2007, Mathieu, Freeman & Aryal, 2007). Cities face a dilemma: how might they best engage private landowners in improving their own landscape performance? As strategies to catalyze stewardship on private property emerge (Cerra, 2014) alongside research suggesting that direct engagement with landowners is an effective tool for encouraging landscape changes (van Heezik, Dickinson & Freeman, 2012; Goddard, Dougill & Benton, 2013), can a combined process of community visioning and site-by-site design influence landowner motivations for change?

This paper discusses a three-year studio effort to engage three communities in such a process, each with a different primary interest—including urban habitat enhancement, water quality and climate adaptation. In collaboration with the landowners, students in each of the studios outlined a project vision and goals, developed ecological neighborhood design guidelines, created individual parcel designs, and calculated the potential environmental benefits of their designs. Hands-on “client” engagement significantly influenced student design decisions as they navigated tensions between environmental performance and residential aesthetics. Landowners expressed satisfaction with the results of the process; 80% of survey respondents indicated that their individual interests were heard and reflected in the community approach, while 70% or more rated their design as “just what I need” to meet identified neighborhood-level goals. While few respondents indicated they would implement all of their property’s design, 70% said they were likely or very likely to implement some of it. Ongoing installation of the designs is also described as an indication of how engaged, design-based stewardship strategies may inspire collaboration and change landscapes for the benefit of cities.

Keywords

Community engagement, service learning, stewardship, urban habitat, water quality