

THE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURAL PROCESS OF MASTER PLANNING

...A primer to the proper developing of and stewardship of God's Earth
"then God said, "...let them rule...over all the earth."

I. Introduction

This is meant to be a brief introduction to the world of master planning. For me, master planning is the discipline of thoughtful consideration and careful stewardship of God's mandate to mankind to rule over all the earth. It always surprises me how many people associate the planning of a community, development, park, or other public use area with the real estate people, architects, and engineers. The truth is that Landscape Architects are the only people specifically trained in the art of master planning. Frederick Law Olmstead is considered the father of landscape architecture with his legacy firmly established through the century old maturity of many of his designs, including such projects as the Biltmore estate and Central Park, to mention a couple. What makes these properties stand out from the rest was the thought and care given to their design before the first shovelful of dirt was displaced. One of the credos of good planning is 'think first, design next, and revise sparingly' which results in a truly beautiful project with incredible efficiency of work as well as significant cost savings during the life of the project.

The landscape architect is trained in 'site design' with emphasis on site sensitive and site relevant building placement within a site-led infrastructure producing a congruent experience in which both man's needs and the site's characteristics are taken into consideration. The solution to the design challenge of master planning is different for the three main disciplines: the architect's solution will center on the building, the engineer's solution will center on the site mechanic's, but the landscape architect's solution meditates between the site aesthetic and the necessary function of the site as determined by it's intended purpose(s).

So, as you can see, your decision on the forefront will most definitely affect the quality of the product you receive in the end. All three of the above named professionals are necessary to the completion of the project, but we believe it is clear that only one of the individuals mentioned above is trained to lead in the planning of the project. The landscape architect is the common thread in the fabric of site design, guiding the architect on building placement and the engineer on sensitive land modification to fit the program, and produces the balanced interdisciplinary document we call the Master Plan.

II. The Design Process

Please key in on the word 'process'. What we are talking about here is not a product, but a very defined process that ends in Master Plan. This process has many steps which equally contribute to the end result. Consequently, the absence of any of the steps results in a compromised plan.

A. Surveys

1. The Program Survey

With all the changes we've experienced in our world in the last hundred years there's one adage that has remained true and tested, "Form follows Function". This initial part of the design process addresses the function of the land. The requirements of the project, as best ascertained at this early date, are outlined in this step. This is the first glimpse into the vision of the developer and the essential first step for the landscape architect to pursue preliminary design steps. At this stage the key word is 'dynamic', nothing is set in concrete and the goal is the best solution for the program on a given site. Constant modification is the name of the game as possibilities and constraints are discovered.

2. On-Site Inventory

This step gathers facts about the site and expresses them on a site plan to aid further design delineation.

3. Off-Site Inventory

This step takes into consideration both the existing and future elements of surrounding properties.

B. Analysis

1. Program Analysis

Here we define program relationships and inter-relationships without any regard to the site. Function is the ruling paradigm at this point. With an ideal functional pattern established we move on to the next step...

2. Site Analysis

This is where the site is analyzed to depict the inventory items on a site plan for design reference as we attempt to define the areas best suited to the proposed individual program elements. Proper understanding of the site's potentials and limitations are critical (read absolutely essential) to make good concrete design decisions in regards to placement of the program elements.

C. Synthesis

1. Design Concept/Preliminary Plan

Up to now the focus has been on individual elements. Now comes the most challenging part of the design process: synthesis, wherein we attempt to fit the ideal functional diagram to the physical site. How this process unfolds is hard to describe but to say that it combines somewhat impulsive experience-based responses to the conditions of the problem as they unfold. As the landscape architect gathers steam a coalescence of response to the various factors involved develops until at last the desired whole is finally visualized. This results in a 'skeleton' plan presented only in graphic form. This gives the firm basis from which to develop the myriad of details necessary to bring the project from concept to reality.

2. Refined Plan/ Final Plan

Now the preliminary plan receives the scrutiny of the client(s). Alternatives are explored and the best solutions are pursued. A successful review ends with agreement about the proposal as revised. Back on the drawing board the plans receive their final shape. Once the final draft is approved the process concludes with ...

3. Construction Documents

With a finalized plan in hand the landscape architect, together with the civil engineer, begin producing the final construction prints and details needed to build the project. Classically, the civil engineer produces the road alignments and drainage considerations while the landscape architect attends to the aesthetic amendment to the same, producing a beautiful harmony of form and function. Another result of this stage is the architect is given the narrowed down possibilities for building placement.

That's it, the Master Plan is now complete and construction can begin. The process takes time, but the result is an assurance that no expenditure in the present will be wasted in the future. The savings to the project is inestimable as those with site development experience can attest. The improper placement of just one critical infrastructure item can cost much more than the whole process and art of Master Planning. The Master Plan may be looked at as inexpensive insurance for the successful completion of the project. The Landscape Architect is the critical member of the team to watch over it.