An inspirational learning environment

Delle Willett | Art on the Land

Architects design buildings. Landscape architects design the space the buildings live in and the spaces in between.

“To be a landscape architect you have to be part architect, part engineer, part sociologist, part biologist, part botanist and part geologist,” said San Diego’s Vicki Estrada of Estrada Land Planning. “What makes a city great is not an Eiffel Tower here or an Empire State Building there, it’s what happens in between.”

A good example of what happens around and in between is on the San Diego City College campus, on the grounds of two new educational dwellings; the Math and Social Sciences building, designed by RNT Architects; and the Science building, designed by Harley Ellis Devereaux; with landscape architecture by San Diego’s Spurlock Poirier.

“Education is a key component of the landscape architecture design around both buildings,” said Leigh Kyle of Spurlock Poirier. “The designs serve as an outdoor extension of the educational activities in the buildings and help tie the sites physically and aesthetically to their surroundings.”
At the Science building, everything about the landscape design promotes the core design concept of the architecture, responds to the existing character of City College, and employs sustainable materials to the greatest extent possible.

A key component of the landscape is an educational garden. Approximately 4,500 square feet, this garden area is configured to allow for flexible uses and programming, and includes 1,200 square feet of growing beds, 2,500 square feet of plaza space for outdoor classes and labs including a cast-in-place concrete stream table and Corten steel sundial, and a 450 square-foot lab and storage area. The garden is bordered to the north by a 3,200 square-foot allee of flowering canopy trees.

Visible storm-water treatment and sustainable strategies are seamlessly incorporated into the overall landscape to demonstrate and promote environmental consciousness. Enhanced and accent paving include permeable concrete pavers and stabilized decomposed-granite. The primary surface is natural gray concrete with contrasting bands of sand and exposed aggregate finishes, providing a durable and easily maintained surface. Site furnishings use sustainable materials such as recycled-plastic lumber slats.

The retaining, site and planter walls are a combination of architectural concrete and brick veneer to match the architecture and reinforce the idea of the landscape as an extension of the buildings.
Walls and handrails are treated with anti-graffiti coating and skateboard deterrents to provide minimal maintenance and reduce damage. All hand rails and guardrails are galvanized steel to complement the architecture and campus site features. Benches, trash and recycling receptacles, ash receptacles, bike racks and tree grates are provided to promote a clean and inviting atmosphere.

Soils on the site are amended to provide plant material a good growing medium, allowing the plants the opportunity to become well established while minimizing the development of destructive surface root systems and lowering overall maintenance requirements. Street trees and trees in other paved areas are planted in structural soil with root barriers to minimize root intrusion.

Low maintenance trees tolerant of high traffic and requiring low water usage were selected, and include: African Sumac, Torrey Pine, Western Redbud, and Coast Live Oak. An allee of flowering Eastern Redbud trees in the courtyard provides color and seasonal interest. Street trees include Chinese Evergreen Elms planted in tree grates along 16th and B streets.

The plant palette of native and drought-tolerant shrubs and groundcovers includes Cape Rush, Giant Chain Fern, Red-flowering Agave, Coffeeberry, Creeping Fig and various accent Agaves and native Sages. Grasses and Buckwheat Shrubs and groundcovers minimize turf areas. Selected plant varieties are resistant to insects, animals, and diseases, and require minimal maintenance.

One block down 16th Street the landscape design of the new Math and Social Sciences building focuses on creating connections within and around the site to promote both gathering and interaction, and treats the landscape as an outdoor extension of the building, addressing the site’s significant grade differences through sloped walkways instead of ramps whenever possible, and harmoniously responding to the characteristics of the different neighboring streets.
The central plaza serves as the “living room” of the surrounding classrooms, offices, and conference centers with comfortable, well-scaled spaces to encourage outdoor dining, gathering, relaxing and studying.

The street frontage along Broadway is designed with the goal of actively knitting the project into the surrounding downtown fabric.

The selection of materials balances contemporary aesthetics while harmonizing with the architecture and the campus’ existing character. The plaza hardscape is natural gray concrete, a durable and easily maintained material, with areas of concrete pavers at key gathering areas. The retaining, site and planter walls are all cast-in-place concrete.

Native-adapting plant materials were chosen that are low-maintenance and drought tolerant — as well as shade tolerant where appropriate — to help minimize irrigation demands and respond to San Diego’s mild climate.

Deciduous trees are used in the central plaza to maximize winter solar gain and to provide additional shade in the summer. Species include Sweet Gum Trees in the courtyard with flowering Redbuds as accent trees adjacent to the building.

Street trees include Chinese Evergreen Elms along 15th and C St., Golden Rain Tree along 16th and C St. and Southern Magnolias on Broadway.

Understory planting in the central plaza includes Giant Chain Fern, Manzanita, Coffeeberry and Berkeley Sedge, and along the streetscapes Atlas Fescue, Blue Chalk Fingers, and Natal Plum, as well as Torch and Coral Aloes.

For 25 years, Spurlock Poirier Landscape Architects has nurtured a practice that creates transformative and restorative landscapes that connect people, communities and environments. Known for its collaborative, ideas-driven approach to problem solving, Spurlock Poirier has developed particular skill in the design of places for rich, human experiences in both urban and natural environments. The firm has expertise in planning, parks, urban residential, mixed-use, institutional projects, and art in public places.

Both Andrew Spurlock and Martin Poirier are Fellows of the American Society of Landscape Architects. For more information, visit sp-land.com/.
Delle Willett cut her teeth traveling as the daughter of a career Navy man. A graduate of USD with a BFA in hand, her career in marketing and public relations has flourished for over 30 years. An active volunteer for various local organizations, she currently works as a freelance publicist and writer when she’s not traveling the world with her husband, a retired airline pilot. Delle can be reached at dellewillett@gmail.com.