ROUNDTABLE REPORT:

Multidisciplinary Process

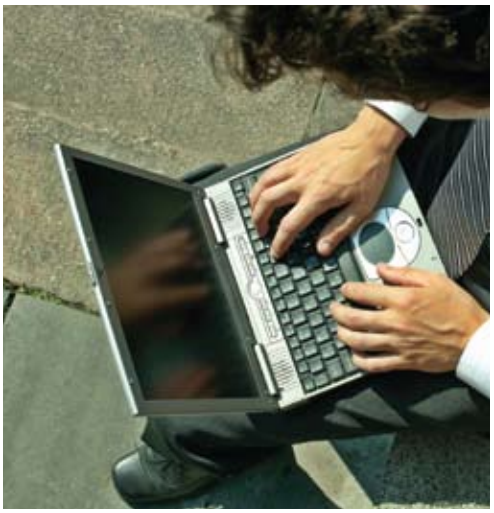
BY GAIL GREET HANNAH

"I can't imagine interdisciplinary work without a fairly strong set of language skills, not just so you can talk to others but so you can listen to them and understand what they have to say." **Peter Walker, FASLA**

On Tuesday, May 10, 2011 a group of nineteen distinguished design professionals made up of landscape architects, architects and interior designers, met at San Francisco's Huntington Hotel for a roundtable discussion on multidisciplinary process: how it works, why it sometimes falls short, and what design practitioners can do to make it better. The event was sponsored by site furniture manufacturer Landscape Forms and the Landscape Architecture Foundation and moderated by Joe Brown, Chief Innovation Officer at AECOM. Hosts for the discussion were Bill Main, President, Landscape Forms and Barbara Deutsch, Executive Director, LAF.

Performing Landscapes

Barbara Deutsch opened the session by affirming sustainability as the core principle of the landscape architecture profession and mission of the LAF, confirming the importance sustainability to the major multidisciplinary projects of our time, and asserting that "by any measure of sustainability: zero carbon, zero waste, clean water, livability, biodiversity, economics — you cannot achieve sustainability without landscape solutions." She followed with a presentation of web-based LAF tools developed to help design professionals quantify landscape performance by documenting the measurable outcomes of sustainable landscape practices.



A Broken Process

Moderator Joe Brown bridged the discussion of sustainability with multidisciplinary process by launching a salvo. "The process is seriously broken," he declared. "It's disconnected, disaggregated. You've got open space over here, transportation over there, and land use, water and watershed issues somewhere else. I'm very interested in connected language and connected delivery because all these issues go together and we're not considering whole solutions." He cautioned against talking about sustainability as a reward unto itself and proposed instead talking about "sustainability economics" and "sustainability infrastructure," calling for connected technical expertise that leverages environmental, social, cultural and economic issues together. Brown extended his comments to global national development as well as projects at the local level, expressing optimism at the performance mentality now emerging in the profession and what he calls a "sustainability frugality" in site planning and building design. "Frugality is a very important part of design elegance," he explained. "It does not eliminate esthetic questions because there's always an ugly way to do things and a more beautiful way. But if you don't have a basis in performance the right people will not listen to you."

Performance Plus

But it's not just performance, argued Julie Eizenberg, an architect and principal of Koning Eizenberg in Santa Monica. "I take issue that an experiential idea has lesser value than sustainability ideas," she said. "The landscape has the potential of being a huge kingdom that rules everything else and I think you can lose touch with the anecdotal and the small. Many landscape architects deal with vast scale issues and maybe the interdisciplinary thing is to bring in a small landscape firm that deals more with the human scale and join those two skill sets." Brown clarified: "You do multiple scale worlds at the same time. We're a profession of craftsmen thinking about experience, even when we take it to a big scale. So I would keep big scale, mid scale and small scale in your thinking."

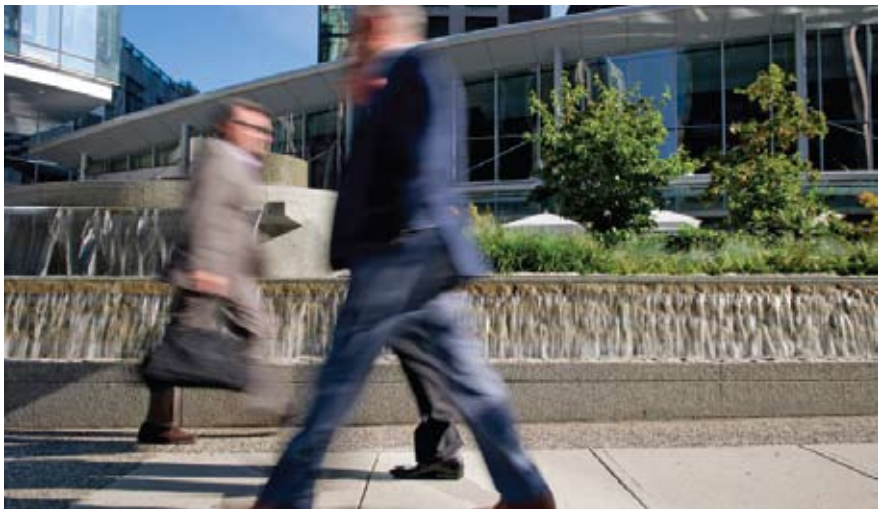
Cultural Sustainability

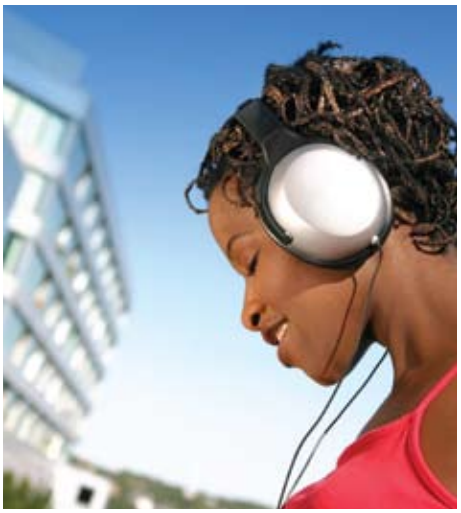
Peter Walker of Peter Walker Partners in Berkeley introduced the idea. "We are now gaga about making the various systems work. But if a project doesn't have cultural sustainability – if people don't love what you do, it won't be there. My measure of failure is it's gone – either redone or not taken care of. I suggest we try and figure out the major issues that make one

project succeed and another one fail." Later in the session when participants were asked to give an example of a successful multidisciplinary project, Dennis Rubba of Studio INSITE in Denver told a moving story that epitomized cultural resonance. Called in by the building architect to consult on the site for the National Museum of the Marine Corps he did some research. "I soon realized that the museum was just a shell of what the Corps is, which is the experiences of its people and the contributions it made to the country" he said. "So we proposed a separate place called Semper Fidelis Park to commemorate that and made hand drawings to convey the experience of what the park might be like." Presenting the proposal to an audience of retired Marine Corps officers he worried about the soft, experiential approach - until the Commanding General walked with his cane up to the drawings and, pointing to one of a man and woman together facing paths going into the park, said, 'I can see what it would be like to take my granddaughter here and explain to her what it's like to be in the Corps.' And as soon as he started to talk about the dappled light and the trees he became the most eloquent landscape architect I have ever met." Rubba's firm has been working on realizing Semper Fi for the last eight years.

Language Matters

What have we learned about why multidisciplinary process often fails to deliver? Brown gives language a big share of the blame. "We all tend to isolate ourselves with what we think is the language of our profession and our work," he says. "But if you isolate yourself with language, you can't convince people to do what needs to be done. We need to be a more public profession with a more common language. If we can't take performance language and translate it into the public environment, we're not going to succeed." He accused the landscape architecture profession of talking too much to itself. "You are all charming and persuasive but there is a kind of embedded arrogance that leads to separation and isolation." Brown's harsh appraisal came as a surprise to those used to thinking of landscape architects as modest, self-effacing folks who work and play well with others. But it fostered a nuanced discussion of what constitutes useful communication in a complex process: polite conversation vs. serious debate; talking vs. listening; retreat into the comforting assurance of ones own unappreciated wisdom vs. a willingness to enter the fray and test ideas to achieve results. At the end Andrea Cochran, of Andrea Cochran Landscape Architecture in San Francisco observed, "Now we have a language and a more critical intellectual climate for the profession that didn't exist before. And I think I understand what arrogance means. If you lose the project and it's gone, you've done something that hasn't connected in some way. My takeaway is you cannot be arrogant as a designer, thinking you know more than other people, and yet you have to be strong enough as a designer so you don't give it all away."





Chris Kent of PGA Design in Oakland recounted his personal experience with a failure of language and a fractured process. "The planners of the landscape speak the same language, but then it goes to engineering where there's a whole new language, a whole new system of rules and codes. Our firm often gets hired to implement plans that have already gone through the planning process and we find ourselves having to design something that is not what the community approved because traffic and fire and other issues were not thoroughly looked at and they have huge implications." Lamenting the standard road or plaza solutions that often result, he said, "It's very frustrating. Planning is one thing. Implementation is another. We know we're diminishing the effort with each disconnect."

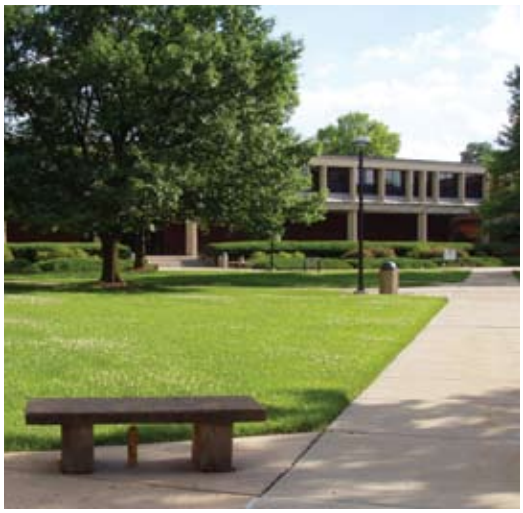
Peter Walker advocated for proficiency in speaking the language of other disciplines. "I can't imagine interdisciplinary work without a fairly strong set of language skills, not just so you can talk to others but so you can listen to them and understand what they have to say. I've often noticed when you get with a group of experts, they don't listen to each other, but you have to listen to all of them so you can gradually bring them together and show them that if it's zero sum it's not going to work." Bill Callaway of SWA Group in Sausalito, observed that getting results sometimes requires talking to people you may not want to talk to. "Young people often resist real estate based work and dealing with developers, he said. "I tell them the best way to bring an enemy to your side is to talk their language and understand what they do."

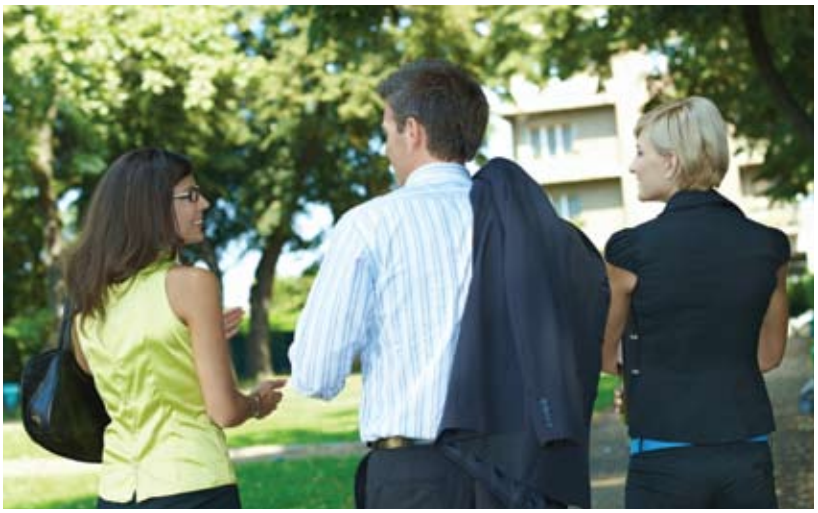
Beyond Language

Jim Stickley, a landscape architect with Wallace Roberts & Todd in San Francisco, warned against the danger of getting caught up in an early attachment to an aesthetic concept. "We're the artistic side of the process and we find ourselves fighting the engineers and others to preserve the purity of the construct," he explained. "In fact, given our training as synthesizers and our place in the in-between zone of the different design professions, we should have confidence in our ability to re-invent the aesthetic construct as we move through the process and get inputs from our allied professionals."

The way multidisciplinary teams are structured can be an obstacle to success. Several participants voiced the conviction that projects are often most successful when professionals are hired directly by the client or developer and come together on a level playing field. Joe Brown wondered what would happen if the process went a step further, from level to equal. "What if there were equal resource investment, equal design investment, equal sustainability and site, transportation, water, watershed, architecture, environment…? That's what we're trying to do at AECOM," he said. "It hasn't been done before -- and we will probably fail. But glorious failures are to be admired."

Multidisciplinary process fails when values are not shared and Tary Arterburn of studioOutside in Dallas suggested that there might also be a generation gap at work. "Engineers





and architects under 40 tend to be very collaborative and open to new ideas," he said. "But I've worked on a gigantic public hospital where we had a fantastic program and the engineers were working with it beautifully. And then the entire sustainability program got crushed by an external design review committee of professionals from construction, civil engineering and architecture who were all 60 or 65 and were aghast at the whole idea of sustainability. They've been asleep for ten years."

On the individual level, some people are just better collaborators than others. Several participants commented on the value of teaming with people they've worked with before and with whom they have established common language and a productive working style. "It's who's at the table," Joe Brown declared. "It's not willy-nilly collaborating or integrating. It's about working with a specific partner to create a particular kind of solution in a very closure-oriented way."

The Academy

Many people in the room remarked on the eagerness and facility of the young people entering their firms at sharing ideas and innovating together. Mark Adams of SmithGroup in Phoenix said that with the young people he's seen, "There's a fight for not collaborating – that becomes an issue at the table." But there was criticism of the academy for failing to provide cross-disciplinary opportunities. "I've seen a slow erosion in academia, particularly in landscape architecture, of collaborative classes," said Bill Callaway "We're all talking happy talk and it's getting further siloed in the schools." Todd Kohli of AECOM agreed, citing Penn State where architects and landscape architects are located in the same building. "They are right next to each another and they don't talk, he complained. "We either have to get new professors who actually want to collaborate or change the curriculum, but something has to change." Kristen Lundquist of Brumbaugh Associates in Seattle said she was seeing "definite erosion" in university programs as a result of state budget shortfalls. "That said," she went on, "the students coming out of the universities that we see are still very excited, very compassionate and have a whole new way of looking at things. They're born of the generation where you share everything and it's forcing us to rethink how we do our day-to-day work." Joe Brown opined that the schools are doing the best they can under the circumstances and that, in any case, "the professions are better than the academy at creativity and innovation." Landscape architecture is especially well suited to the challenge, he suggested, because "We're just confused and random enough, and have come from so many different places, that we're the people to find the right skills and tactics."

Making it Work

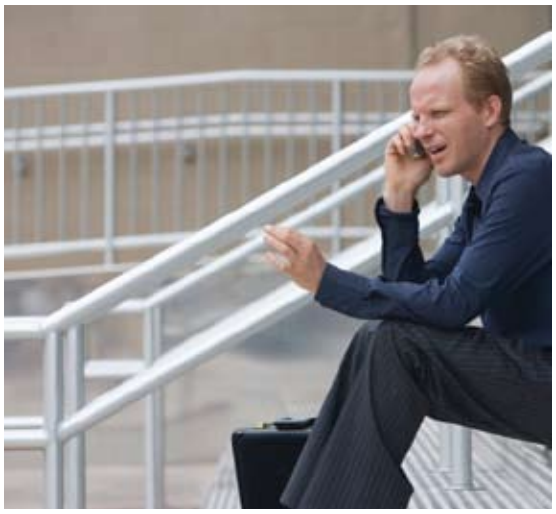
It starts with the personal qualities that participants bring to the table. Peter Walker recalled a colleague who believed that planners had such power over the lives of individuals that no professional should be specifically trained to do it and that lawyers, doctors, educators, priests – people with experience and understanding of the impacts of these big decisions -- would be likely to make wiser decisions. Walker thinks he may have been on to something. "I think the binding thing has got to be wisdom. It's got to be judgment," he said. Mark Adams advised people to set their egos aside. "It's a matter of recognizing that we need each other because none of us has the knowledge base to do it all."

Training the next generation is key. "We're realizing that we need to give our younger designers exposure to other systems, particularly engineering, much earlier in the process," explained Brian Jencek from Hargreaves Associates in San Francisco. "As we grow the next generation we need to move from a focus as generalists to generalists with some specialization – in storm water, soil sciences, botany, etcetera. It's a tall order but it's critically important."

In some cases clients are driving the multidisciplinary process. Carol Sandman, an interior designer with AP+I Design, Inc. in Mountainview, CA said, "We have teams with engineers, landscape architects, architects, interior designers, etcetera and I'm finding that everyone is working toward more collaboration because our clients are all about collaboration." And proven successes make the case for the efficacy of the process. Tary Arterburn confirmed, "In my experience, the highest performance landscapes have the most integrated design teams."

Dana Brown of Brown + Danos landdesign, inc. issued a note of caution. She's seen a lot of collaboration during the recession "because people were trying whatever they could to get the project. But I'm concerned that when the economy really turns around we will go back to saying, 'This is my territory, not yours.' We need to be developing shared values, relating to people in other professions and building trust and understanding so we continue to collaborate."

Is it possible for a project to be so extraordinary that it drives the success of the process? Lee Steinmetz of Bellinger Foster Steinmetz in Monterey said that's how it was with the Terraces of the Shrine of the Bab, at the High World Center in Haifa, Israel. He explained: "Architects, landscape architects, engineers from all around the world came to work on this project. Not only were there the languages of different disciplines, but people spoke in Arabic, Hebrew, French, English, Spanish and a host of other languages. There were a lot of egos and a lot of passionate discussion. What made the collaboration incredibly successful was everybody realized that the project itself was greater than any one individual or



what they had to contribute. People really worked together to create a project that was worthy of this place."

Joe Brown declared that in the end it's the quality of the connection that matters. "It's about participating and connecting, not integrating and pseudo-collaboration," he said. "The substance is about getting to closure. It's about coming up with a new deliverable, buildable idea."

Conclusion

Bill Main concluded by saying that the manufacturing company he leads has been successful at fostering collaboration at all levels of the company by recruiting for that talent, and advised, "I would look at it as a skill set just like engineering or landscape architecture or hydrology and hire the people who are good at it."

Finally, Todd Kolhi summed up his major learning from a decade of multidisciplinary work in observations that mirrored those made by others during the morning's discussion. "On very large multidisciplinary projects you need to have a strong client who understands the language we were speaking of today; mutual respect between all parties, both personal and professional; a proven past relationship; and no sub-consultants, so you're all on the same page with a common goal."

Since 2003 Landscape Forms and the LAF have partnered to sponsor roundtables and seminars on critical issues in landscape architecture and design. We welcome the opportunity to bring design professionals together to share ideas and inspiration. Stay tuned for future events as new issues emerge and read reports of past events at landscapeforms.com.

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