

XTreme LA Challenge:

# Towers and Trails... Bridges and Bats

BY GAIL GREET HANNAH

The Austin campus of the University of Texas is a fine place to be on a sunny autumn afternoon and on such a day in September 2010 a select group of landscape architects and students gathered for a two-day design charrette aptly named XTREME L A.

The event, co-sponsored by the Landscape Architecture Foundation and site furniture manufacturer, Landscape Forms, provided an intense creative experience focused on a critical landscape planning and design challenge. Sixteen young landscape architects nominated by their firms as future leaders of the profession were joined by eleven third-year students in UT's landscape architecture master's program. Divided into two groups comprised of roughly equal numbers of professionals and students, the teams were led by Susannah Drake, founding principal of Dlandstudio, Brooklyn, New York and Sarah Kuehl, principal of Peter Walker & Partners, Oakland, California. University of Texas hosts were Fritz Steiner, Dean of the School of Architecture and Dean Almy, Director of the Urban Design and Landscape Architecture programs at the school. Sponsor hosts were Barbara Deutsch, Executive Director of the Landscape Architecture Foundation, and Bill Main, President and CEO, Landscape Forms.

Fritz Steiner introduced the event. "There are a lot of activities that recognize people who are well into their careers, but few or none that address emerging professionals," he said. "The leaders at Landscape Forms had the idea to bring together promising young professionals from around the country, connect them in teams made up of people from some of the country's great firms, and challenge them to create something that could be given back to the community. For this third XTREME L A, and the first outside Michigan, the sponsors partnered with UT to bring students into the mix."

Guest speaker Chris Riley, a member of the Austin City Council, provided a capsule history of the city, photos and plans of the area, and an overview of community objectives and concerns. Dean Almy laid out the specifics of the Austin challenge. "The question is the future of Town Lake," he explained. "The lake, which was formed in the 1970's by damming the Colorado River,



is the front porch of Austin and provides incredible environmental, social and economic benefits for the city. For decades Austin's Waterfront Planning Advisory Board, of which I am a member, has been looking at the best use for the city at large of the area around the lake by balancing what is appropriate for the adjacent neighborhoods, for long-term sustainability of the landscape, and for the development potential of the underutilized area on the south shore. We hope to use this opportunity to brainstorm around some potential futures. Participants are asked to be provocative and visionary, to think outside the box and ask "What If" questions."

In the morning participants were given their team assignments and toured the site by bus and on foot. Back in their respective studios and armed with notes, sketches, maps and laptops, they set to work. They brainstormed, organized around themes and skill sets, plastered the walls with lists and drawings, worked on paper and screens and, with a break for TexMex and margaritas, toiled late into the night. On the second morning, after finessing powerpoints and refining narratives, the teams presented their results to their peers, faculty and people from the community.

Both teams presented plans that proposed greater density, more connectivity, mixed use development of underutilized space, more public amenities, and enhanced ecological opportunities. Both teams addressed the site's location in the Town Lake and Boulder Creek watersheds and within the 100

and 500-year flood plains with green spaces and streets that integrated collection, retention and floodwater management into the urban fabric. But the teams had quite different views about siting built elements and green spaces, and about the relationship between development on the north and south sides of the lake.

Team One under the leadership of Susannah Drake presented a plan for the south side they titled "Edge City," using the image of a soft boiled egg to describe a hard articulated edge containing developed and programmable spaces and a soft core providing green spaces with integrated water management. The scheme was conceived as a contrast to the opposing side of the river, which is characterized by a soft vegetated edge backed by a strong urban grid.

The team articulated six principles that informed their solution: civic space, connectivity, long lots and water strategies, "show me the money," wildlife and program. Long lots and water strategies, patterned on the agrarian division of land, established the overall profile of the plan, creating higher density towards the lake edge and medium to lower density as the land stepped back. High-rise residential and commercial towers with slim profiles along the water, divided by green streets and boulevards, were proposed to maximize water frontage and access, keep the waterfront open to public view, and naturally process water. Planned civic spaces included public greens and parks situated inland, while cafes, restaurants



with terraces, urban beaches, and sports-related facilities were proposed to create a lively, clearly defined waterfront for public use. An “intense ribbon of program” was proposed to build the identity of the south shore neighborhood as a recreational and performance center by formalizing an existing space as a “legible performance campus;” constructing under-bridge elements such as skate parks and rock wall climbing; creating a bicycle loop through the neighborhood, and providing opportunities for bicycle and kayak rental.

The team addressed connectivity at the transit, pedestrian and street grid level with a light rail line crossing the lake along Congress Street (and potentially extending to the airport); a new pedestrian bridge over the lake between the existing connections along Congress and I-35; and reorganization of some streets for better vehicular circulation and access. It proposed a pedestrian trail with added loops along lake’s south shore, with entry and exit points at intervals through adjoining neighborhoods, and addressed the lack of continuous publicly owned land along the existing trail at water’s edge by building sections of boardwalk out over the water where necessary. “Show me the money” considered ways of financing the project and funding green and civic spaces through mixed-use neighborhoods with residential, retail and recreation-related revenue opportunities. And wildlife was addressed by expanded parkland in the area where the bats of Austin nest and stage their dramatic nocturnal flights, and by what the team called “general enhancement of the area’s ecology.”

Team Two led by Sarah Kuehl named its approach “Performance” to acknowledge inspiration from the multiple aspects of performance that contribute to Austin’s identity and unique character of place: musical performance, athletic performance, nature in performance (most notably the city’s iconic bats) and opportunities for landscape performance. The team made the lake the crossroads of its plan and proposed a mix of hard and soft edges with a focus on accentuating the softness of the shoreline and enhancing the ecology there. It situated buildings back from the water’s edge, leaving the waterfront open to the public. This scheme for development of the south side more closely mimics that on the north, with density increasing farther back from the edge. Noting that the south end of Congress Street is at the same elevation as the Capitol on the north, the team advocated developing Congress to the south to highlight the balance, with terracing coming down to the waterfront and a system of “hyper nature” east and west along the river corridor.

Team Two identified five areas of concern: habitat, density, land use, circulation and activities and looked at how these might work together to create a connected, performance-oriented and lake-centered environment. Proposals for addressing habitat included developing a more extensive viewing area/amphitheater it called ‘Bat Central’ near the bat site on the north and creating a floating boardwalk along the south shore to provide a continuous pedestrian pathway along the shoreline and enable the cultivation of aquatic plants and natural habitats at the



water's edge. And the team advocated building docks out into the lake to provide greater public engagement with the water.

In looking at land use on the central north side of the lake the team noted the strong grid and "plaid" pattern of mixed uses -- residential, retail and green space, and proposed extending this pattern to the south shore. Greater density on the south side was achieved through mixed use structures set back from the water's edge and stepping down from 20 to 10 to 6 stories, with intervening street walls for water management. Newly developed buildings were envisioned as part of adjacent parks, acting as a backdrop for green spaces and, by virtue of their location, increasing real estate values. The team addressed circulation with a new light rail and pedestrian bridge south of Congress that would continue to the airport and add to the "poetic quality" of repeated crossings connecting the two sides of the lake at multiple locations. And it proposed development of nature, music and sports-related activities in zones around the lake within a 5-10 minute walk from one another, effectively creating a circulation "ladder" for movement throughout the site.

Fritz Steiner summed up the overall results: "The idea was to be intensive and inventive -- to put some interesting ideas out into the community. And we have accomplished that. Involving students was great because it added another layer of mentoring and interaction. A lot of young professionals I meet would like more opportunities to teach and this offered a way

of gaining experience in mentoring by working on a project." Professionals and students alike commented on the benefits of establishing relationships with new people from other places, quickly sizing up the capabilities of oneself and others and collaborating toward a common goal. Sarah Kuehl explained, "It's good to have to come up with ideas quickly and collaborate. The team members learned from each other -- and more learning from this experience will come later as we review what we have done." Susannah Drake commented on the special role that student participants played: "They have the local knowledge, a skill set they brought to the table that made them a critical part of the team." Student Stephen Moore said, "The pace of work itself is really inspiring -- to see how far you can come in such a short time." Greg Matteo, of Zimmer Gunsul Franco, enjoyed the opportunity of drawing on the inventory of projects he's worked on and the experience of working with students. "They bring a fresh perspective. They're somewhat freer -- their ideas aren't always nailed down." Student Erica Huddleston, in turn, found working with young professionals "so productive because they have built work and could explain the process. I got to see that there are many different ways to approach a project." Finally, Bill Main of Landscape Forms thanked the participants for their hard work and enthusiasm. "We can be a catalyst and facilitate these things," he said. "But you brought the energy, the intellect, and the skills and made it happen with great teamwork. We're thrilled with what you have done."



XTREME L A is designed to challenge, encourage creativity and foster teamwork. In its sponsorship of the annual event, Landscape Forms also has another goal in mind. It strives to create opportunities for friendships and professional relationships across firms and miles in order to build vital connections that will strengthen the landscape architecture profession and expand understanding of effective practice. Including students widens the circle to include the young people who are the future of the profession. Plans for 2011 are underway.

#### Team One

Leader: Susannah Drake  
 Cody Peratt (Ochsner Hare & Hare)  
 Greg Matto (Zimmer Gunsul Franco)  
 Will Heidbreder (Jacobs-Ryan & Assoc.)  
 Grace Tang (James Corner Field Operations)  
 Charles Benick (MSI)  
 Daniel Seiders (Janet Rosenberg & Assoc.)  
 Ben Noyes (TBG)  
 Jeff Willams (Perkins + Will)

#### Students

Erin Buhl  
 Steve Moore  
 Chelsea Larsson  
 Britta Johanson  
 Jovi Chang  
 James Yan

#### Team Two

Leader: Sarah Kuehl  
 Corey Haselhorst (Wheat Scharf)  
 Elliott Doerle (TBG)  
 Anthony Fox (Sasaki)  
 Lindsay Landers (Clark Condon Assoc.)  
 Darren Damone (Andropogon)  
 Michael Johnson (JJR)  
 Brian Richards (Studio 39)  
 Brian Nicholson (RNL Design)

#### Students

Christina Sohn  
 Matt Nicolette  
 Veronica Stephen  
 Erica Hiddleston  
 Abby Wiltse