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Falaise Park Wetland Garden: *Interpreting a Community Vision*

In an ideal world, every open space project would arise from a strong, sustainable, community-based vision, itself the product of an inclusive public process. The reality is that most open space projects come into being without the benefit of well-coordinated volunteer groups, replete with time, energy and resources and poised to release the genius loci of their beloved neighbourhood park.

To make their project happen, the community that comes up with the vision and initiates the project typically has to entrust their vision to others. Those “others” are the owners and designers of the open space. And it is up to them to deliver the finished project so that it not only fulfills the original vision, but maintains the community’s sense of engagement and ownership. Achieving these worthy goals requires taking the right approach to developing and realizing the community’s vision.

Such was the story of the wetland garden project established last year at Falaise Park, a rather featureless, 7 hectare Vancouver park located south of Grandview Highway and east of Rupert Street. Like a number of the City’s post-war era parks, Falaise Park had been created on the site of a ravine that had once contained a fish-bearing stream. Over time, the

ravine had been filled in and its stream culverted – as much to bury the accumulating garbage as to create a park.

The buried stream captured the imagination of the Falaise Neighbourhood Committee, a small but dedicated community group that had seen the historic stream depicted on the Vancouver Old Streams Map. The group’s mandate, “to actively participate in making positive changes to our neighbourhood,” extended to establishing the Falaise Park Stream Reclamation Project. In 1999, the Committee approached the Vancouver Park Board with a request that the stream be daylighted for environmental, educational and social reasons.

The City was initially receptive to the idea, but a review by the Engineering Department concluded that the size and depth of the

storm sewer (along with other issues) made stream restoration virtually impossible. So the vision was scaled back to creating a “wetland garden,” both to enhance a particularly wet patch of the chronically boggy, south side of the park, and to evoke its now-silent stream.

In the spring of 2004, LEES + Associates Landscape Architects were awarded the contract to develop a concept for the Falaise Park Wetland Garden and oversee its construction.



Falaise Park Before

Over the next 16 months, the following key lessons emerged about maintaining and developing community vision for open space projects:

- **Find a grass-roots vision within the community.** The Falaise Neighbourhood Committee had laid a solid groundwork for this project by working with the City to secure funding and develop an RFP for project design and construction. Basic concepts such as creating habitat and developing a healthier and more interesting, educational environment, right within the neighbourhood, had its genesis with this small group.
- **Provide opportunities for community input.** Keeping the community “in the loop” is essential, particularly once the vision is in the hands of the owners and designers. For the Falaise Park project, this was achieved by holding a steering committee start-up meeting, an onsite public open house, a “shirt sleeves” design workshop and posting a large, rendered concept illustrative at the project site.
- **Make the community feel important, and calm their fears.** Taking the time to send emails, make phone calls and give people the sense that this is still “their project” keeps the community on-side. Change is scary to many people. Being open and positive, asking for specifics and telling people that you share their concerns all help. Truly sharing their concerns, and working to address them, is the other part of the equation.
- **Don't displace the people who like it just the way it is.** Many of the Falaise Park neighbours are seniors who moved to the neighbourhood as newly-weds. Managing their concerns that we would spoil what they knew and said they liked was a big part of the process. Talking to park users during site visits and coaching contractors to “share the message” engaged skeptics and allayed the concerns of older residents that the park they had known for so long had now been deemed valueless.
- **Involve the kids.** Children are the best ambassadors for good design. In the case of Falaise Park, children were also the vehicle for the message of sustainability, communicating to their parents (often in another language) what we were telling them about the project. Durable, colourful interpretive signage aimed at 8-10 year olds can be inform-

ative to all age groups or adapted by children into a message for parents and preschoolers.

- **“Use lemons to make lemonade”.** Falaise Park was a project full of surprises. The original design had to be modified throughout the construction process to work with unexpected subsurface conditions – mainly abundant groundwater – that appeared (and disappeared) throughout the course of construction. The trick was to make creative adaptations within the framework of the vision. Proposing to be “the expert” at this site would have undermined the credibility of the design; admitting the unknowns makes it easier to acknowledge and accommodate the inevitable surprises, problems and changes that lurk in every project.
- **Communicate with words and actions the project's vision and values.** Long term success can be achieved only by following the principles of sustainability, from design and construction through long-term maintenance. Falaise Park used recycled materials such as wood-composite lumber, reclaimed granite curbs and leaf mulch from the city's parks and street trees. Soil was amended rather than imported. And the all-native plant palette was sourced and installed by the Vancouver Park Board. Some of the wetland species were harvested from other parks with thriving wetlands, such as the Stanley Park's storm water treatment area in Lost Lagoon.

The vision for Falaise Park includes naturalizing the grassy margins of the project area with native bulbs and forbs to create a lower-maintenance transition zone. As with the initial riparian planting scheme, selecting plant species according to

their specific needs – and explaining this on interpretive signage – helps to communicate and sustain the original vision for the park.

Falaise Park Wetland Garden had its opening celebration on September 24th, 2006. School children participated in a treasure hunt and planted willows provided by Evergreen. Although the park has yet to fill in to look like the con-

cept plan, the community has embraced its new feature area. Children play along its cobble-lined “streambed”, dog walkers and commuters follow its pathways and seniors stroll along its bog gardens. The vision for Falaise Park has been developed and realized, and is again back in the hands of its community.

