Partnerships as a Basis for Landscape Preservation in Tucson

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Tucson, Arizona, is located some sixty miles north of the border with Mexico. The second largest city in Arizona, its metropolitan area has a population close to one million people.

Founded in 1775 as the northernmost outpost of Spanish occupation, it was ceded to the United States in 1856. At present, there are 34 National Register historic districts in Tucson, and six more are pending. Tucson is a Certified Local Government with a historic preservation officer and an active historic preservation commission. However, until 2012 there was little recognition of the significance of historic landscapes. Since then, awareness of the importance of this asset category has been fostered by a growing coali-

Photo by Helen Erickson

Veinte de Agosto Park Fountain, looking northeast towards Tucson downtown.
tion of city officials, preservationists, landscape architects, citizen advocacy groups, educators, and business and philanthropic entities. Today, funds for historic landscape rehabilitation have been included in a county bond proposal for fall 2015.

Two events in the spring of 2012 brought historic landscapes to the attention of Tucson’s historic preservation community. Both had the potential to negatively impact historic landscapes. One was the placement of a large World War II memorial in Armory Park, Tucson’s only park reflecting the City Beautiful movement. The other was a proposal to deaccession the water sequence of the Tucson Community Center landscape, designed by master Modernist landscape architect Garrett Eckbo in 1972 as part of an urban renewal initiative in downtown Tucson. Ultimately, the memorial was placed in the park over the objections of the Tucson-Pima County Historical Commission and the preservation community at large. The plan to remove the historic water sequence, however, was unanimously rejected by a subcommittee of the Tucson Pima Arts Council, which had been assigned the task of considering the deaccession request in the absence of a procedure for review by the historical commission. Without a definition, the landscape was considered within the framework of public art.

As a consequence of these events, three significant initiatives were undertaken to develop a framework for today’s support and stewardship of historic landscapes. First, the Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation underwrote a conservation master plan for the Eckbo-designed landscape; second, a National Register nomination was initiated for the property; and third, the Tucson-Pima County Historical Commission authorized a historic landscapes taskforce to consider the place of historic landscapes in the review process.
THE ROLE OF THE TUCSON HISTORIC PRESERVATION FOUNDATION

In response to the move to deaccession a portion of the Eckbo-designed landscape, the Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation undertook a historic conservation master plan, which provided a historic context for the landscape and made recommendations for future documentation and management. Subsequently, the foundation also supported work for the preparation of a National Register Nomination for this Modernist masterpiece. The TCC was listed in the National Register at the national level of significance in September 2015. In the course of preparing these documents it was discovered that original plans were archived with those of a local architect, and others were found in city files. All were scanned, and the originals were archived in Special Collections at the University of Arizona.

MOVING TOWARDS REHABILITATION OF AN IMPORTANT HISTORIC LANDSCAPE

Once attention was drawn to the Eckbo-designed landscape at the Tucson Community Center, interest in its renovation began to grow. A citizens’ advocacy group—TCC Today—was formed to advocate for improvements at the site. Financial support for the rehabilitation of a small area of the plaza was undertaken by a coalition of public, private and city supporters, who used a combination of gifts from foundations, businesses and individuals, along with a city allocation, to complete the project. In October 2014 the completion of this demonstration area was celebrated by a festive “opening.” Over forty individuals and organizations were involved in the effort.

The renovation was planned to test potential rehabilitation technologies. A section of plaza paving was carefully removed and retained for subsequent replacement, so an underground cage system could be installed to provide ample root space and rainwater collection for newly replanted trees. Irrigation was converted from a spray to a drip system. Missing benches were reconstructed following Eckbo’s original plans, and planters were duplicated through the use of a mold made from a model planter that remained on the site. The newly-authored Historic Landscapes Subcommittee—more about this group below—recommended replacement vegetation after studying the original planting plans and considering adaptations essential in an increasingly arid environment.

FORMATION OF THE HISTORIC LANDSCAPES SUBCOMMITTEE

In January 2013, in response to the poorly placed World War II memorial in Armory Park, the historical commission authorized a historic landscapes task force to study landscape issues. Ten months later, in December 2013, the task force presented a final report. This report included definitions of landscape types and features and proposed three goals:

- Documentation of historic landscapes in appropriate formats
- Education of commissioners and city staff to recognize historic landscape resources
- Communication of landscape preservation goals to elected government officials and the general public

In addition, two categories of historic landscape resources were selected for more intensive study: historic parks and streetscapes.

HISTORIC PARKS

Tucson parks were divided into three provisional and flexible tiers:

- Parks with historic resources
- Parks that might have historic resources
- Parks with no historic resources

The task force recommended that parks with recognized historic resources be documented and parks with potential historic resources receive further study. Tucson’s historic preservation officer concurred that the existing city administrative directive on historic resources could be expanded to require that city undertakings must take into consideration any impact on documented resources or, if the resource had not received preliminary study, require documentation of potential resources. This expansion of the directive did not require approval by the city council.
HISTORIC STREETSCAPES
Planning for the preservation of historic streetscapes was more complicated. The task force studied a number of existing historic district design guidelines developed by other communities, but it quickly became apparent that these models could not serve Tucson’s needs. First, Tucson’s idiosyncratic historic districts span a wide range of styles, making it impossible to develop a “one size fits all” set of design guidelines. Second, Arizonans in general oppose regulation of private property. Given this, the task force concluded that the best course was to encourage residents of individual historic districts to recognize the characteristic features of their own unique streetscapes as a first step towards preservation. A draft format for documentation was developed to provide a starting point for discussions with neighborhood associations. In this way, individual neighborhoods could determine their own acceptable level of regulation.

A STANDING HISTORIC LANDSCAPES SUBCOMMITTEE
Recognizing the importance of the task force, the historic preservation commission created a standing historic landscapes subcommittee with two charges: 1) to advise the plans review subcommittee of the commission on landscape issues; and 2) to continue work on the parks and streetscapes initiative. At present, one working group is beginning extensive documentation of two historic parks, and a second working group is developing streetscape inventory forms in cooperation with neighborhood associations. Members of the historic landscapes subcommittee are helping members of the associations to identify characteristic resources.

MAKING HISTORIC LANDSCAPES VISIBLE
The combined efforts of the historical commission, the historic preservation office, and the Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation brought to light work by other local Modernist landscape architects. Among them was Guy Greene, who founded the department of landscape architecture at the University of Arizona. In 2015, under the auspices of the university’s Heritage Conservation Program and several volunteers from the Arizona Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects, students completed a Historic American Landscapes Survey (HALS) for Greene’s Sunset Garden at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum. Previously the Arizona Chapter of HALS had focused on older designed and vernacular landscapes.

ROLE OF THE CITY OF TUCSON IN THE COLLABORATIVE EFFORT
While the preservation foundation, the citizens’ advocacy group and the historical commission were proceeding with their work, the City of Tucson began independently compiling potential future bond projects. Due to extensive recent work at the Tucson Convention Center Arena, the city considered adding rehabilitation of the adjacent Music Hall Theater, Leo Rich Theater, and the Eckbo-designed Tucson Community Center landscape to the list of bond projects. Perceiving the integrative role of the landscape, the city scoped the project as one, with three distinct components: a renovation of the two theaters, along with the rehabilitation of the landscape.
MORE POTENTIAL FINANCIAL SUPPORT: INCLUSION IN THE COUNTY BOND ELECTION

After months of vetting the project with the City of Tucson Bond Committee, justifying the importance of the project to the downtown area, and pointing out the economic and the social benefits to the community as a whole, the project was added to the city’s list of fundable projects. Ultimately, it ranked as the second highest priority by the bond committee. In Spring 2015 it was confirmed in the list of Pima County bond projects to be submitted to voters in November 2015.

A PUBLIC–PRIVATE COALITION

Throughout this time, the education and conversation regarding the importance of the historic landscape continued. At a critical juncture, the city saw the connection and link between the future bond project and the efforts of the historic landscape advocacy groups, and made the decision to offer financial support to TCC Today’s first demonstration area. Henceforth, the city would become an active partner in supporting the protection of this historic landscape.

NEW PARTNERS: THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA AND PIMA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

To leverage the bond project, in the Spring of 2015 the city contracted with the Drachman Institute—the research-based outreach arm of the College of Architecture, Planning, and Landscape Architecture (CAPLA) at The University of Arizona—to document and assess the landscape. The city worked with students under the direction of the university’s heritage conservation faculty member R. Brooks Jeffery to develop best practices for documenting the landscape. Through teamwork and networking, the Drachman Institute arranged to have the landscape scanned and processed by Pima Community College’s Revit class and Revit Club in order to build a 3-D model of the landscape. In a short time, the partnership of the city, the university, the community college, preservation advocacy groups, the historic preservation commission, and multiple private businesses and philanthropies led to a complete inventory and mapping of historic features. Now an as-built drawing offers a concrete basis for rehabilitation.
STEWARDSHIP PLANNING
At the same time that a class at the University of Arizona was documenting the landscape, a second class in the Heritage Conservation Program taught by William P. O’Brien also decided to study the landscape. Working in tandem with the documentation class, this class focused on preservation planning issues: identifying stakeholders and preparing a plan for public engagement and programming, and laying a groundwork for the city to define a sustainable plan for stewardship and activation. This cooperative team of students and professionals determined that, as an initial premise, the baseline for stewardship must be adopted by the municipality that owns the property. Once this is established, a process for treatment can be developed. A regulatory framework and process document was created to outline ownership, allocate approval authority, and develop a formal process to review all repairs, alterations and renovations within the landscape. The process includes the submission of the study and recommendations made by the Historic Landscapes Subcommittee to the Plans Review Subcommittee of the historical commission. The recommendations are then forwarded to the full commission for adoption. These procedures are key to maintaining oversight of the landscape following the city’s stewardship policy.

COALITION AND PARTNERSHIP AS A MODEL FOR PRESERVATION OF HISTORIC LANDSCAPES
Tucson’s experience offers a model for aligning a range of public and private entities to identify, support, rehabilitate, and protect their own historic landscapes. The conservation master plan for the Eckbo-designed landscape illustrated the importance of documentation. Without documentation, understanding, discussion, and planning would have been impossible. The National Register listing further emphasized the importance of the resource. A citizen’s advocacy group, the downtown business community, area educational institutions, local landscape architects, and historic preservationists—all have played important roles in the effort. In Tucson, the city continues to work together with these groups toward winning a “yes” vote in the November 2015 bond election, as well as to educate the community on the importance of identifying and preserving historic landscapes.