

SHARED WISDOM

NURTURING EVERYDAY LANDSCAPES

As director of the nonprofit Neighborhood Design Center, Mark Cameron, ASLA, works to make common space more common in Baltimore.

By Susan Hines

MANY OF THE RESIDENTIAL STREETS of Baltimore are relentlessly urban—block after block of row houses with stoops resting directly on the concrete sidewalks. Front yards are mostly nonexistent and few trees grow along the streets. In west Baltimore, plywood scabs cover the windows of many houses, and signs posted by real-estate speculators shout, “We Buy Anything.” Although storefront churches offer salvation and bail bondsmen advertise a more physical form of redemption, these are pretty mean streets.

Mark Cameron, ASLA, executive director of Baltimore’s Neighborhood Design Center (NDC), works to change that in both the city of Baltimore and nearby Prince George’s (P.G.) County, Maryland. “A lot of problems in these neighborhoods are systemic,” he says. “The shooting needs to stop, employment levels need to rise, and the kids must be fed. But NDC’s projects, here and in P.G. County, give people something they didn’t have before and that they played a part in creating. It’s not solving all those other issues, but it’s making small inroads into improving the quality of life for people who don’t have hope or trust in the system.”

As much a pragmatist as an idealist, Cameron abides by a customized version of Daniel Burnham’s injunction, “Make no little plans.” “I like to think that we make hundreds of small plans that are all cumulative in effect,” he says. Last year, more than 70 projects came out of NDC’s Baltimore and Prince George’s County offices. Many of these projects focused on small landscapes—from schoolyard butterfly gardens to playgrounds and small parks. “We feel strongly that by rallying people around small physical improvement projects, groups learn that they can accomplish positive change and gain confidence to move on to other things,” Cameron says.



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Mark Cameron, ASLA, stands before a mural artist Jay Wolf Schlossberg-Cohen painted with input from residents of Baltimore's midtown Edmondson neighborhood. The Neighborhood Design Center provided design services and advice for the green space neighbors named "In the Spirit" park.

Cameron has made creating fruitful partnerships between underserved communities and designers the focus of his career. Not surprisingly he was a student of Anne Whiston Spirn, FASLA, and worked on her well-known West Philadelphia Landscape Project.

By the age of 12, Cameron had decided to become an architect. He received a bachelor of arts in architecture from the University of Cincinnati, but he didn't consider landscape architecture as a career until he was accepted into the master of architecture program at the University of Pennsylvania. Already professionally degreed, he expected to complete his master of architecture degree in just three semesters. While investigating course work outside the architecture department Cameron contacted Spirn, and before the end of their first conversation, he was committed to the university's joint master's degree in architecture and landscape architecture.

"It was one of the best decisions I've ever made," Cameron says of the move, which doubled his time in grad school as well as his student loans. "I did the first year in the landscape architecture program and had the chance to study with Ian McHarg, Carol Franklin, FASLA, Leslie Sauer, Jim Corner, and Anne Spirn. Landscape architecture fully engaged my interest." He fulfilled just the bare requirements for the architecture degree.

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"I love design," Cameron says. "I love the opportunity to create places that are for everyone. I didn't go to school to be an architect for wealthy people only." When he began to look at the spaces between buildings, he realized that "landscape architecture can have a positive impact that is tremendous and far-reaching."

Cameron eventually did project management on Spirn's West Philadelphia Landscape Project. "That's what got me interested in doing what I'm doing today—community design," he says. "We were looking at everyday landscapes, working directly with people on community gardens and residential block projects that you don't tend to think of as landscape architecture. I could use my skills and ideas and theory in places that are not often touched by landscape architects. I found it really invigorating because it affected so many people, and we helped them take the ideas they had and figure out how they could do them in a particular place."

Much of what he learned in Philadelphia applies directly to his work at NDC today. An essential part of his task, then and now, is matching people who lack technical knowledge and resources with people who can help them. "It's big picture and small picture," Cameron says. To help communities deal with vacant city-owned lots he thinks about the lot's location on the block as well as the patterns of vacant land in the neighborhood. Corner lots suggest different uses than empty spaces in the middle of a block. "Cities can't come to terms with the individual lots; they can only come to terms with larger assemblages," he says. "So what happens with that individual lot? It often doesn't make sense for economic development—at least at that time—because it's too small. But the community wants to *do* something because they need the space to *be* something."

AS WE TOUR EIGHT OR SO OF THE 350 projects NDC has been associated with during just the past five years, Cameron seems equally proud of all of them. After all, he sees not just the design of the space but also the specific people—community members and professional volunteers—who made each playground or pocket park a reality despite formidable obstacles.

Several projects are small parks that include the work of local artists and artisans. We stop by a formerly empty lot. Now a mural by a local artist decorates the brick wall that encloses it on one side. A quote from Maya Angelou proclaims, "And Still

We Rise." The park is in good condition, in part because a playful decorative fence created by a metalworker from the Maryland Institute College of Art encloses it on the other sides.

"When working with artists on these projects our goal is to create places, not just murals," Cameron says. This is very much the case at a failed 1970s vest-pocket park that NDC has revitalized on a particularly blighted street with the help of muralist and painter Jay Wolf Schlossberg-Cohen. Inspired by the Billie Holiday song "Strange Fruit," Schlossberg-Cohen

transformed a grove of mature pin oaks by hanging wind chimes high in the trees. Holiday's song about lynching clearly speaks to the pain and loss of this community, and Schlossberg-Cohen's mural depicts that suffering, including a pietà-like image of a mother holding her son, who had been shot more than a decade earlier over a pair of tennis shoes.

"I hate to sound cliché, but picking out a single project would be like favoring one of your children," Cameron says. Yet the playgrounds and schoolyards have special meaning for him, because in so many of the neighborhoods we visit there is literally no place to play except the front stoop.

School playgrounds, all of which are maintained by the city's parks and recreation department, help fill that breach. In 2000, NDC joined with other groups to raise close to \$1 million dedicated to renovating nine city playgrounds.

We visit several schools with new colorful equipment ordered from a catalog NDC supplied to its clients and set thoughtfully on mulch and foam surfaces. "These playground designs are not particularly innovative and don't show off well," Cameron admits, "but before they were built we had terrible play conditions." To him, the very existence of these safe playgrounds is an NDC success story.

But it didn't stop at just the nine playgrounds. "The real triumph," Cameron maintains, "was building awareness of the dire condition of the city's playgrounds and seeing it affect policy." Before the NDC initiative, the Department of Recreation and Parks was able to renovate five or six playgrounds every five years. "We built partnerships with children's advocates and community groups who spread the message that these are important places," Cameron says. As a result, Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley formed a playground task force early in his administration. "Even though we only did nine of the playgrounds, we spurred the city on," Cameron notes. "The city has now done about 150 as opposed to the six renovated by the previous administration."

Ground Rules for Pro Bono Work

*Here are some tips gleaned
from Mark Cameron:*

THINK on your feet. Be willing to experiment and think creatively when it comes to involving the community. If people aren't showing up at meetings, Cameron suggests taking the plans to community association picnics and engaging people there.

MAKE SURE the community members feel they have ownership of the project by involving them every step of the way.

REALIZE that sometimes making sure people don't make bad decisions is enough. "Many times our most important task is helping clients make more informed decisions about their park, playground, or building project," Cameron says.

LEARN from your mistakes and failures. Try to understand what happened and move on.

CONNECT and collaborate with other organizations. Serve on non-profit design and preservation boards.

Because the city took up the torch, NDC was able to phase out that program and move on, although it still does an occasional playground. “My belief is that public space should be the responsibility of civic leaders, and our role is to help them do it,” Cameron says. “In this case, our work was done.”

Although it has moved on from playgrounds, NDC’s work with the school system is far from over. In partnership with the local environmental education nonprofit Irvine Nature Center and other groups, NDC is helping improve the environment and wildlife habitat at schools. This work ranges from creating rain gardens and butterfly gardens to planting trees and taking up asphalt to encourage on-site stormwater retention.

“I really enjoy these school projects because it’s about working directly with kids,” says Cameron. “I can use it as an opportunity to introduce students to landscape architecture and talk about what the profession does, and get them to think about landscape architecture as a potential career.”

After Irvine staff members lead the children in a school grounds habitat assessment, on which their school more often than not receives a failing grade, Cameron steps in. He tells the kids, “Landscape architects communicate by using plans, pictures, and words, and you are going to use these three things to create a poster showing a garden that will improve the habitat at your school.”

The NDC/Irvine Nature Center partnership resulted in a schoolyard butterfly garden planted by the children and featured on the public television show *Zoom*. As we toured this garden in early February, the butterflies were long gone, as was the birdbath the school has had trouble hanging on to. It’s a modest plot with herbs and perennials, but it’s a stark contrast to the flat grass plane of most schoolyards, and the kids actually have access to a garden they planted with their own hands.

AS WE DRIVE TOWARD another school garden, Cameron is anxious. He recently received an e-mail saying this school’s rain garden had been accidentally destroyed by a snowplow. We pull around to the back of the school where a temporary building had been installed, inadvertently creating a courtyard.

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“We’ve learned that gardens need to be well edged and defined so they won’t be mowed over,” he says. “I can understand how it happened. We got 12 to 14 inches of snow. The plowing contractor didn’t know the garden was there. This could be a learning experience.”

Cameron is relieved. There isn’t much damage at all. The snow has melted and I can see how areas of concrete have been removed to broaden the beds that border the two buildings. A curved edge breaks up the rectilinear space. Rain barrels have been constructed of plastic garbage cans and painted by the students. The rain barrels take advantage of the slight pitch of the temporary building’s roof to capture water. Across the courtyard, a compost pile stands along with some raised beds that allow physically challenged students to participate in gardening. Even in winter, it is easy to see that the plants are filling out nicely.

This story had a happy ending. But as we drive back through Baltimore, a city that faces so many challenges, it’s hard not to wonder how Cameron keeps working in these communities of need. “The lack of resources—human and financial—as well as political support has created resentment, anger, and mistrust in these communities,” he says. The challenge is overcoming all those negative feelings and doing it with volunteers and small budgets.

“On the other hand,” he says, “there are extremely good people in all the neighborhoods we work in. They are taking on these projects in addition to working two jobs. They’re trying to learn the system. There is so much hope in what they are trying to do, and they face so many more obstacles in life than I do. They are in the trenches. We can’t give up because they don’t give up.”

It’s also about doing the right thing. “One should help those who are less fortunate, and this is my opportunity to put that in action. If I weren’t heading up this organization I’d be volunteering here, as I did before I joined the staff. Part of our job is building better citizens. The NDC community—the staff, clients, volunteers, and friends of the organization—is really great. Everyone wants to make better communities, a better Baltimore, because we all live here too.”

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