

REVIEWS

Understanding Connectivity

The guidelines are the product of a partnership between the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation (DPR) and the Design Trust for Public Space, with contributions from agencies, professionals, advocates and others. The manual is a comprehensive, municipal primer, intended to guide design, construction and maintenance of parks and related open spaces. Its goal is to enable designers and others to integrate parameters of ecological performance.

Part how-to manual and part advocacy tool, the guidelines combine current research, technology, best practices and performance goals for design, construction and maintenance. The authors integrate contemporary knowledge about soil, water and vegetation, providing meticulous references to hundreds of web and print based publications.

This attempt to connect with rather than duplicate research and knowledge that already exists can be seen throughout the publication, which also situates the guidelines in the complex and evolving web of NYC agency initiatives and guidelines.

Thoughtful and informative introductory texts forge links between principles and practices, while bullet-point guidelines walk the reader through site assessment and practices that focus on soil, water, vegetation, material selection and resource management. The publication is well designed, and illustrated with diagrams and photographs, including a

fantastic fold-out Composite Section, which situates and interrelates site conditions of different kinds of parks. The “Lessons Learned” section of the Case Studies chapter, contains some of the most thoughtful and potentially transformative writing, opening up new ways to appreciate and value the potential for design to support social as well as environmental sustainability. It would be hard to overstate the significance of the guidelines, which codify a shift in how the city conceives of parks, recognising them as urban infrastructure, capable of sequestering carbon, storing and cleaning water, filtering air, increasing energy efficiency, restoring habitat and biotic connectivity to increase biodiversity. The project’s significance has in part to do with scale: DPR as an agency is responsible for design, construction and maintenance of 11,735 hectares of parkland, comprising over 14 percent of the city’s area, enabling them to perform ecological functions in ways that exceed the sum of their individual parts. The guidelines’ emphasis on performance joins form and process. Their focus is as much on performance of DPR as agency as well as physical environment. Perhaps their most significant contribution has been to bring together the knowledge of the agency in one place, by opening up lines of communication within DPR between groups of capital design, planning, construction, operations and maintenance, many of whom are distributed

throughout the city’s five boroughs. Explicating, integrating and sharing the knowledge of these diverse groups makes it possible to bring that knowledge to bear on problems and opportunities, and is therefore a key to high performance. What makes this accomplishment truly remarkable is that much of the knowledge is either tacit, developed as a byproduct of practice, or context specific, requiring its context to be described, in order to be meaningful.

In both process and content, the guidelines are about connecting. As Commissioner Adrian Benepe writes in the introduction, the guidelines for “high performance landscapes – landscapes that can perform many functions at once – provide cleaner air, a cooler environment and sinks for stormwater, as well as more opportunities for physical activity ... will connect the many people who design, build, and take care of the city’s open spaces so that each project is resilient.” As well as connections between people, the guidelines focus on connecting parks with each other and with surrounding neighbourhoods; connecting DPR as an agency with other agencies; and connecting people and their environment, in support of environmental and human health. The guidelines are intended not only as a robust tool, but a living document, for which parks are a living laboratory, promoting sustainability education and research, helping to raise environmental awareness and stewardship.



High Performance Landscape Guidelines: 21st Century Parks for NYC

Authors include Michele Adams, Steven Caputo, Jeannette Compton, Tavis Dockwiller, Andrew Lavallee and Charles McKinney; Design Trust for Public Space and the City of New York; 2010; ISBN: 978-0-9777175-5-2 www.nycgovparks.org/sub_about/go_greener/green_capital.html

The publication is the third in a series of high performance guidelines. The previous manuals – focusing on buildings (1999) and infrastructure (2005) – have contributed to innovative design and construction projects and policy change in support of PlaNYC.

Radical in their ambition, they set the bar high for the city and DPR and the professionals who work with them, mandating changes in policy as well as practice. Recommendations for “Next Steps” include a new position within DPR to direct implementation of the guidelines, which seems likely to happen soon. Other kinds of next steps may include extending the focus on high performance to integration of architecture and landscape, for which DPR’s Design + Construction Excellence Program has fine examples.

As Mayor Bloomberg writes in the introduction, the document is blueprint for how parks are designed, built and maintained. As a blueprint – that is, something intended as a guide for making something else – their effectiveness can only be assessed in the context

of their implementation. Tracking and feedback from pilot projects testing aspects of the guidelines will be incorporated into future iterations. Implementation will also make it possible to assess how practices interact, overlap and affect each other, as well as other social/cultural and economic design criteria, to construct synergies among them. The Guidelines focus on New York City parks, but would be useful to any parks system interested in integrating sustainable practice into the core of its operations. Smaller cities may be able to progress more quickly, in the context of less complexity. As other cities look into producing similar reports, it is hoped that some kind of shared and interactive knowledge base or platform could anchor multiple efforts.

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