

NEW YORK CHAPTER  
AMERICAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

THE CENTER FOR ARCHITECTURE  
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March 11, 2005

Patrick A. Miller, PhD, FASLA, President  
**American Society of Landscape Architects**  
636 Eye Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20001-3736

Re. NY ASLA 2005 Medal of Excellence Nomination:  
The Regional Plan Association (RPA) & Robert D. Yaro, President

Dear Patrick:

On behalf of the New York Chapter, it is my distinct honor and pleasure to nominate the Regional Plan Association (RPA) and its President, Mr. Robert D. Yaro as our Chapter's nomination for the ASLA's 2005 Medal of Excellence. Over the long history of this organization, the RPA has consistently met and exceeded the criteria established by our organization for this esteemed award. The contributions the RPA have made to our profession and allied planning and design fields are numerous and significant. On an individual basis, Mr. Yaro has led this organization with a degree of skill, intellect and professionalism that sets the standard for our field. Under his leadership, this organization has remained valid and at the forefront of current and important planning decisions here in New York City and the entire Tri-State region. Much of this work is easily applicable to many issues being tackled throughout North America.

### **Regional Plan Association**

The Regional Plan Association (RPA) is an independent, not-for-profit regional planning organization that improves the quality of life and the economic competitiveness of the 31-county New York-New Jersey-Connecticut region through research, planning, and advocacy. For more than 80 years, RPA has been shaping transportation systems, protecting open spaces, and promoting better community design for the region's continued growth. Regional Plan Association anticipates the challenges the region will face in the years to come, and mobilizes the region's civic, business, and government sectors to take action.

### **An Influential History**

The nation's most influential independent regional planning organization, RPA has a storied history. RPA's First Plan in 1929 provided the blueprint for the transportation, land use, and open space networks that are taken for granted today. Among them are the George Washington and Verrazano Narrows bridges, JFK Airport, the Merritt Parkway, and the Long Island State and Palisades Interstate park systems, and state parks along south shore of Long Island and the Hudson Highlands.

The Second Plan, completed in 1968, was instrumental in restoring our deteriorated mass transit system, preserving threatened natural resources and revitalizing our urban centers. One of the first voices to identify the need to rein in sprawl, RPA played a key advocacy role in creating a network of satellite employment centers in Stamford, CT, White Plains, Downtown Brooklyn, Newark, and Jersey City. The Plan's Race for Open Space included seminal research on the value of wetlands, conservation easements and urban parks that set the stage for series of regulatory, land acquisition, and park funding innovations. The resulted in the

creation of nine new regional parks including the first urban national park in the country: Gateway National Recreation Area.

Released in 1996, RPA's Third Regional Plan, "A Region at Risk," warned that new global trends had fundamentally altered New York's national and global position. The ambitious plan called for building a seamless 21<sup>st</sup> century mass transit system, creating a three-million acre Greensward network of protected natural resources systems, maintaining half of the region's employment in urban centers, and assisting minority and immigrant communities to fully participate in the economic mainstream.

Just eight years later, a series of accomplishments underscore the effectiveness of the organization in shaping the metropolitan area. RPA has been instrumental in reviving plans to connect the Long Island Rail Road to Grand Central Terminal and for building the Second Avenue Subway. RPA successfully pushed for New Jersey's brownfields legislation to encourage the cleanup and redevelopment of these sites, an early model for the nation. RPA's vision of a protected greenbelt around the urban and suburban core has taken form in accomplishments like the 18,000 acre Sterling Forest State Park, the 50,000 acre Long Island Pine Barrens Forest Preserve, and the 400,000 acre "core preservation area" of the New Jersey Highlands while new parks along the Hudson River and Governors Island are helping revive the New York Harbor as a regional amenity.

### **The Rebuilding of Lower Manhattan**

RPA has played a significant role in shaping the rebuilding of Lower Manhattan through its leadership of the Civic Alliance to Rebuilding Downtown New York, a broad-based coalition formed shortly after 9/11 to provide an "umbrella" for civic planning and advocacy efforts in support of the rebuilding process. Under RPA's leadership, the Civic Alliance set goals and principles for the rebuilding process that later formed the basis for principles adopted by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation. These principles emphasized the quick recovery and expansion of Lower Manhattan's transportation infrastructure, the creation of environmentally sustainable architecture and landscape design at the World Trade Center site, the geographic focus on all of Lower Manhattan below Houston Street in addition to the 16-acre World Trade Center site, and an open and equitable, participatory planning process.

To promote public participation, the Civic Alliance sponsored the pivotal "Listening to the City" town hall meetings in the summer of 2002, where 4,500 people came together and demanded from their public officials more imaginative and ambitious plans for the World Trade Center site. These historic forums were followed by other public outreach and planning exercises, such as the "Beyond 16 Acres" series of public forums and panel discussions that continues today. The Civic Alliance also sponsored a four-day Planning Workshop for Lower Manhattan at the South Street Seaport that brought together architects, landscape architects, planners, academics and community members to contemplate different directions for the future of Lower Manhattan's growth. The physical plans and renderings that emerged from this workshop supported and elaborated upon New York City's Vision for Lower Manhattan, which is now moving towards implementation.

Since 2002, the Civic Alliance has played a strong advocacy role in the planning process, applying pressure to public officials and agencies to see that the broadly-supported principles of the civic community are implemented. A report released by RPA at the third anniversary of 9/11, "A Civic Assessment of the Lower Manhattan Planning Process" commended New York City and State agencies for the quick recovery of vital infrastructure after 9/11 but took them to task for an erosion of public participation as implementation begins and a narrow economic

development strategy. Recently Civic Alliance advocacy has focused on the implementation of urban design and sustainable guidelines at the World Trade Center site, a transparent process for the division of remaining rebuilding funds, the advancement of off-site planning projects, and the reduction of the office space program at the World Trade Center site so as not exceed projected market demand.

### **The Far West Side**

The City and State of New York have put forward an ambitious but controversial proposal for revitalizing Manhattan's Far West Side, the last major underdeveloped area of the island's commercial core. Over the last year, RPA has changed the terms of the debate by putting the plan in a regional context and defining alternatives that clarify the underlying issues. The effort included analyses of current trends, future projections and critical issues. As important as the research, however, has been an extensive dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders and experts. Numerous meetings with public officials, civic and academic observers, and both proponents and opponents of the plan culminated in RPA's Regional Assembly on April 16, 2004. More than 600 participants heard and debated a range of views on the Hudson Yards plan, the RPA research papers and alternative visions for the district.

RPA also released two reports that marked turning points in the public dialogue. In July 2004, RPA published "Fulfilling the Promise of Manhattan's Far West Side," a position paper that outlined an alternative strategy that incorporated much of the City and State proposals, but included further recommendations for urban design, transportation, phasing and uses for the proposed stadium site. In addition to extensive media coverage, the report opened the gates for other civic organizations to out forth their ideas, and several issued reports and position statements in the following months.

In December 2004, RPA further articulated its proposals for the stadium site in "Urban Development Alternatives for the Hudson Rail Yards," a report that outlined three mixed-use alternatives for the Yards and weighed their design, fiscal and economic impacts against those of the stadium. This had the intended affect of changing the terms of debate from the false choice of a stadium versus a hole in the ground to a choice between the stadium and other development proposals.

### **Innovations in Community Design**

Regional Plan Association has set the benchmark for effectively involving communities and stakeholders to reshape their communities. A recurring theme in each of these efforts has been the role that underlying natural systems play in shaping development. - what has come to be called "using the green infrastructure" of the place. Aspects of this include revealing hidden or buried water resources (for example, day-lighting culverted streams), dealing with non-point - source pollution through bio-remediation, creative use of lower-maintenance native plantings for landscape design, and applying best management practices to storm water strategies.

- RPA's New Jersey Mayor's Institute on Community Design educates and encourages Mayors to promote smart growth and better design. It brings together Mayors with experts and planners to discuss and solve planning and design concerns specific to their communities. The resource team of experts always includes a landscape architect who brings state-of -the art strategies for combing community redevelopment with resource protection.
- RPA is helping Somerset County to implement the Regional Center Strategic Plan by refining proposals, educating key constituencies and identifying potential funding mechanisms as well

as researching statewide fiscal reforms that can encourage smart growth in centers and redevelopment in areas with existing infrastructure. One of the major implementation projects currently underway is the Regional Center "Green Plan" which is illustrating a comprehensive landscape strategy around greenways, storm water management and resource protection. This was featured in the July 1999 issue of Landscape Architecture magazine.

- Working with NJ Transit, RPA is formulating new ideas for growth in villages near rail transit including infill, multi-unit and multi-use development near stations to encourage greater use of public transportation. Here, redevelopment of former industrial properties is a recurring challenge, as well as the use of urban forestry to define connections between the train station and surrounding neighborhoods.
- Community design workshops in Hastings, Governors Island, Riis Park, and other places are used to resolve difficult land use conflicts on brownfield sites. This was the case in Hastings-on-Hudson, NY, where RPA efforts resolved a stalemate between state agencies, environmental advocates, landowners and the municipality over the clean-up and redevelopment of one of the most polluted brownfield sites in the Hudson valley. (New York Times, August 10, 2003)

#### **Advocate for Region-Shaping Landscapes**

The 1996 Third Regional Plan called for the creation of metropolitan Greensward, a regional analog to Olmsted and Vaux's Greensward Plan for Central Park. RPA's bold proposal called for the conservation and restoration of a dozen region-shaping landscapes and waterbodies that, by providing green boundaries to suburban sprawl and re-centering amenities at the region's core, will shape the region of the 21st century much as Olmsted and Vaux's vision shaped the growth of Manhattan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Over the past eight years, Regional Plan Association has worked with a variety of public and private coalition partners to implement this proposal. Highlights include:

- Establishment of New York State's Third Forest Preserve and the Pine Barrens Commission to protect and manage the 100,000 acre central Pine Barrens of Long Island through capital funding and a transfer of development program;
- Acquisition of the jewel of the Appalachian Highlands, the 18,000 acre Sterling Forest through a unique bi-state/federal/private initiative and, more recently, establishing a 400,000 core preservation area through the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act in New Jersey.
- The reinvention of the New York Harbor as a recreational amenity, with political commitments and more than \$ 500 million of public and private funds invested to establish major open spaces such as Hudson River Park, Riverside South, Brooklyn Bridge Park, and Governors Island;
- The creation of the 500 acre Keyspan State Park, featuring the longest undeveloped waterfront on Long Island Sound, and a commitment by a to create a Long Island Sound Stewardship System that will help protect thousands of additional acres.

#### **A Model for Metropolitan-Scale Planning and Advocacy**


RPA is uniquely qualified to use its research and planning to advocate for critical infrastructure investments, land use and regulatory changes, and enhanced planning and development review in the tri-state area.

- RPA's experts on staff are internationally recognized authorities in transportation studies, economics, design and environmental planning.

- RPA's influential Board of Directors and State committees comprise business leaders, experts, and opinion makers. They provide guidance on major initiatives and advocate for implementing recommendations.
- Because of its independence and impressive success record, RPA is highly respected in the business and policymaking communities. Through its ties to organizations and governmental agencies throughout the region, RPA is the metropolitan area's prime source of connections and interface so far as planning is concerned.

In conclusion, we hope that you and the Board of Trustees find our nomination of The Regional Plan Association worthy enough to be considered as one of two finalists for the Medal of Excellence and, ultimately, worthy of the Medal itself.

Sincerely Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'ALX.' with a horizontal line underneath.

Alexander F. Kurnicki, BLA, MUD, ASLA  
President-Elect, NY Chapter ASLA