

Collaborating for Context Sensitive Solutions in Transportation

Rationale for Context Sensitive Solutions in Transportation

Transportation projects are powerful engines of change, sometimes welcome and sometimes not. They hold the power to enhance, preserve, or destroy community and environmental assets. Now that land use, quality of life, and adverse impacts rank high among public concerns, transportation projects are subject to increasing scrutiny, expectations, and contention. The context sensitive solutions approach is designed to create stakeholder consensus on a project's scope, purpose, and objectives and widespread support for the project's completion. In the context sensitive solutions approach, stakeholders are engaged early in the process and continuously throughout.

The Context Sensitive Solutions Team

Each context sensitive solutions project progresses within a unique set of constraints and opportunities. A context sensitive solutions team should consist of multiple disciplines tailored to the unique needs and circumstances associated with the project at hand. The team's composition may change over the course of the project as different issues arise and require varying areas of expertise.

Team members from certain core disciplines are essential "common threads" to the success of virtually all significant transportation projects. Civil engineers and landscape architects are chief among the essential core members of context sensitive solutions teams in transportation. Together, landscape architects and civil engineers can guide projects that preserve or enhance not only safety and mobility but also the community and environmental assets that further contribute to quality of life.

The Need for Specialists and Generalists

"Context" is everything about the "people" and "place" that factors into successful transportation improvements. Specialists excel at identifying problems and solutions within the area of their expertise. But how is the need for particular forms of specialized expertise identified along the course of a complex project?

Planning and design professionals who are skilled transportation, community, and environmental generalists bring broad perspective and vision to a project. Their role is to conduct broadly scoped analysis and to engage stakeholders to identify, articulate, and explore less than obvious questions, problems, and opportunities. Skilled and effective generalists raise awareness of situations that may yield serious obstacles or reveal lost opportunities that would result in unforeseen costs and consequences in project development. An effective generalist on a project's core team can ensure a balanced, successful and cost-effective public works project.

Appropriate big-picture generalists must be present from the inception or scoping of a project, or better yet, even earlier at systems planning. Throughout project development, skilled generalists

need to continue in their essential leadership and support roles of building and maintaining dialog and alliance relationships among stakeholders and the various disciplines that compose or inform the project team.

Landscape Architects on Context Sensitive Solutions Teams

Landscape architecture is a broad and rigorous discipline embracing both planning and design. Landscape architects' working knowledge integrates elements of large-scale planning, civil engineering, architecture, art, and environmental and social sciences. Landscape architects maintain that thoughtful and skilled design promotes healthy development patterns and creates an environment that encourages positive human interactions. Landscape architecture was the first professional discipline of the modern era to study the movement of vehicles through our nation's landscape in order to identify optimal patterns.

Historically working in close collaboration with civil engineers, landscape architects made prominent contributions to some of the most distinctive and celebrated roads of the past century. Parkways in Minneapolis, Boston, New York, and elsewhere around the country were among the results of these collaborations. These roadways respected scenic, ecological, and cultural concerns along with technical requirements. They are regarded as significant advances in highway design. Landscape architect Stanley Abbott laid out the entire Blue Ridge Parkway; he described his intent for the road's character by coining the phrase: "lying lightly on the land like a ribbon."

The first half of the 20th century was a golden era of roadway design, featuring particularly close and creative collaboration between landscape architects and civil engineers. This interdisciplinary approach has continued relevance and is now even more critical in light of today's need for context sensitive solutions.

Landscape architects cultivate multidisciplinary skills in varying blends, and not all landscape architects have the level of experience and technical training in transportation planning and road design to qualify them to serve as core members of a context sensitive solutions team. Many landscape architects, however, are well qualified to assume core positions in context sensitive solutions teams in either the specialist or generalist capacity. As interdisciplinary professionals, many landscape architects are comfortable and capable operating in the generalist capacity, establishing and maintaining effective communications and relationships among members of the team and stakeholders.

Finding the Right Landscape Architect

The right landscape architect can make excellent contributions to a context sensitive solutions team. Finding the right landscape architect is a matter of soliciting candidates and knowing what questions to ask: What skills have you cultivated? What kinds of projects have you worked on? Do you enjoy working with the public? Are you interested in building expertise in a specialized technical capacity? Do you prefer to maintain a big-picture and holistic perspective with facility in multiple technical areas? Many landscape architects will have the skill set that your team seeks.

Achieving Excellence with Context Sensitive Solutions

The context sensitive solutions approach brings transportation project excellence by multiple measures: community acceptance, environmental compatibility, technical functionality, financial feasibility, and timeliness of delivery. Fundamentally, “context sensitive solutions” refers not so much to a body of model outcomes but to the application of an overarching philosophy and set of principles. These principles emphasize using a multidisciplinary process featuring both technical expertise and expert generalist coordination to achieve project excellence. The training, knowledge, and skills represented within landscape architecture are essential to fulfillment of the vision and promise of CSS.

This statement grew from a discussion among members of ASLA’s Context Sensitive Design Professional Interest Group. Discussion participants included Cochair Greg Hoer ASLA (MD), Cochair David Reitsch ASLA (TX), Cochair Scott Southall ASLA (KY), Past Chair David Fasser FASLA (FL), Scott D. Bradley FASLA (MN), Jeff Caster ASLA (FL), Liba Wheat ASLA (AZ), Harlow Landphair ASLA (TX), Mel Stout ASLA (OR), and Kris Gilbert ASLA (NY). This statement was edited by Jennifer Strassfeld and Scott D. Bradley FASLA.