December 13, 2004

Professional Interest Group Q&A: Context Sensitive Design
Greg Hoer, ASLA, with David Fasser, FASLA, Answers Questions About ASLA's
Context Sensitive Design Professional Interest Group

What is Context Sensitive Design?

Context Sensitive Design (CSD), also known as Context Sensitive Solutions
(CSS), refers to an interdisciplinary approach to transportation needs and
projects. CDS/CSS involves regional planning, site analysis, public relations,
community facilitation, locally driven vision and goal setting, design, engineering,
construction, and maintenance.

This approach relies heavily on skills common among landscape architects. But
CSD/CSS is not the specific domain of any single design profession, and no
single design profession alone can successfully implement CSD/CSS. This
comprehensive approach to what in the past have been essentially engineering
projects assures that project managers and designers go beyond the physical
project limits to anticipate and respond to potential community and environmental
issues, generate community input, minimize negative impacts, and assure
community ownership of the outcome.

How long ago was the CSD/CSS PI Group founded? What inspired your group to form?

ASLA's Context Sensitive Design PI Group owes its origin to a conference
cosponsored by the Maryland State Highway Administration, the Federal
Highway Administration (FHWA), and the American Association of State Highway
and Transportation Officials (AASHTO). This 1998 conference, "Thinking Beyond
the Pavement: A National Workshop on Integrating Highway Development with
Communities and the Environment," effectively launched the CSD/CSS
movement. David Fasser, the founder and first chair of the group, recognized the
huge implications of this movement for landscape architects, and he believed
that CDS/CSS would become THE arena within which LAs could take the lead in
multidisciplinary projects. Fasser founded the group in 2001.

What inspired the emphasis on this approach to transportation planning?

The public grew aware of its power to influence projects affecting the fabric of
communities. Public opposition frequently kills projects and turns investments
sour--even challenges the criteria used to evaluate a project's "success." In the

last decade, government agencies have begun to embrace CSD/CSS in response to this increasingly sophisticated and vocal criticism. At the same time, experience has shown that community input can produce true improvements that enhance communities far beyond a project's original intent.

So all practicing landscape architects are involved in CSD/CSS?

Yes and No. The term CSD/CSS is a branding that refers to a specific approach to transportation planning and transportation infrastructure design; accordingly, landscape architects involved in transportation are the ones who are involved in CSD/CSS. On the other hand, it could be argued that our context-sensitive approach reflects the essence of landscape architecture in all arenas in which it is practiced. As landscape architects, we are trained to engage client and community input in the design process. We are trained to create designs that engage with the surroundings at multiple scales and to respond to a complexity of opportunities and needs. The long-term and short-term benefits of a landscape architect's expertise in this approach are increasingly recognized in transportation planning as well as in other large-scale planning efforts involving community and environmental impacts.

It seems this is an evolving area of practice based on long-established principles but driven by government demand.

Exactly. Federal transportation agencies are promoting the CSD/CSS methodology, but it is a process in itself to systematically implement a new approach to design within an organization. A commitment to CSD/CSS can require a complete change in the way an organization approaches the project development and design process. It requires communication between areas of the organization that may not have a collaborative tradition. Continued successes drive the evolution of CSD/CSS practice.

How does your group's specialty relate to the landscape architecture profession as a whole?

Landscape architects, by virtue of their education, training, and background in interdisciplinary collaboration on design projects, are particularly well qualified to oversee the CSD/CSS project development process. A landscape architect is uniquely equipped with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to take a leadership role on the team of design professionals and specialists required to successfully plan, design, and execute a project.

What success or progress have you seen within CSS/CSD?

CSS methods and philosophy are being included on more and more of the projects in which I am involved…and I find that I have to do less and less explaining of just what CSD/CSS involves. FHWA and AASHTO are actively

promoting training and education for national implementation of CSS/CSD methods, with pilot programs underway in the states of Connecticut, Kentucky, Maryland, Minnesota, and Utah.

What else fuels your optimism about CSS/CSD and this PI Group?

First, the readiness with which ASLA leadership recognized the value of creating this group. More recently, I was particularly happy with the turnout and participation at the CSD Professional Interest Group's meeting at the 2004 Annual Meeting in Salt Lake City. I am optimistic that this Professional Interest Group will become a major force in promoting CSD/CSS throughout the country.

Do you see any caution flags in this picture?

Yes--that landscape architects do not yet "own" CSD/CSS, despite the fact that we possess a specific skill set that uniquely qualifies us to serve as project team leaders in a CSD/CSS environment. But landscape architecture is gaining a more prominent role in CSD/CSS. For example, the FHWA is developing a reference website for use by state departments of transportation as they work to implement CSD/CSS at the state level. The website will include contributions from landscape architects.

What opportunities are there for further development?

Continued CSD/CSS education…at both the university and professional levels; and "lessons learned" presentations and/or fact sheets for dissemination at professional development meetings. I hope we'll see increasing demand for more CSD/CSS presentations at future ASLA Annual Meetings.

Any closing thoughts?

I want to emphasize that, although CSD/CSS is an interdisciplinary partnership that cannot rely on the expertise of landscape architects alone, CSD/CSS cannot be successful without landscape architects' involvement and leadership.