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Diana Balmori

Diana Balmori, principal of Balmori Associates in New Haven, has advocated for linear parks in Baltimore, Minneapolis and New Haven. For background on the New Haven project, see "A Path in the City, A Path in the Woods," Places 6:4.

How did you become interested in linear parks?

A citizens' group asked me to produce a vision for an abandoned rail line in New Haven. They were trying to get the city to buy it but felt that without a vision it would never happen. They thought that having drawings and an idea about what could be accomplished would help.

Why do you think linear parks are an important?

Their continuity, the fact that they go through so many different terrains. Old railroad lines bring you downtown, to the water, to suburbia, to open space. These narrow troughs offer a simple, modest tool for changing the quality of life. In Baltimore, one citizen put it beautifully: "We are prisoners of our neighborhood, and this would give us and our children the possibility of participating in the city."

What has your role been as an advocate?

I've done master plans. I've written about them because I feel they need to be developed as an idea, not just as a form. I also advocate for their design: Unfortunately, most linear parks are being interpreted as prosaic things, built by engineers who do drainage and paving, ten-foot strips of asphalt with no further thought. Once a park is there, there will come a second stage in which design can take place.

What are your goals for participation?

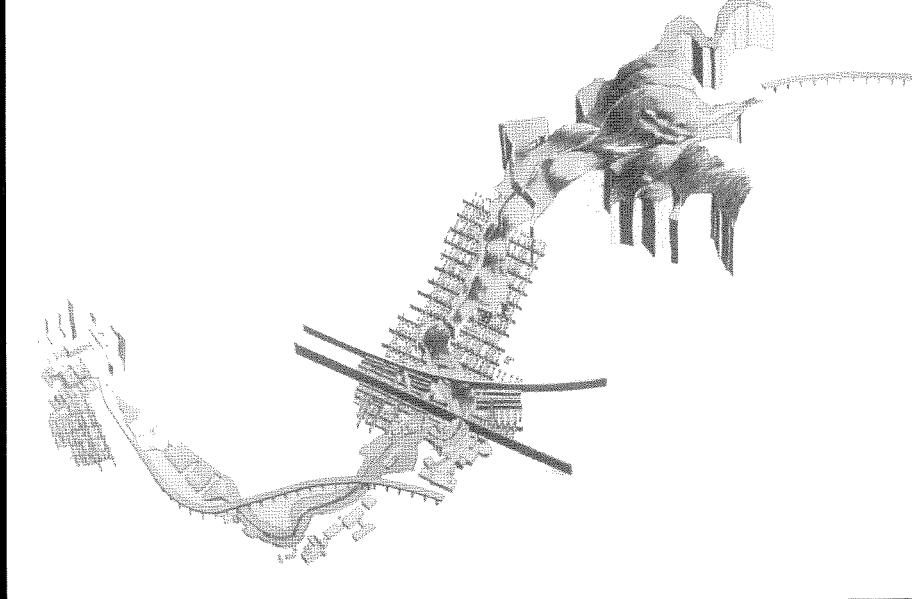
It's a two-way road. Citizens educate me about how they see their neighborhood, what they're interested in having and contributing to. It's my function to educate them to see beyond their neighborhood to the larger city. When I mark on map all the places they will be able to get to, a light goes on: "this could be much more than we ever thought."

Safety is an issue that dominates. The data that are emerging show these projects become incredibly used immediately, and once you pass certain density of use they become safer than the surrounding areas. Participation gives the neighborhood ownership of the trail; if it's going to be safe, the neighborhood needs to make it safe.

Describe the participatory design process you use on these projects.

Baltimore and Minneapolis have established procedures. Minneapolis has very controlled and regulated process of showing the project and discussing it from the very beginning to the very end—what's happened, what's changed, how suggestions have been paid attention to or ignored.

In Minneapolis, people were convinced our work would have an effect on the authorities, but in Baltimore there was distancing; if people participated, they didn't know how this would ever reach the forces that make decisions. So we took a more proactive role. We started



a process of getting together all the organizations that had a role on that stream, they hadn't seen each other for years. In order to get things done, one should be able to get to these bigger problems. The designer is an intermediary, but has the role of making things understood, what the effect could be.

Does a designer have to have a vision in mind for a participatory process to be successful?

It's essential. Otherwise you are not giving people a sense of what is this for. If one can develop a vision of going toward something that is complete and clear, the response and support you get are more effective.

If you bring a vision to the table, what do other people in the participatory process bring?

Different kinds of knowledge. These designs are composites. One can state a general vision or goal, but the parts of it are polished by everybody who is at the table. In Baltimore, I had no idea how important the water was. It was a place where people had gone to swim and fish; I learned about several secret fishing holes. One person pointed out sources of pollution we hadn't known about. Something emerges from the knowledge of everybody in the room.

How does your participatory design approach compare to that of advocacy planning?

I question the whole process of design as its structured today, even in case of having public participation. The designer comes into a structured piece into which our formal understanding of how things work doesn't mesh, even at the simplest level. Designers should come in at the beginning, at the predesign phase, when one thinks about the site and interprets it. This discussion has to include many different professionals, like hydrologists and ecologists, as well.

Proposal for Gwynns Falls Trail, Baltimore.

Graphic: Fran Leadon, Balmori Associates.