THE ART OF HANGING OUT

“HYPERCOLLABORATION” YIELDS AN EXUBERANT—AND MULTITASKING—LANDSCAPE AT MASSART.

BY JANE ROY BROWN

HE STUDENTS at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design call it the Tree House. The 20-story residence hall not only towers like a great oak at the nexus of Boston’s Fenway and Mission Hill neighborhoods, but its facade, composed of more than 5,000 composite aluminum panels of varying depths, hues, and gloss, is inspired by Gustav Klimt’s painting The Tree of Life.

In front of the building, five scattered concrete planters form lively islands in a paved plaza. From above, the planters form abstract shapes reminiscent of flowers or tree canopies. Their “petals,” outlined in the paving pattern, carry the theme onto the plaza and into the adjacent side street. Viewed from the ground, the planters, made of precast concrete, are as sleekly sculptural as the late work of Henry Moore, their retaining walls undulating in all dimensions around hillocks sprouting shrubs, perennials, and grasses.

Between the irregular, petal-shaped lobes, students can hang out in broad bays, hunker in intimate nooks, or pull up a wheelchair. The spaces, spanned by ipe wood slats of varying widths, manage to feel both private and safe. Interspersed with the wood slats, yellow acrylic light planks—bench seats that double as lamps—emit a warm glow after dark. Each planter contains a core of needled evergreens and scattered serviceberry shrubs, which are uplit at night. Seasonally changing perennials and ornamental grasses catch the breeze. The overall effect is invitingly Oz-like, an urban haven softened by organic form and bursts of foliage.

“The first two goals of the project were to assert the school’s identity on Huntington Avenue, Boston’s ‘Avenue of the Arts,’ near the city’s prestigious art museums, and to create a great place to be within,” explains Shauna Gillies-Smith, ASLA, the founding principal at Ground Inc. of Somerville, Massachusetts, and the project’s landscape architect. “The client asked us to create a variety of places for students to gather and hang out. I imagined mossy mounds that offered different kinds of places to sit, inspired by The Tree of Life, the main expression of the project,” she says.

LEFT Flower power: Paving patterns splash over the curb to unify the streetscape.
Given the multiple constraints of this site, the landscape represents a triumph of technical skill equal to its aesthetically pleasing design. Embedded within one of Boston’s most densely built districts, the site comprises a former parking lot and an additional strip of land conveyed by the adjacent property owner to form a flat, bow-fronted trapezoid. At 6,400 square feet (about a half acre), the resulting parcel had to accommodate both building and landscape.

And this was just the surface issue. Underneath the old parking lot, three massive culverts owned by the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority meet and change in grade. The water authority periodically services this belowground infrastructure, and the design had to allow the vehicles clear access to various manholes. “This meant that most of the landscape had to be paved,” Gilles-Smith says.

“What we had to do to build there was nothing short of miraculous,” says Edward Adelman, the executive director of the Massachusetts State College Building Authority, an independent authority that finances capital development at public colleges, including this project. “Because there is so little open space here, the idea was to get as much out of this landscape as possible,” he says. “We wanted places where people could sit, and we didn’t want the space to look like a lot of empty benches when no one was there. Shauna understood intuitively how to do this, and she used the site’s constraints to advantage.”
Before founding Ground in 2008, Gillies-Smith worked as a principal and the design director for the U.S. office of Martha Schwartz, Inc. She is also a public artist who trained as an architect and urban designer before turning to landscape architecture—in short, an ideal fit for a project at the country’s only freestanding public art school.

“Shauna thinks about landscape materials in the same way we do, based on their visual attributes as well as texture and scale,” says Roy. “She also takes the ego out of the creative process—she says, ‘It doesn’t matter whose idea it is; we just want the best ideas to support the project.’”

Gillies-Smith attributes this mantra to her years in Schwartz’s firm, where designers were encouraged to brainstorm freely up front and stay open to changes throughout the process. “Besides,” Gillies-Smith says, “for a firm like Ground that works mostly on public projects, it’s practical to be flexible.”

For the new building and landscape at MassArt, as the college has branded itself, flexibility turned out to be essential. Prompted by a highly engaged client—the art school community—the architects and Gillies-Smith led an exhilarating exchange of ideas that extended to community meetings with residents and public agencies.

The college’s president at the time, Kay Sloan, wanted to involve students in all phases of the design, and members of the architecture faculty were delighted to lead them in a real project. “Our students are very hands-on—they like to

By extending the paving pattern across a narrow side street to the edge of an existing public bike and walking path, for instance, Gillies-Smith used the plaza ingeniously to expand the campus landscape. The plaza, street path, and an adjacent existing lawn now comprise a unified space shared by students of two neighboring colleges as well as the Massachusetts College of Art.

Though the lack of show room above and belowground might have compelled collaboration between architect and landscape architect, the project architects, B. K. Boley and Tamara Roy of the Boston firm ADD Inc. (since acquired by Stantec), had previously worked with Gillies-Smith and established a fluid design process. “These architects are very inclusive and interactive,” Gillies-Smith says, “and they are not afraid of exuberant landscapes.”

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“make things,” says Paul Hajian, the chair of the architecture department, whose students helped to design everything from the facade to the ground-floor café.

A committee that varied in size from 10 to 20 people—including designers, contractors, and college faculty, administrators, and students—met weekly throughout the design phase. “Three students sat on the committee, and they attended every meeting,” Gillies-Smith says. “They were our best critics and allies.” When engineers wanted to pare down the planters’ voluptuous walls into standard curbs, for instance, the students nixed the idea, and the wiggly walls stayed. (To make sure the walls did not create a skateboarder mecca, Gillies-Smith foiled a smooth ride by notching the seams of the precast concrete sections. To date, skateboard scuffs mar only a few spots along the walls.)
Sloan also championed the design in public meetings. Roy recalls that when city and historical commission officials fretted about the Klimt-inspired facade clashing with Boston’s staid brick buildings and picturesque Olmsted parks, Sloan countered, “If it doesn’t look like it’s on fire, why bother to build it?”

The art school also hosted a charrette in which more than 80 people—the designers, design committee members, city design and planning officials, and others—weighed in on every aspect of the building and landscape. “People really rolled up their sleeves,” says Hajian. “It was a workshop, and that was what was great about it. Even costs were discussed.”

The invigorating creative process—later dubbed “hypercollaboration” by the design team—balanced compromises imposed by the site’s small size and pre-existing infrastructure. For example, the designers wanted to use pervious paving throughout the courtyard, but the underground recharge bays needed for drainage would not fit into the crowded subterranean space. Consequently, only the pavers around the planters are pervious.

But on the whole, the design team counted few disappointments, and four years after completion, the residential hall is an eye-catching feature of the Boston skyline and an inviting pocket park at street level. Both building and landscape are

Gillies-Smith worked with all dimensions to create spatial depth.

Wiggle in the walk: Opposite the plaza, curbs repeat the petals’ curves.

Varied spaces draw people in off the street.
PLANTER C – ENLARGED PLAN

PLANTER C – ELEVATIONS

PLANTER C – BENCH

PLANK GEOMETRY EXTENDS ACROSS THE SITE

PLANTER C – WOOD BENCH BACKREST PLAN

BENCH FEATURE LIGHT – CROSS SECTION

WOOD BENCH ON PRECAST CONCRETE WALL – PLAN

WOOD BENCH ON PRECAST CONCRETE WALL – ELEVATION

GROUND INC.

PLANTER C – ELEVATIONS

PLANTER C – BENCH

PLANK GEOMETRY EXTENDS ACROSS THE SITE
not only functioning well, but have reaped several awards, including a 2015 ASLA Honor Award for Residential Design.

Gilles-Smith is particularly proud of the finesse the contractors achieved, given a modest budget and the challenges of fabricating one-of-a-kind pieces, such as the intricate sections of the planter walls. She credits Ground's tight construction drawings, extensive oversight, and the recession—the project started in 2008 and finished in 2012. “A lot of contractors didn’t have much work, and they wanted to keep their A teams busy,” she says. “They were up to the challenges.”

JANE ROY BROWN IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR TO LAM BASED IN WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS.

Project Credits

CLIENT/OWNER MASSACHUSETTS COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN/ MASSACHUSETTS STATE COLLEGE BUILDING AUTHORITY, BOSTON.

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE GROUND INC., SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS (SHAUNA GILLIES-SMITH, ASLA; HIROTSUGU TSUCHIYA; OLIVERA BERCE; LAURA KNOSP; KIRSTEN BRUDEVOLD).

ARCHITECT ADD INC. (NOW STANTEC), BOSTON (B. K. BOLEY, TAMARA ROY, DAVID LUNNY).

CIVIL ENGINEER NITSCH ENGINEERING, BOSTON.

LIGHTING DESIGNER LAM PARTNERS, CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS.

TECHNICAL LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE CONSULTANT RYAN ASSOCIATES, WALTHAM, MASSACHUSETTS.

IRRIGATION DESIGN IRIGATION CONSULTING, PEPPERELL, MASSACHUSETTS.

GENERAL CONTRACTOR SUFFOLK CONSTRUCTION, BOSTON.

LANDSCAPE CONTRACTOR VALLEYCREST LANDSCAPE DEVELOPMENT (NOW BRIGHTVIEW), BOSTON.

PRECAST CONCRETE CONTRACTOR NORTHERN DESIGN/ PRECAST INC., LOUDON, NEW HAMPSHIRE.

CONSTRUCTION MANAGER DAEDALUS PROJECTS, BOSTON.