2011 ASLA Design Awards

Adams County Government Center and Natural Park
Merit Award
Norris Design

Design over $500,000 Construction Budget
Project Name: Adams County Government Center and Natural Park

Project Location: Brighton, Colorado

Project Summary:
The 90-acre Adams County Government Center and Natural Park has been designed to engage, educate, and evoke a direct emotional connection to the natural environment and the strong historical foundations of the County. While the Government Center welcomes visitors to the natural surroundings, the gem of the development is the Natural Park that embraces the development and buffers it from nearby major highways while encouraging the exploration and celebration of the natural setting. This portion of the site had been historically utilized as the irrigation storage ponds for the adjacent farms, but in its new use, these ponds have been rehabilitated and preserved into a series of wetland cells that cascade down and around the site. A regional pedestrian and bike trail winds its way in and around the wetland cells connecting users with the native landscape and diverse wildlife species that call this new development home.

Purpose of Project:
The Government Center and Natural Park directly immerses its visitors in its design as it consolidates the County offices into one central campus. The campus is strategically located at the crossroads of the Adams Crossing main street and is intended to visually engage the community at the street level. This approach blends the built environment with nature, demonstrates the County’s culture and helps to prepare citizens for positive roles in the future. The ultimate result is a project that demonstrates a responsive, interactive, and transparent government through its built environment.

Visitors to the Natural Park are immediately engaged in the design of the park. Interpretive signage is placed within the park and explains the history of the County Government, details the historical importance of irrigation in the County and describes the exceptional water fowl life that exists here. In fact, this area of the County is the top bird watching area within the state due to it's proximity to Barr Lake. The newly preserved habitat will provide a healthy ground nesting habitat and sustains old growth trees for a wide variety of water fowl, song birds and birds of prey. The Natural Park also provides a diversity of habitats that will support many species of urban wildlife. The trails and boardwalk that meanders through the park and it's wetlands provide park visitors with some unusual vantage points throughout the park of the spectacular wildlife that thrives here.

Near the center of the Natural Park, a shade shelter and a playground for children provide a respite from the hot sun. The shade shelter, crafted from similar design materials as the building, reaches out to the visitors and employees to welcome them into the Natural Park. Small picnic areas are also located throughout the park for the employees and residents to use during the course of their visit.

Construction Budget: $5,500,000
Role of the Landscape Architect:
The Landscape Architect played a key role in developing the site plan and drainage plan for the project. During conceptual design, the landscape architect developed 3D graphics that assisted the County in visualizing the layout of the site and how the Natural Park would play into the campus. In addition, these graphics were used in assisting the client with fundraising for the park, which resulted in securing $500,000 to offset the costs.

For the drainage plan, the Landscape Architect developed a concept that allowed the area along the southern and eastern edge of the site to become semi-passive constructed wetlands. This key concept allows the entire Adams Crossing development and Adams County Government Center Campus to return clean water back to the regional watershed through natural phytoremediation process in eight (8) separate constructed wetland cells. The constructed wetland cells cascade down through the watershed and act as a natural buffer from the major highways that encircle the site and provide desired urban wildlife habitat directly adjacent to the site.

The Landscape Architect worked in tandem with the Architect and the Civil Engineer to further develop the concept by including porous landscape detention, rain gardens and bio-swarues to demonstrate other semi-passive ways to recycle effluents on the site.

The Landscape Architect provided oversight for these key design elements as large segments of the Natural Park were developed a full year after the Government Center was complete. The first two cells were a challenge to develop due to a high degree of effluent being discharged and its resultant algae growth in the pond. The pond was dewatered and the wetland plants germinated separately prior to filling the cells.

As with all public buildings, security was a predominant element of the design. In this project, the Landscape Architect was responsible for developing a 50’ – 70’ impenetrable, but visually creative, setback from the building. The visitors to the building are able to conveniently park, but are immersed in the beautifully landscaped grounds as part of the overall experience of entering the building. The barriers are designed to be unnoticeable and include native stone walls, large boulders and deep drainage swales that were originally envisioned as a moat. The various barriers welcome the visitors to the campus visually in a variety of creative designs that don’t readily reveal their ultimate purpose.

Special Factors:
The special challenge for the Landscape Architect was to take this overall concept and connect the County’s citizens to the history, culture and natural environment of the Government Center and Natural Park.

Visitors to the campus are immediately introduced to the history and culture of the County at the front door with a sculptural element that artfully emulates the center pivot irrigation devices that have played a prominent role in the agricultural-based commerce of this region for decades. The geometric rows of plants and grasses at the foreground of the buildings replicate the rows of crops that have been grown in this region for the last 100 years. At the rear or employee entry side of the building, the landscape takes a more organic form and fits closer with the more natural landscape patterns of the Natural Park.

Project Significance:
Traditionally, government centers have been designed to be places for people to passively experience, by frequenting only to receive public services and then leave. They are often cold and uninspiring places that people don’t enjoy visiting. This is what the Client had seen previously and was fully expecting that same solution as we began the design process. But as we began to discuss the design and how we could captivate visitors with the project’s design theme, it became obvious that something more impactful was possible.

At the Adams County Government Center and Natural Park, the Landscape Architect took advantage of this opportunity to create an exceptional environment that satisfied all of the program elements that were identified early on in the design process. With the direction from the Client, the Landscape Architect created a campus that the employees and their visitors are able to become personally and emotionally connected to in a way that is truly uncommon.