2011 ASLA Design Awards

East - West Regional Trail
Merit Award
Architerra Group, Inc. / Douglas County Division of Parks, Trails, and Building Grounds

Design over $500,000 Construction Budget
Project Fact Sheet:  East-West Regional Trail, Douglas County, CO  Category 1A

Construction Budget:  $1,200,000

Project Summary:
The East-West Regional Trail is a 26 mile soft surface, multi-use trail along the south edge of the Denver metro area. The trail passes through shortgrass prairie, riparian and montane shrubland ecosystems.

Purpose of Project:
The idea for this trail was first conceived in 1986 by a citizens group comprised of members of the equestrian, hiking and cycling communities. This group lobbied public officials and the developer of the Highlands Ranch Subdivision to include a trail easement within the Backcountry Wilderness Area, an 8,200 acre open space dedicated as part of the development process. Their goal was to achieve public access through this incredible open space and one day connect important regional trails on both ends of the project site.

Role of Landscape Architect:
The landscape architect was the prime consultant for the entire design process including public facilitation, master planning, design development, construction documentation, bid administration and construction administration for the project. The design team also included ecologists, structural engineers, and civil engineers. The Douglas County landscape architect led the political process to plan and implement the trail.

Special Factors:
Multi-Jurisdictional Collaboration:
The trail crosses eight jurisdictional boundaries (towns, cities, counties, metro districts, school district) which required extensive coordination and collaboration. Without a leader and project champion, this project would likely still be bogged down in bureaucracy. A landscape architect with Douglas County became the champion and took the leadership for coordinating the project among all the governmental entities.

Balance User Needs with Environmental Stewardship
This important regional trail must accommodate multiple uses: hiking; mountain biking; and equestrian use. The largest challenge was aligning the trail through this unique environment while minimizing impacts to the landscape and wildlife habitat. The landscape architect spent countless hours in the field with the project ecologist delineating a trail alignment that would balance these goals. Even when the trail was located in areas like ridgelines that were not identified as important habitat, care was taken to locate the trail below ridgelines as silhouetted trail users can spook large mammals like elk.

Regional Context:
While this trail can stand alone as an amazing experience through an incredible landscape, the regional importance of this trail cannot be understated. The trail connects to the concrete multi-use Cherry Creek Trail to the east. This trail goes from the confluence of the S. Platte River and Cherry Creek in downtown Denver approximately 42 miles to Castlewood Canyon State Park in Douglas County. Recent counts by the Colorado Department of Transportation show this trail averages over 1,825 daily users. On the west end the trail will connect to the soft-surface multi-use High Line Canal Trail, which is approximately 66 miles in length. The High Line Canal Trail connects to the Colorado Trail which traverses the entire state. In additional to these regional trail
connections, the trail makes numerous local connections to neighborhoods, schools, parks, recreation centers, etc.

*Sustainable Design:*
Principles of sustainable design were extremely important to the landscape architect and the jurisdictions. In addition to ecologically sensitive trail layout, it was important to minimize grading and erosion impacts on the landscape. Existing two track ranch roads were utilized for the trail where practical. Natural surface materials were used when the soils and slopes were suitable. Specifications were written with language related to minimal construction impacts. Crusher fines material was spread from an asphalt spreading truck minimizing impacts to the native landscape. Wildlife friendly road underpasses were designed and are utilized by existing elk and deer herds. Rather than remove existing cottonwood trees, the pedestrian bridge was sited between the trees and the riprap armoring was installed around their roots. Disturbed areas were prepared and seeded with a native seed mix. An aggressive weed control program was undertaken by Douglas County to help establish the native grasses.

*Budget:*
Once the trail alignment was determined, the landscape architect prepared an overall cost estimate and detailed cost estimates for each jurisdiction. Jurisdictional funding cycles and priorities made implementing the entire project extremely challenging. The project landscape architect and Douglas County submitted a grant application to Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO), the entity that funds park and trail projects with lottery proceeds. In the current economic climate, the grant process has become extremely competitive as agencies try to do more with less. GOCO saw the value and importance of this regional trail and awarded a $1,000,000 grant, the largest single trail grant in the history of the organization. This allowed the trail project to be completed.

*Uniform Signage:*
A system of uniform directional and informational signage gently reminds users of the rules of the trail. Interpretive signage tells the story of the unique landscape, the flora and fauna and the history of the site. All the signage was designed with cor-ten steel supports that reflect a ranching vernacular.

*Significance:*
The East-West Regional Trail carefully passes through three distinct Colorado ecosystems. It provides an incredible user experience while balancing access with environmental stewardship. The project is a great example of how a landscape architect can affect thoughtful trail design within a regional context. The trail serves over 500,000 people in the Denver metro area. There are not many trails in the country where you can hear elk bugling while taking in views of a major metropolitan area and one of the most impressive mountain ranges in the world.