2011 ASLA Design Awards

Top of the Rockies National Scenic and Historic Byway
Merit Award
Bluegreen

Planning & Urban Design
Project Title: Top of the Rockies National Scenic and Historic Byway

Project Location: Pitkin, Summit, Eagle and Lake Counties, Colorado

Project Category 2: Planning

Construction Budget: N/A

Project Statement:
Top of the Rockies National Scenic and Historic Byway (Byway) — a 117-mile stretch of alpine highway that seldom drops below 9,000 feet — crosses the Continental Divide into unparalleled wilderness and journeys through historic and living working towns, giving an elevated experience to any visitor who travels along it. Without site-sensitive design guidelines, current land use policies, and a methodology for producing fundable and implementable projects, the Byway lacked a cohesive experience. The multi-headed client of the United States Forest Service (USFS) and the Top of the Rockies Board of Directors sought to update the Byway by calling upon the landscape architect to lead an expert team including a sustainability consultant, an interpretation planner, a graphic designer, and a transportation engineer. Along with the support of two regions of the Colorado Department of Transportation, regional historical societies, and local non-profits, the team produced the Byway planning documents which consist of a Corridor Management Plan (CMP), an Interpretive Management Plan (IMP), Design Guidelines, and the Independence Pass Summit Master Plan. These innovative documents will help ensure the integrity and health of the Byway and its surrounding lands for perpetuity, thus preserving this elevated experience for generations to come.

Project Narrative:
The landscape architect engaged this project by following the principles of collaboration, sustainability, and economy. The expansive scale, high number of stakeholders, and the compressed timeframe required the landscape architects to take a proactive approach to leadership, fostering necessary collaboration between clients, team members, and the public. Sustainability was also a guiding concern. The Byway treks through the pristine alpine wilderness of the White River and Pike San Isabel National Forests and numerous towns, all which embody the region’s intrinsic qualities — the scenic, natural, historic, cultural, archeological and recreational features. It was imperative that the preservation, enhancement, and interpretation of these intrinsic qualities were balanced with sustainable and economic site development. The landscape architect strove to work alongside collaborators to generate a simple yet rich methodology for such improvements. The resulting Byway planning documents achieved just that and express, at their core, a deep respect for this unique and wild landscape.

After numerous internal meetings and investigation, the landscape architect held a design charrette and public open house regarding the development of a prominent site on the Byway, the Independence Pass Summit. Existing Byway conditions, design precedent imagery, and a site analysis were provided to serve as the foundation for comments on the future design. After an initial master plan was completed, another public open house was held to gather further feedback. In the end, public comments not only guided the Independence Pass Summit Master
Plan but the CMP, IMP, and Design Guidelines as well, making public engagement an integral step in the planning documents’ process.

The challenges of the Byway project are notable. The scale and diversity of resources encompass contentious overlapping issues such as transportation, tourism, ecological function, and land use. Additionally, extreme altitude and climate put any potential design solution to the test. Large snow volumes and harsh winter conditions are especially challenging when considering site durability and management. Finally, the compressed timeframe of the project posed considerable problems in producing such a large and complex document suite. The landscape architect, invigorated by the scale, complexity, and timeline of the project, produced innovative documents that deliver:

The Corridor Management Plan addresses regional issues and goals by providing a community-based strategy that balances preservation, enhancement and interpretation of the corridor’s intrinsic qualities with the beneficial use, safety and enjoyment of the Byway user. The CMP specifies the actions, procedures, operational practices, and administrative strategies that may be employed to maintain the intrinsic qualities of the Byway.

The Interpretive Management Plan assesses the current state of the Byway and contains recommendations for improving Byway interpretation, focusing on the combination of new-tech and traditional interpretation. Dynamic interpretation methods reach and engage a diverse audience with a variety of interests, making the Byway a viable regional asset for years to come.

The Design Guidelines provide a simple framework and intuitive methodology for designing and planning sustainable physical improvements along the Byway. These improvements promote a sustainable ecology — the harmonious and perpetual co-habitation of human and natural systems. The manual provides best practices and tools to plan, design, construct, and maintain improvements along the Byway.

Finally, the Independence Pass Summit Master Plan was developed in conjunction with the CMP, IMP, and Design Guidelines to ensure a holistic process, shaping methodology and developing a successful master plan. The master plan represents the vision, goals and objectives of the USFS and the Byway Board.

The Top of the Rockies National Scenic and Historic Byway planning project is exemplary of the holistic approach and varied skillset of the landscape architect. By balancing the roles of leader, communicator, advocate, and designer, the landscape architect was able to create an inclusive process that produced useful tools. These tools held within the CMP, IMP, Design Guidelines, and Independence Pass Master Plan will have far-reaching effects on the Byway, shaping development and the understanding of site history and ecology for years to come. By consolidating dispersed information, the landscape architect expects the document will create positive discussion, advocate for environmental stewardship, and act as an example of innovation in interpretation and site-sensitive development.