

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

The Detroit Collaborative Design Center

The Detroit Collaborative Design Center is the equivalent of what a teaching hospital is to a medical school, we are to a school of architecture. With that said, there are about ten full-time employees, and eight of them are professional architects, landscape architects, urban designers and planners, and two-to-three students work alongside those professionals, like students would work alongside doctors. They work with real projects that come from other non-profit organizations. We work exclusively with non-profits. Our work is more than just architecture. It's more than just urban design. It's really all the things that relate to the built environment. One particular project we're working on and have been for the last several years is an unearthing of a creek in an area of the city of Detroit. We call that the Bloody Run Creek Storm Water Management Project. It's a project that's intended to be a place of recreation for people, but also a blue-green infrastructure. It will clean water, clean land and clean air as part of the project. We see that as a very strong, significant project for a place like Detroit. We've also worked on envisioning the major corridors in our city, particularly Woodward Avenue. We did a study with the Woodward Avenue Action Association on what a green infrastructural transportation system can look like. So besides just saying we're having light rail go up on Woodward: what does that look like, as well as how can we collect water? Can we have bioswales? A variety of sort of interconnected types of infrastructure?

Don't Just Fix It, Redesign It

There really are some very negative things that are going on and need to be addressed, but there are some incredible positive things that are happening as well. With regard to the infrastructure, there has been, for years, wonderful work that's been happening at the community, at the infrastructural level, utilizing the vacant land. Now, yes, the existing infrastructure requires work. An example would be the water system. It is a central sewer system that collects all rainwater and human waste into a single cleansing system. We and the city have been working through looking at how to separate this into a multi-dimensional system, particularly two systems: one that cleans mechanically, more traditionally, human waste, so having waste treatment plants; but then a system that would clean the rainwater, so it would not overload the central sewer system that we have. The work that's been happening is developing ponds and using the land that we have to clean the rainwater and the system—that is adequate for the kind of population we've had. But it's inadequate when it's collecting the rain and the other water, the ground water that comes through the pass.

Effective Engagement

We truly believe that in the work for the built environment, we need to be thinking about more people, we need to be thinking about more programs and more geography: essentially, as many people as we can bring around the table and the many ways of doing that. It's more than just having a community meeting; it's having a variety of types of ways that have people engage in the way that's appropriate with their time schedules, with their abilities, with the connections they have through technology to reach a deeper knowledge or content exchange. What I mean by that is that in Detroit we have a digital divide that's quite strong. Digital engagement works, but it only works with a certain core group of people who have that technology access. Community meetings work, but they work with a certain group of people. It's not about developing a tactic that is one-size-fits-all; it's about developing tactics that connect. It's the connection of all those tactics that can build a deeper dialogue. One of the core beliefs we have in this is truly trying to blend through these varieties of methods, blend in community expertise with discipline expertise and expertise of engineers and designers and economists and developers and so on, blending that together. It's not one side or another; it's about all sides working together to move forward together.

Citizens Need to Stay Engaged, or They Won't Like the Results

Citizens are talking about it. The problem is that talking isn't connected with the engineers or the designers or the other folks that are doing the work, and that's where we feel our job lies. I think it's natural to understand how that occurs. I mean infrastructure is a very knowledge-intensive action. It takes a lot of knowledge to understand how to get infrastructure produced. We've all been part of meetings where someone will say there's too much knowledge to bring more people into the dialogue. Some feel that they're just doing it because they have the knowledge needed to move forward, and they do have the discipline knowledge, but then there's knowledge that has to do with communities and how they connect with each other. One of the biggest challenges we have in the region of Detroit is communities talking beyond the boundaries of their own communities to other communities. Having that dialogue where communities can learn from each other, which then ultimately will benefit infrastructure, particularly transportation infrastructure, is invaluable. If I can give one brief example: in the community where our office is located in northwest Detroit, there was a study done, with wonderful community engagement, for how to deal with the very wide road going through this community. Communities loved the response; there was a median that was developed that the community looked forward to and was excited about, and thought that it would slow traffic and so on in the discussion, and how mass transportation could work with it. People went, and then community engagement stopped. They designed it and they built it. And now the community is lobbying to get that median and the changes made removed because they completely hate the response. And people say, "wait a minute, how could this happen?" So the other thing I would add is that community engagement is wonderful but it has to happen all the way through the process. There are some very simple things that could have happened in the dialogue. Where do

turnarounds occur in a median? Where should bus stops occur here and there? To have that dialogue, and continued knowledge exchange throughout the process, would have benefited this entire single project. I can talk generally about it, but then thinking about specifically how a project that's maybe three or four miles long could start with grand fanfare, people loving the project, now people lobbying to have it removed because the civic engagement did not continue.

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