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**Parks and trails within Knoxville urban wilderness corridor:
A Freshman's brush with sustainable landscape design
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When asked “what is a *park*?” our mind conjures up a variety of words and images: lush green vistas, winding paths and lakes for some, and ball fields and picnic tables for others. Add to that, the issues of land ethics and low impact development, and the imagery changes even further- but not so quickly, not so easily. That is what our Freshmen Fall 2010 Landscape Architecture design studio was about. We were to design a navigation network of trails interlaced with pocket parks of upto an acre within a conservation easement that was appropriated by Legacy Parks Foundation of Knoxville for the Knoxville Urban Wilderness Corridor. The site spreads over about 70 acres of hilly terrain, next to UT Medical Center on the south side of the river in Knoxville, Tennessee. To give you an idea of local context, the population of South Knoxville is about 26,500 with most people in construction related or other blue-collar jobs, as per a 2009 study. There are very few parks accessible to these people for relaxation. The community sees itself as separate from the “big city life” of Knoxville. The residents who have been in the community for years can sometimes be at odds with the developers that come in, build large apartment complexes for the more affluent of Knoxville, and don’t stop to consider the impact of these sites on the people whose families have lived there for decades. The place has a largely forgotten historic value since it was the site of Civil War battlegrounds and encampments in the 1860s.

Through the fundamental design studio offered by Professor Archana Sharma, my peers and I learned that a place as simple as a park is not only a recreational space but an identity of the local place, a built illustration of socio-cultural, political, economic context, a repository of social and ecological history, a confluence of landscape systems, and a memory bank with layers and layers of memories. Not a hypothetical combination of form and materials assembled on-site based on designers whims, but an outcome of sensitive dialogue between the site and context. Only, it should be expressed through design as a harmonious, poetic intermeshing of spatial organizations and volumes, forms, materials, textures. This is where the individual challenge became most apparent. To know that the winding paths with small outlooks or resting points, along the way to the park that we were to design, would carry a distinct imprint of our years of conditioning, was thrilling and empowering.

Only after many class exercises including McHarg’s suitability analysis oriented systems’ mapping, and field trips in understanding and experiencing the site to get at the essential character of place, and with reminders to be sensitive to other biodiversity – a tenet of Leopoldian land ethics, did we embark on our designs.

After much site-context analyses, we began to formulate our own plans and ideas for what the parks and trails could be and where they would be located. Our site encompassed a wide range of natural features, challenging terrain, water sources, and is nestled between a few residential areas of varying socio-economic classes. Some viewed certain elements of the site as constraints whereas others took full advantage of those same elements. In Yue Xue's project, which focused mainly on "depth", a series of bridges were constructed to help lead people out from the hilltops and over deep valleys to further emphasize the topography of the landscape. This certainly got people talking as some saw it as a risky move. The locations of major structures such as bridges needs very strong conceptual basis and her locations could have been further thought out. Many classmates sought to avoid creating spaces on the steep terrain, whereas Danielle Norman actually created a whole progression of spaces atop one of the ridges to create a "journey" park. While the progression of spaces was very successful, some of the program elements needed more refinement. Some more thought about what could realistically happen in some of her spaces would have helped solidify the idea even more. Patrick Osborne found his ideas based around transportation and how people experienced a park at different speeds and by using different methods of transport through the space. His challenge was giving both groups of users the same types of experiences within the park. Hierarchy of spaces became a valuable asset for some: Will Copeland's emphasizes certain elements of the landscape that had strong historical value, Troy Gardner's created a journey from the urban context to a type of wilderness haven, and my own design sought to influence people's movements through different visual, path, and spatial organizations of spaces. All of the projects could have potentially benefitted from a little more boldness in design, but when dealing with conservation easements, a real client, and our first major design project in Landscape Architecture, we may have settled for the safer designs. Overall, tackling this design challenge was a great learning experience made more educative and fun by our enthusiastic, passionate course instructor Dr Sharma and our fantastic Critics such as Carol Evans from Legacy Parks Foundation, Landscape Architect Mike Fowler and Professors: Terry Clements, George Smith, Brian Ambroziak, Ken McCown, Curtis Stewart, Garry Menendez and Sam Rogers.

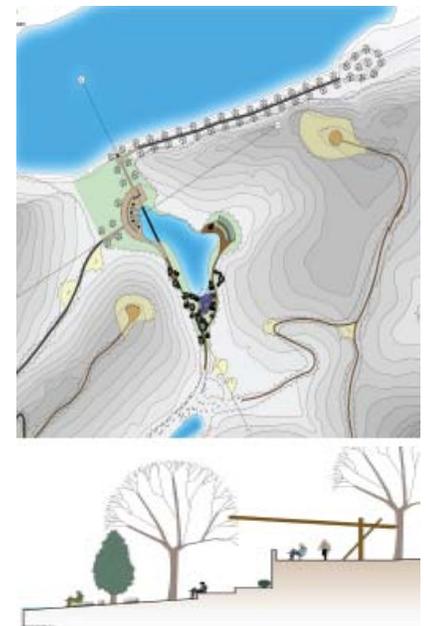
Just beginning our journey to become Landscape Architects, the process, as one might expect, is arduous and intellectually challenging. Coming from diasporic lives of engineers, businessmen, designers, anthropologists, wood-workers, our transformative journey to become land stewards of tomorrow has begun. That a sustainable landscape has to be low impact and context sensitive at so many levels is a lesson learnt for further evaluation and progression.



William Copeland.
Memorial to history



Luke Murphree.
Facilitating social and natural connections



Troy Gardener.
Exploring interactions with water