

Application to 2018 IDA Downtown Achievement Awards

Category: Public Space

Submitted by: Rosslyn BID, Arlington, Va.

Summary: Streetscape Elements Masterplan

A toolbox for revitalizing pedestrian space and identity in Rosslyn, Va.

The Problem:

Strategically located on the banks of the Potomac River, across the Key Bridge from Georgetown and Washington, D.C., Rosslyn is a 21st-century, 17-block, urban core in Arlington County, Virginia. Recent reinvestment of billions of dollars in redevelopment from its property owners, along with adoption of the County's 2015 Realize Rosslyn Plan, have provided Rosslyn with an impressive skyline, many blocks of great architecture and 10 million square feet of office space. Improvements have attracted 13,000 residents—and more redevelopment is on the way.

With so many new buildings, reinvestments and residents, it was critical that the street level experience responded to the growing pedestrian needs. The Rosslyn Business Improvement Corporation Board challenged the BID's Urban Design staff to focus on the opportunities for enhancement of the public sidewalks. The sidewalk areas needed welcoming amenities and a unified pedestrian environment to "tie" the district together, support commercial frontage, and reinforce Rosslyn's contemporary architecture and unique identity.

The Process

RBIC staff looked at examples of successful urban pedestrian districts that transformed their sidewalk environments and reinforced their district's character, helping to define "place." To help Rosslyn achieve such sidewalk transformation, RBIC's then Urban Design Director, Lucia deCordre, enlisted the assistance of New York-based Industrial Designer Ignacio Ciocchini, who helped transform the popular Chelsea Meatpacking District, the 34th Street Partnership and Bryant Park into successful pedestrian environments through custom-designed furnishings and elements.

An in-house analysis and photo inventory of each Rosslyn street frontage identified areas of empty sidewalks and a lack of inviting pedestrian amenities. While some pedestrian areas were devoid of amenities, other areas appeared overwhelmed with the "visual clutter" of uncoordinated bike racks, news boxes and a wide variety of signage. The missing and repetitive elements of existing sidewalk areas helped to inform and develop a toolkit of custom-designed streetscape elements. It was hoped that these custom elements would help establish and reinforce Rosslyn's character at the street level and provide much-needed pedestrian attraction and amenities. Key elements include benches, bike racks, trash and recycling receptacles, newsbox corrals, kiosks, informational tableaus, planters, sign stanchions and fencing name tags. A curb-side parklet was also designed as part of the project to further support pedestrian activity by expanding the public sidewalk where needed.

The style and material of the elements were chosen to reflect the contemporary architectural style of redevelopment in Rosslyn. They were to be complementary in color and character to the materials used in the new urban environment. Each element was designed for high functionality and style, efficiently and effectively achieving its purpose. Rosslyn's identity was further reinforced in the design of the perforation pattern found on most of the elements. The perforations reflect a unique pattern of window lights in the night-time skyline of Rosslyn. On other elements, the name "Rosslyn" is embedded or part of the design, helping to promote wayfinding as well as identity.

RBIC worked closely with stakeholders and County staff throughout the conceptual stages and the design process. Presentations were made to many committees, professionals and interest groups as well as to County Commissions to build support for the streetscape elements. Public input was incorporated through each stage, helping to refine the final design of the streetscape elements.

During the design process, immediate enhancements were identified and made to reduce the visual clutter of mismatched existing streetscape. These interim measures were quick solutions through consistency in color. RBIC Ambassadors spray-painted banner stanchions and sign straps to be the

same color as the poles they were on, allowing the banners and signs to be the focus. Other immediate “fixes” were made by hiring a local industrial painter to spray-paint the BID’s large terra-cotta colored concrete planters throughout the district to an urban charcoal color, consistent with the upcoming streetscape element and in the same color family as the BID’s tree-box fences and County’s street lights. The consistency in color made a dramatic difference in the visual quality of the sidewalks. These interim improvements remain and continue to support and reinforce the new streetscape elements.

Once the elements were designed, RBIC worked with the County to identify a prominent location to install prototypes of each element as a demonstration project. With a location approved, Ignacio worked with Landscape Forms’ custom fabrications division to fabricate the first set of elements. Seventeen prototype elements were produced, including a single roving information cart and a moveable solar-powered charging station.

Additional input sessions were held to solicit public feedback on the installed elements as part of the final process for County Board approval. RBIC then worked closely with the County Urban Design staff to develop a policy for the implementation of the streetscape throughout Rosslyn. The County Board adopted the Streetscape Elements Masterplan in June 2017, adding it as an addendum to the County’s Rosslyn Sector Plan.

PROMOTING THE PROJECT

To get people excited about the project, social media was used to spread the word and announcements were made at the American Society of Landscape Architects’ annual dinner in Washington, D.C. Once the demonstration project was installed, a public opening celebration was held, launched by a County Board member. Local media were in attendance. Others who helped launch the project included numerous County departments, Rosslyn stakeholders and residents, Rosslyn BID Board members, and design professionals.

OUTCOME

Since the installation of the prototype, the project has received an Arlington County design award and much media coverage. RBIC’s Urban Planning and Design Manager, Doug Plowman is working closely with County staff and proceeding with the fabrication and installation of Phase 1 of the project on prominent streets. Central Place, a newly built, full-block redevelopment project, revised their previously approved streetscape furnishings to include the Rosslyn streetscape elements. In addition, new redevelopment proposals are including the Rosslyn elements to add to the continuity. The project has set precedent and has led to policy creation in Arlington County.

CONCLUSION: LESSONS LEARNED

- Not everyone has the same taste in design. It’s important that the design is appropriate to the setting and its needs and uses (a traditional Victorian wooden slat park bench with iron scroll work may be nice in a park, but may not be appropriate for slick urban bus stop).
- A full analysis of what exists is critical to understanding the dominant existing streetscape elements. It’s also important to understand all options for pulling together a streetscape.
- Start with a few basic streetscape elements and build on them.
- Often, quick and easy fixes help to dramatically improve the streetscape (such as painting elements all the same color scheme, or planting one prevailing color throughout).
- Including many different stakeholders to provide input helps build support.
- A prototype project is a great way to gain buy-in and provides opportunity to consider possible or necessary modifications.