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Cynthia Kemper

Crossing Cultures

Environmentally conscious thought leaders are becoming more vocal about the impact of the built environment.

In an attempt to open communications and find common ground, an emerging group of "translators" has surfaced within academic, development, and planning circles offering a bridge of understanding between those who come from a development world view and those who seek an environmentally sustainable approach.

Although their personal views and experiences vary greatly, getting to know a few of these translators—their definitions, perspectives, and the experiences that catalyzed their commitment to sustainable development—may help motivate others to join them in the margins where an integrated development model is fast emerging.

The green roof on Salt Lake City's new main library building is only one of many features that make Library Square sustainable in the city's harsh climate.

Among these translators are developers Mark Falcone and Tom Gougeon of Continuum Partners, best known for their Belmar and Bradburn developments in suburban Denver. Falcone, who grew up in Syracuse, New York, gleaned some fruitful insights and a few life-defining ideals from work experiences at his family's integrated development company. These same ideals catalyzed his move west and the launch in 1997 of Continuum, a Denver–based real estate development firm collaboratively founded on a belief in the connection between long-term, sustained property value and high-quality urban design.

Curious about why some real estate projects hold their value better than others, Falcone sought to identify those elements that ensure long-term sustainability. The projects he admired seemed to honor a diversity of pedestrian assets and products, and were highly profitable, offering greater potential for extended returns, Gougeon explains.

"Over time, Mark observed that the more easily duplicated new 'stand-alone' suburban real estate assets—those lacking a relationship to any larger fabric or context—were losing their value and appeal," explains Gougeon, who was recruited by Falcone to join Continuum in Colorado.

"The projects that appreciated most in value tended to be part of a denser, more diverse fabric . . . designed to be more adaptable to changing market demographics, as well as technological and cultural influences," he says. "The value of those assets was derived not from their newness, but from their location, context, and ability to be reused, adapted, and evolve over time."

Gougeon, a Philadelphia native known for his innovative urban developments, explains that Continuum's philosophy is founded on traditional family business approaches—like those of Falcone's upbringing—which he believes are quite different from those of the more institutional or formulaic real estate developers, who tend to focus on repetitive, high-volume approaches.

"Real estate has increasingly become an institutional business aggregated into very large-scale organizations focused on the creation, acquisition, and disposition of assets," Gougeon asserts. "Conversely, the traditional family development business model adheres to a more place-based, market-context orientation where value is created through family-owned equity and risk.

"Businesses like ours are focused on context, whole patterns, debt reduction, and achieving long-term appreciation. Fee-driven developers tend to get in and get out—with less emphasis on long-term value," he explains. Continuum focuses on establishing a sense of place, diver-

Cynthia Kemper, *principal of Denver-based Marketekture, is a market development consultant and strategist for architecture, urban planning, and design firms.*

sity, and pedestrian scale on only a handful of projects at a time—in contrast to the usual risk-reduction formulas of repeatability and scalability. As a result, notes Gougeon, the firm is able to create more livable, sustainable communities. For Continuum, he adds, merging the worlds of development and sustainability produces long-term community spaces that grow richer over time.

How do the partners at Continuum define sustainability? First, they take a macro view, Gougeon explains, starting with questions like: "How can we create and manage compelling urban spaces in a way that leaves room for long-term preservation of working landscapes and wild places?" and, "Should a site even be developed within the regional framework as a logical 'center of gravity'—taking into account issues like transportation needs, local and regional context, and the physical form of the community?"

Then Continuum's principals move on to micro issues, and the longer-term, site-specific, sustainable attributes of the program and design. "How you build, and what you build, are only two of the questions we explore," explains Gougeon. "We also ask 'What desirable, more sustainable features and attributes will this particular community and market context allow us to successfully incorporate?'

"In the end, because of our highly customized response to each opportunity, our projects are more intellectually interesting, challenging, and complicated in a way that allows us to meet or exceed other projects out there," he maintains. "With successful execution, the long-term potential for greater profitability and sustainability is quite high."

Another of Continuum's sustainability values, he adds, is making a "meaningful long-term commitment" to its projects. In addition to development, design, and planning, the company assumes a management role, overseeing daily operations, security, maintenance, and other responsibilities. This creates a deeper commitment to the project's long-term sustainability, says Gougeon, and a closer bond to the community as a whole.

Gene Bressler, another emerging bridge builder between the worlds of environmental sustainability and development, grew up on Long Island in New York, not far from Levittown, a small suburban community created by William Levitt for returning World War II servicemen and their families. As a part of the great 1950s spread of suburbia, Levittown's ranch-style rowhomes were purchased for $7,990—plus $100 down—providing some of America's earliest affordable housing.

This suburban experiment left a deep and lasting impression on Bressler—one that ultimately defined his vision and ambitions at an early age. For him, the suburban model exemplified by Levittown—and played out in thousands of communities across the United States—catalyzed one elemental question: How much more of this kind of development can be absorbed before the country can no longer afford it?

After receiving his bachelor's degree in landscape architecture from the State University in New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry and a master's degree in landscape architecture from Harvard University, Bressler studied the development impact on communities of density, growth, transportation, and resources, using advanced technological simulation and asking "What happens if . . . ?" Then, at the University of Oregon, his research focused on landscape suitability and urban growth modeling. After an extended stint in software development, Bressler returned to academia in 1997 as chair of the landscape ar-

chitecture department at the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center.

As a lifelong translator at the confluence of urban planning, landscape architecture, sustainable development, and smart growth practices, Bressler believes he is finally in a position to honor his original vision of encouraging creation of communities and retail developments in a more sustainable way.

"Denver is one of the top three meccas of landscape architecture in the country," Bressler explains. "San Francisco, Boston, Seattle, Philadelphia, and Denver are considered the most progressive. Landscape architecture has a lot to do with issues like recreation and land reclamation directly related to sustainable development.

"The word 'sustainability' has everything to do with the future," he says. "It's about creating development that meets the needs of the present—without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs."

Bressler's latest initiative, launched in spring 2004, is the university's new research center, the Colorado Center for Sustainable Urbanism (CCSU). With a mandate to examine the critical issues of air and water quality, transportation, and growth, Bressler is now asking, what happens if a couple million people move to Colorado or create new families there?

As director of the new center, Bressler is ultimately charged with developing Colorado's foremost urban growth think tank, staffed and equipped to examine the diverse, complex issues of urban growth; to disseminate related case studies, white papers, and publications; and to provide technical assistance to municipalities, organizations, and businesses interested in sustainable development.

With forecasters predicting that Colorado's population will increase by 2 million people over the next 20 years, Bressler's center is examining how this increase can be accommodated in sustainable ways that do not harm the state's land, infrastructure, and resources—while enhancing urban areas and the quality of life.

Yet another emerging translator is urban designer Mark Johnson, who moved to Colorado from Boston 22 years ago after immersing himself in the 1960s environmental movement. He and his wife, Ann Mullins, launched Civitas, Inc., in 1984 "to improve the quality of life in cities [and] create solutions that synthesize the complexity of issues that make cities meaningful," according to the company's mission statement.

While the Civitas team—urban designers, landscape architects, and planners—focuses primarily on projects involving infill, redevelopment, brownfield sites, transit-oriented design, and infrastructure, Johnson sees a thread of sustainability running through all his works.

"Realities are shifting," he explains. "The disincentives of commuting are becoming increasingly prohibitive, and the developer side is changing dramatically, too. Competition has grown, so profits have decreased in the outer regions. As a result, there's an increasing interest in infill. The hot new developments are definitely with infill—not sprawl. Better opportunities for reusing sites are moving development toward a more sustainable pattern of growth."

When Johnson thinks of sustainable development, though, he says he thinks of "creating goodness in a community," and making it "real." At Civitas, "cultural clues and core values like care, productivity, authenticity, vibrancy, and health" are what matter most, he notes. "Creating places where humanity and nature intersect makes places for people to tell their own stories"—sustainable development stories that are worth contemplating on a much broader scale. ■