



IOWA CITY DOWNTOWN STREETScape

URS CORPORATION

Project Overview

Iowa City's recently renovated downtown streetscape testifies to the ability of landscape architects to update public environments to meet contemporary needs and programs. The 12 blocks located between the University of Iowa and the Central Business District was developed in the 1970's as a pedestrian mall. Unlike other similar pedestrian spaces around the country, the pedestrian mall continues to thrive as the center of social and commercial interaction.

Three decades later, the landscape architects worked with a spectrum of community representatives to redesign the area using durable, contemporary streetscape elements that also more accurately reflected downtown's design history. The result is a new streetscape and central pedestrian mall that are safer, easier to maintain and more supportive of Iowa City's downtown businesses.

Of greatest value to the community were the existing mature trees including Pin Oaks and Little Leaf Lindens, the extensive brick paving and the strong pedestrian orientation. For budgetary and environmental benefit, the designers sought to reuse as much as possible in both plantings and hard materials. The highest quality trees were crown pruned and most of the brick pavers from the central mall were cleaned and reused. Original wood timber planters, steps and other worn out site furnishings were replaced with Iowa limestone, colored concrete, cast iron and steel.

Working from historic photographs, the team selected globe streetlights similar to those first used in the 1900's. Given the intense activity of the collegiate retail setting, only durable, easy maintenance materials



were used. The decaying timber planters were replaced with custom-designed, limestone slabs ranging from 1-3 feet in height. To conserve budget, the designers floated the pinned together slabs over a deepened stone base instead of more costly frost footings.

To create a design identity distinct to Iowa City, the designers worked with a Minneapolis metal fabricator to develop custom steel kiosks topped with a painted dome. Inspired by the original Iowa State capitol that still stands as a part of the University of Iowa, the kiosks and the smaller domed "posting pillars" serve as localized icons for the downtown district. The durability and high quality of these stately elements is intended to stand the test of time and to evoke a more respectful use from students.

Two Minnesota sculptors worked with the landscape architects to redesign the fountain at the core of the pedestrian mall. Beloved for years as a place to play in the water, the old fountain had become dangerous and difficult to maintain. The new fountain is designed as an interactive surface art piece with water jets shooting up from flame-finished granite pavers.

Role of the Landscape Architect

The landscape architect served as the project manager, public facilitator and lead designer working with a ten-member design committee and with a separate public arts committee to establish the public arts program. The landscape architect also developed detailed specifications for tree preservation during planter reconstruction.

Summary

The Iowa City Streetscape stands out as an urban design that reflects historic precedent and community preferences in tandem with regionally distinct public art and site furnishings. Both durable and human-scale, the update brings new opportunities for interaction between the city's university and local population while strengthening the image and identity of the downtown civic environment.

