



Integrating Artists and City Planning

THE FARGO PROJECT Lessons Learned

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The Fargo Project:
Join the Conversation
Where Nature + You =
A New Kind of Place!



GREENHOUSE
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The Fargo Project:
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A chance meeting between an ecological artist and an engaged citizen culminated in a transformative venture called The Fargo Project. The Project's first installation, coined as "World Garden Commons" (WGC), transforms an existing 18-acre storm water basin into a lively, useful green space while maintaining the basin's function as storm water storage.

The project offers not only an example of transformed urban flood management, but also the creation of an experimental, adaptive process for engaging residents, experts, and administrators in a common planning endeavor. Through extensive artist-led design and community involvement, the project is working to transform the Fargo community's perception of storm water and to create a new aesthetic of what a natural vegetative urban basin can be. The project also laid the groundwork for the community to continue to explore connections, local expertise, and passions while learning about its diverse cultures and creating an ecological commons.

The project integrates the Community Based Natural Resources Management, Creative Placemaking and Community Development practices, specifically focusing on socio-ecological components. It has received several awards from:

National Endowment for the Arts- 2011

ArtPlace America- 2014

North Dakota Outdoor Heritage Fund- 2015

The Kresge Foundation- 2015

By integrating best stormwater management practices and replicating those at other sites, the project aims to modify city governance structures to have a less intrusive style of land management. By educating the community on the benefits of the ecological restoration practices, the community will understand how their influence can affect change. The role of the artist is to carry the vision of transformation, the components of inclusiveness, and creative problem solving to build a sustainable program to support the community commons.

The experience gained from working with an artist proved invaluable to the outcomes that now define and shape the project. We have created this workbook in hopes of passing on our experiences to similar communities.

November 2015

Nicole Crutchfield, ASLA, AICP

City of Fargo Planning Administrator

Image: Jackie Brookner with a group of children playing in the stormwater basin at Rabanus Park, Fargo, North Dakota



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"Hidden in the roots of our words we find what we seem to want to forget--that we are literally the same stuff as earth. My work explores this identity while undermining the assumptions and values that keep us from acknowledging it."

Jackie Brookner

Setting the Stage

Fargo: A history of flooding and a need to re-imagine storm water infrastructure

Boasting a population of about 116,000, Fargo is the largest city in North Dakota, accounting for nearly 16% of the state's population. Located on supremely flat land, the floor of what was glacial Lake Agassiz, and along the Red River of the North, one of the only rivers to flow northwards, the City is extremely prone to flooding. Sudden summer downpours, as well as spring thaws along the river, can cause extreme flood events. The floods of 2009 required state of emergency declarations and engaged the National Guard.

Floodwater management is thus a central concern of city managers. The interests of businesses, homeowners and citizens ebbs and escalates during dry or flooding periods, depending on the severity, duration and real and imagined damages associated. During times of flooding, there is a general experience of chaos, unease and unrest. When there is lasting damage, for example, when an entire neighborhood needs to be moved or homes are destroyed, individuals experience real trauma. Many city residents carry a negative connection to the fickle river, and urban stormwater is seen as a potential menace, rather than a beneficial natural resource.

Flood management infrastructure around Fargo involves major investments, including concrete channels, drainage pipes, pumps and containment basins, or “ponds.” These basins are sprinkled throughout the city ranging from 2 to 20 acres in size. The ponds and their associated pipes and cement-lined ditches tend to create large barren, wind-swept spaces, separating neighborhoods and creating unfriendly barriers for people. The social and aesthetic impacts were not considered in the selection and construction of these basins. The older basins are located in underserved neighborhoods with low or moderate-income residents, including Fargo's Native American community and New American population—refugees and immigrants from 20 different nations.

Leadership at city government fully recognizes the quality of life challenges presented by the current infrastructure and have been open to creating a new knowledgebase and means of discovery to rethink management processes and structures.



Image: Yield and Welcome to Fargo: A City of Parks signs inundated during the 2009 flood

A Passionate Citizen and Receptive City Leadership

Cali L. Anicha, a passionate and active community member, introduced the idea of bringing artist Jackie Brookner to work with the City of Fargo to her long-time friend and City Administrator, Pat Zavoral. Cali recognized that Jackie's book *Urban Rain: Stormwater as Resource, 2009* would speak to the Administrator's professional need and personal aesthetic. Since Cali had a close friendship with Pat, she introduced the idea relentlessly:

Email:

Hi Pat!

Lynn and I are preparing to head off to New York this Saturday for a visit with my daughter in Brooklyn then a 6-day "sit" – meditation retreat. I believe I have sent info to you before about someone I have met previously on one of these retreats – her name is Jackie Brookner and she does these amazing water-reclamation-art-installation projects that I have been assuming are "right up your alley" – I just heard from her and will be meeting up with her probably Sunday.

Thus, I thought it might be right timing to see if you might be interested in bringing her to Fargo –now that there is all this gov't money (???)... perhaps I think too big – people do say that about me sometimes – however – one cannot rise to low expectations, yes? Let me know if you have time to check out Jackie's web site and if there is even a shadow of a chance that her work might relate to something you'd like to see the City do!

Cali's persistence paid off. City leaders including Mayor Dennis Walaker and Administrator Pat Zavoral understood that Jackie's experience could prove useful to helping them rethink the stormwater basins across the City.

A Qualified Artist

Jackie Brookner, Ecological Artist, experienced in a community-based approach, shared a mutual interest in the topic of stormwater with the community of Fargo. However, Jackie's body of work asserts that stormwater is a precious resource. Her work reveals how natural waterways mirror our very blood vessels. Her art connects humanity with nature. She was experienced in the active discovery of the under-told stories, what she described as "deep listening." She provided opportunities for people to exercise their own ability to solve problems and eagerly shared authorship of the solution.



Image: Jackie Brookner climbing a “buffalo boulder”

Ecological artist Jackie Brookner collaborated nationally and internationally with communities, policy makers, design professionals, ecologists, and engineers on water remediation / public art projects for parks, wetlands, rivers, and stormwater runoff. Respected as an artist and educator, she brought 30+ years’ professional experience to The Fargo Project; the last 20 years focused on site and audience specific ecological art projects. Her Biosculpture™ projects in Salo, Finland (2009), San Jose CA (2008), Cincinnati, OH (2009), West Palm Beach, FL (2005); and near Dresden, Germany (2002) are living water filtration systems that restore habitat, reclaim polluted water and create multifunctional public spaces. Her large-scale participatory remediation art projects are designed to help people reconnect with the places in which they live and to activate collective creative agency as people work together to develop viable strategies where regenerative cultures and ecologies can meet.

Brookner had extensive experience with public process and working with community members and stakeholders. In her museum exhibitions in the 1990’s: “Native Tongues” at The Miro Foundation in Barcelona, Spain and “Of Earth and Cotton,” that traveled throughout the southern United States, Brookner developed oral history strategies to explore how regional cultures and landscapes shape each other. In 2002-3, as winner of the NEA / National Park Service “Art and Community Landscapes” competition, she worked closely with local communities in 3 towns in the Pacific Northwest providing conceptual planning assistance on stream daylighting, restoration and trail projects, and designing public art.

Brookner is the recipient of numerous awards including The National Endowment for the Arts, The New York Foundation for the Arts, The Nancy Gray Foundation for Art in the Environment, and The Trust for Mutual Understanding. Urban Rain, in San Jose won several stormwater management awards including Project of the Year from the American Public Works Association. Brookner was Guest Editor of the 1992 Art Journal issue, “Art and Ecology.” Her essays can be found in Cultures and Settlements, in LA China, in M/E/A/N/I/N/G, in Natural Reality/Artistic Positions Between Nature and Culture. Brookner lectures internationally, and has taught at Harvard Univ., the Univ. of Pennsylvania, and Parsons School of Design, where she currently teaches. She completed her B.A. at Wellesley College and held M.A. and A.B.D. degrees from Harvard University. “Urban Rain,” published by ORO editions, 2009 provides a survey of Brookner’s work. Her website is www.jackiebrookner.net.

First Impressions: Mutual Discovery between Community and the Artist

City Administrator Pat Zavoral chose Nicole Crutchfield, City Planner and landscape architect to collaborate with Cali L. Anicha to arrange Jackie's visit. The city had a history of bringing experts to town for workshops and speaker sessions; following past processes, Nicole arranged community partnerships to develop a program for Jackie. Partners included The Plains Art Museum, North Dakota State University (NDSU) and the Spirit Room, a local non-profit and community center. Once the City Administrator gave permission to proceed, Nicole invited Jackie to visit and explore the city and speak with stakeholders in spring 2010.

Prior to her first trip to Fargo, Jackie prepared with research on the region's history of flooding and the revitalization projects in nearby Grand Forks, ND following citywide devastation in the 1997 flood. Jackie first toured the city to gain an understanding of the environment and topography that characterize the city and region. Jackie met with Bob Backman, the director for River Keepers, a local NGO promoting the use and integrity of the Red River, geologist Don Schwert, PhD from NDSU, and had lunch with the Mayor Dennis Walaker and City Administrator Pat Zavoral.

Jackie exuded genuine, non-judgmental warmth and immediately put others at ease. Her style of communication was upfront, honest and challenging. She was investigative and carried an authentic interest and curiosity for others and their experiences.



Image: Jackie Brookner was fascinated by formations left in the snow shaped by wind or a freeze after a thaw.

A Concept Approach Emerges

Community Conversations

For Jackie's first visit, Nicole Crutchfield and Cali L. Anicha planned three city-wide discussions to broaden Jackie's exposure to the community. During the sessions, Jackie presented her previous work and other installations of ecological sculpture to open conversations about the watershed, including a discussion about "outsider versus belonging." She also asked, "How do you celebrate as a community?" The timing was serendipitous for honest, intimate conversations as citizens were still reeling from the major flood of 2009, which had emotional, and for some, traumatic, effects on people through the forced or mandatory decisions to move their homes, and the compulsory economic toll on the community with scheduled home buy-outs, and an impending flood of 2010.

"Being an artist gives me leverage. I can be non-threatening. I can say things that I could not say or do if I were something else. I throw a pebble into a pond and it ripples. Or maybe I am the pebble. My goal is to keep opening, to become more transparent and permeable." - Jackie Brookner

Following the first visit, Jackie shared her thoughts with Nicole and Cali, and the idea of re-imagining the stormwater basins began. On March 11, 2010 Jackie wrote an email that served as the basis for what would become the first installation of The Fargo Project.

"A central gathering place ... will create a sense of place and convey the specific identity and individuality of the Red River and Fargo (looking both back and forward in time), that will facilitate encounters with people and the landscape, and that will also function ecologically to restore habitat and help keep urban stormwater pollution out of the river.

Conversion of existing detention ponds throughout the city to multifunctional public spaces that will serve neighborhood needs, while maintaining their water retention capacity. While the meetings so far have noted the need for local community gardens celebrating and serving the diversity of the New Americans, as well as Native Americans and other residents in Fargo, the design and function of these spaces should be the result of community planning and sustenance with the neighborhood residents (similar process as with the central gathering place described above). One of the goals of creating these places is to catalyze the creativity of the people who will be making and using the places and stimulating active civic democracy."



Image: Installation at Dreher Park, FL, Jackie Brookner

Three events were held to introduce Jackie to the community and the community to Jackie.

March 4, 2010 Meet and Greet, 4:00 to 6:00 pm, Plains Art Museum

Jackie Brookner, an ecological artist is recognized throughout the world for her installation of living sculptures, called Biosculptures™. These are evocative, plant based systems. Her projects demonstrate how the undervalued resources of stormwater can be reclaimed and used to create lush environments and multifunctional public spaces. She will introduce her work in a meet and greet setting. Cash Bar

March 5, 2010, Urban Rain Lecture, 4:15 – 5:00 pm, NDSU Renaissance Hall

Jackie Brookner, a visiting ecological artist will be visiting the NDSU Architecture and Landscape Architecture Department, including a formal presentation to the public. Her presentation focuses on her collaboration with ecologists, designers, communities and policy makers about reclaiming stormwater as a resource.

March 6, 2010, Book Talk, 1:00 – 2:00 pm, Zandbroz Variety

Jackie Brookner, an international ecological artist, will give a talk in a casual setting about her work as presented in the book *Urban Rain*. Ms. Brookner creates living sculptures that clean polluted water, integrating ecological revitalization with the conceptual, metaphoric and aesthetic capacities of sculpture.

Now What?

Months of email and phone conversations between Jackie and Nicole ensued. Nicole provided Jackie additional technical material to consider a focus on the basins within the core of the city and existing neighborhoods and how the stormwater basins are situated in the neighborhoods. While the basins generally perform the same function, the location, size, and scale of these basins affect the surrounding areas differently. They began to talk about the features of neighborhoods including demographics, vulnerabilities and those eligible for Community Development Block Grants, which include neighborhoods supported by the City's Community Development Division that coincidentally include sites with large basins potentially enhanced to further build community connectivity.

“Surprisingly, there are many New Americans in Fargo, refugees from war-torn countries across the globe. There is also a large, urban Native American community, in addition to the majority population of Scandinavian descent” Jackie Brookner

Jackie connected her observations and findings from the original visit to Fargo to her own work developing an environmentally driven, people focused approach. Jackie noticed some significant cultural qualities in Fargo. She began to focus on how these social dynamics integrate into the development of the community.

Funding Support

To acquire funding, Jackie and Nicole shared the responsibilities of a grant writing process. Together they drafted an application for the inaugural Our Town grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Jackie's experience seeking and writing proposals served as a valuable asset. The application imagined a participatory community process to select an existing neighborhood storm water pond and to transform it into an “ecological commons.” The intent was to work closely with three neighborhoods using different engagement techniques, gauge interest among participants, bring awareness to these dead spaces, and spark interest within the communities to imagine ponds as enhanced green spaces that bring meaning to neighborhoods.



Image: Design inspiration

Lesson Learned: Work with an artist early, and give them leadership authority, prior to problem identification and definition, to lead to a more dynamic project.

Support from the City

The City Administrator, Pat Zavoral helped open doors within the city administration by supporting Nicole in collaborating with the artist. He also stepped out of the way to allow the artist to lead the project and to define its scope. Jackie and Nicole moved ahead to prepare a program for community-driven site selection and problem identification. Pat helped guide discussions with the Mayor, elected officials and department directors and continuously encouraged the completion of the project.

The city trusted Jackie in setting the direction for the project. Jackie functioned as the leader in the design and research process while city staff provided support. Importantly, specific roles for different participants were flexible so that people could define their involvement according to what the project needed, and as new processes emerged.

Lessons Learned: The typical hierarchical organization model needs to change to a predominant horizontal structure with leaders integrated within to allow for easier access to bottom up communication.

Image: Textures, Jackie Brookner



A New Process for Citizen and Expert Engagement

A New Process for Citizen and Expert Engagement

Over the course of her professional life as an artist and teacher, Jackie sought to educate people that stormwater is a resource, even a gift, rather than a problem for engineers to solve. She worked across disciplines, emphasizing that storm water is social and cultural, even human. Jackie taught that our understanding of stormwater arises from the relationships we hold with each other and from the land on which we live and reside.

Jackie started discussions with city staff to confirm what resources were available from public works, the engineering department, and planning office. Importantly, she also sought to learn about the people and their needs in urban neighborhoods. In this approach, there is a shared ethos between the planner and artist. Planners are trained to facilitate conversation, to learn the needs from community, build consensus and to carry out planned approaches. Jackie's role as the artist took this facilitated community conversation further – to work across disciplines, spark interest, dialogue, make inroads and link connections. Her training enabled her to ride the natural turn of conversations, and to respond to many different needs, concerns and stories shared by people. As an artist, Jackie reinforced the value and consequence of engaging people in all elements of the process but especially prior to “solving the problem” to allow and encourage the community to share the authorship of the solution.



*Top: Jackie Brookner meets with artist team.
Bottom: Meeting with interested community members.*

Cross Disciplines and Engage Experts in Small Groups

The National Endowment for the Arts Our Town grant, awarded in 2011 supported Jackie in a series of trips to Fargo. During her first visit, the City Administrator, Pat Zavoral set up a kick-off meeting with the city team that included department directors and engineers. During this first meeting with the city engineers, it was tricky to develop a conversation flow between engineer and artist. The artist was trying to investigate the parameters of the storm water needs and what would be flexible for her range of work, while the engineers were trying to figure out why they were invited to a meeting with an artist. Nicole Crutchfield recalls:

“In a large conference room with approximately 7 engineers, 2 city planners, the City Administrator, and 1 artist, the City Engineer states, ‘Well, that is the problem. We don’t know how to build things with the right aesthetics, and we don’t speak the same language.’ Jackie didn’t miss a beat: ‘I can translate and it doesn’t need to be difficult as we explore,” she said. “I can bring different sensibilities to the conversation.’ By the end of the meeting, Jackie was sitting on top of the table, pointing out key points on city maps engaged in deep conversation with the engineers as they brainstormed on topics like plunge pools, sediment, and capacity. Jackie was able to quickly reassure the experts in the room by showing them that she understood and respected their work. She was familiar enough with engineering and hydrology to appreciate their challenges and styles of decision-making. She had a lovely way of bringing conversation to an approachable level, sharing commonalities, and building trust with the City engineers.”

Nicole created a community advisory team from key stakeholder groups, including River Keepers, the Plains Arts Museum, North Dakota State University professors in Landscape Architecture and Natural Resources Management, and local art curators. Additional introductory conversations also included instructional leaders and city administration partners, such as the school district and park district. The purpose was to determine how the project could fit with each group’s mission, who would buy in to the ideas of the project, and who was ready for an experimental challenge.

Given the size and diversity of the advisory team, and the logistical challenges of convening large groups, the advisory team determined they did not need to meet as a full group more than once a year. Jackie identified small sub-groups based on similar interests and facilitated conversation between these groups. Key participants emerged, who showed early commitment to the developing vision, and who helped



Image: Director of River Keepers Christine Laney, Artist Jackie Brookner, Director of Engineering Mark Bittner, City Division Engineer Brenda Derring

further the progress of the project. These participants distinguished themselves by their comfort with undefined roles and ambiguous outcomes while connecting to the project on a personal level.

As an artist and an outsider to the community, Jackie as facilitator allowed people to drop their guard, be open to other's ideas, and reach into their own creativity. Jackie approached conversations in unexpected ways; thus, partners were more apt to try something new, experiment, and work with The Fargo Project team. Jackie also worked hard to reach out and to meet with a diverse group of people in the community and to welcome their involvement—leading to a larger pool of organizational partners.

Lesson Learned: The role of staff and that of volunteer can overlap. Sometimes it is hard to determine if interest for the project comes out of career motivation, or community shaping motivation or both. Whether volunteer, expert or consultant, passion has to connect to the project for success.

Identify Vision Leaders

At the city level, the project needed champions to navigate an ambiguous process. The city did not have any set administrative process for art, acquiring art, or building amenities. The city planner, engineer, and administrator had to be comfortable with the uncertainty of the City's role.

The City Engineer April Walker was encouraging and supportive of the ideas she heard from Jackie, which set the tone for the Engineering department to be comfortable exploring new stormwater management practices. Together they decided that an outcome of the project would be a stormwater workbook including what the team learned and explored in regards to stormwater management. The engineering office as a whole understood that there are other ways to build infrastructure and public places, but experienced constraints such as lack of experience with participatory processes and the resources to add amenities or creative features.

Cali, the interested citizen that connected Jackie to Fargo in the first place, provided ongoing support. She championed the project with a diversity of community members from the beginning, and nurtured the team with critical social and ecological information and guidance. Through her consistent encouragement and engagement with other community members, she grew support for the project. She also financially supported the project by providing housing for Jackie's stay every 6-8 weeks.

Recognizing the importance of the Native American Peoples to this geographic region, Jackie and Cali facilitated a presentation and discussion with the City's Cultural Planner, Willard Yellowbird. Jackie asked Willard to present to the Native American Commission. At the meeting, she and Nicole presented the concept of the project, made an offering of tobacco and asked for their blessing, guidance, and participation in this project. The Native American Commission accepted the tobacco and set up a liaison to work with Jackie to select a site. The team visited four candidates for pilot sites and studied each relationship to the surrounding neighborhood and factors related to the site. Once Willard Yellowbird, also a healer and Native American leader, found a sacred eagle feather at the site Rabanus Park, the selection process was over.



Image: Walking with Linda Black Elk (Catawba Nation), an ethnobotanist, restoration ecologist, and instructor at Sitting Bull College in Fort Yates, North Dakota

Lesson Learned: Dedicate vision keepers to defend and maintain the public engagement process. Vision keepers as leaders of the project help communicate and translate the vision as members come and go within the project. An element of the vision keeper also needs to be pragmatic in order to understand the constraints involved; there is a balance of logic and imagination.

Local Artists: Feet on the Ground

Jackie and Nicole were conscious about the need to acquire resources and team members at the local level. Obviously, it was not sustainable to keep Jackie, from New York, in Fargo for long periods or to assume that she would have the same knowledge about the community that a local has. With Fargo-Moorhead home to three colleges, Jackie could create a local artist team trained to implement the project with the hope that members of this group would eventually take on the responsibility and roles that Jackie initially filled.

The City distributed a request for proposals from local artists interested in participating in this project and awarded five local artists the means to assist with the outreach and workshop for the Rabanus Park site (what would become World Garden Commons).

The idea to have workshops where all members could participate fully without any barriers to access or language took time to plan and shape. Jackie instigated the creative process with a team of local artists to invite participation in creative ways. The artists developed a plan to use the shape of a bowl as a metaphor to represent the stormwater function of the Rabanus stormwater basin. During a “Bowl-a-thon,” nine artists threw 350 rounded rectangle clay bowls to reflect the shape of the retention pond. After the bowls were bisque-fired and glazed, they were placed at neighborhood residents’ doorsteps as invitations to the celebration and WeDesign Charrette workshop.

Besides organizing and running events, the artist team developed creative ways to engage people living in the apartments surrounding the Rabanus stormwater basin. They knew the best way to engage conversation is through established relationships. As a passive effort, the artist team distributed flyers to residents through the apartment managers. An active strategy was to intercept people at the site in their day-to-day activity. For instance, a North Dakota State University art student and master puppeteer worked with local artists to set up a puppet show in the parking lot of an apartment complex near the basin with a focus on water. The goal of the outreach was to inform residents about the project, seek their knowledge about observations of the space in the neighborhood, and invite their participation to the WeDesign event. The artists also set up an information table in the foyer of one of the apartment buildings and talked to residents as they came and went about the upcoming WeDesign event.



Image: Children working on placemat invitations for the WeDesign Charrette

Lesson Learned: The City provided an honorarium for local artists engaged in the public project. There was an intentional decision to set the example the City is willing to pay artists for their time and ideas.

Building a Community of Interest

Building A Community of Interest

This project thrives on partnership development. Although it originated with the City of Fargo, the City's best skill is managing construction and building infrastructure. Programming, engaging citizens, outreach, and creative design are not the local government's typical roles. By partnering with the Fargo Park District, Lutheran Social Services, River Keepers, the Plains Art Museum, the Arts Partnership, the Fargo-Moorhead Visual Arts, the Fargo School District, West Fargo School District, North Dakota State University, the YMCA and countless volunteers, the project teams found and engaged active community members. Through collaborations, the project team learned of more detailed local opportunities and ideas, and the corresponding successes and failures. Since project development, individual community members stayed connected and formed groups to help implement project activities. Our partnerships have also helped adapt the goals to make the project relevant to the community. By linking other groups' needs to this location and The Fargo Project's goals, the project has developed additional advocates.

Success is also defined in networking and building bridges between other organizations and projects. This engaged more participants and aided in defining the value of transforming the space. Additionally separate partnerships and goals among participants have expanded into other projects and programs. One such example is 'Friends of the Watershed and Soils ' (FOWS), a community group interested in advocating for the teachings of the soil and geography unique to this part of the world. By 2014, the "project family tree" included over 100 interested community groups and people, including public health advocates, cultural groups, natural scientists, artists and community art groups, and local philanthropic groups.



Artists learn from Linda Black Elk an ethnobotanist, and Willard Yellowbird



Listen to the Community and Develop Commitment

Jackie led the design process and advocated for social engagement, specifically with underrepresented populations. To provide for all community members to have a voice to shape the public space around them, the project team invited participation from neighborhood members and held special community meetings including intimate meetings in people's homes, attending weddings, and participating in church events. These activities to build a community of interest are contrary to the traditional infrastructure design process, which typically occurs solely in the office of the city engineer.

By providing an environment that removes the barriers to participate and listen, a deeper sense of understanding about the community can occur. This requires to remove the facilitator, remove any preconceived notions, and to have a conversation. This requires building trust.

Develop Social Credibility: Break Bread

For each community engagement conversation and event, Jackie and Cali consciously created an environment to address and care for the base needs of the people participating. Their act of hosting, feeding and breaking bread with people exemplifies the most basic, universal of human interactions to build trust and intimacy. To break bread or provide a meal is a ritual of many cultures so deeply ingrained into a social fabric it is considered holy, an offering, an act that builds connection and community.

It seems appropriate for a city planner to have outreach and facilitation exercises in their toolkit to engage community members. However, in reality, as an Anglo-American dominated institution the city does not have the skill set to customize outreach to engage diverse demographic populations. It needs community leaders to be liaisons.

Willard Yellowbird was among those to help bridge the gap with the Native American community. Willard helped answer the question: How does the Fargo Project team build an event attractive to the Native American Community? As he said (only partially teasing), "If there is fry-bread, people will come." Willard introduced individuals and community groups who, for an honorarium, would share their culture of food, drumming, and spiritual traditions with the greater community to build a community-wide design workshop that would be later be called WeDesign.



Image: Sharing a meal builds connection and community

Lesson Learned: Cultivate relationships. In community planning, it is important to focus on relationships first and outcomes second. Meet people where they are and meet their needs.

Listen and Respect

It was also important to figure out how to engage the apartment residents surrounding Rabanus Park to determine their interest and see if they would like to participate in transforming these spaces for their access and use. The team contacted Karis Thompson, an active community organizer, to help make introductions and explain the goals of transforming the public spaces outside of apartments and within neighborhoods. This led to invitations for small group intimate conversations, allowing Jackie and Nicole to learn about cultural differences and nuances that influenced Jackie's approach to design discussion.

“Because I work with real ecological problems in the public sphere, I have had to learn to speak many languages. For example, on a single day during a recent trip [to Fargo], I started out talking with the City Engineers about hydrology, followed by a conversation with the Park District about trees and neighborhood demographics, a dialogue with some local business leaders, and finally a meeting with a group of Elders at a Bhutanese wedding. Because of the complexity of the population, we have been spending much more time than we originally planned on outreach, as the need for a more personal approach became clear.”

Jackie Brookner

Lesson Learned: Practice deep listening and compassion for good relationship building. Listen for opportunities to connect partnerships and bridge needs to foster more allies. Partnerships that are multi-purposed and multi-serving will grow the project and help sustain it.



Image: Sweetgrass, Loretta Cantieri

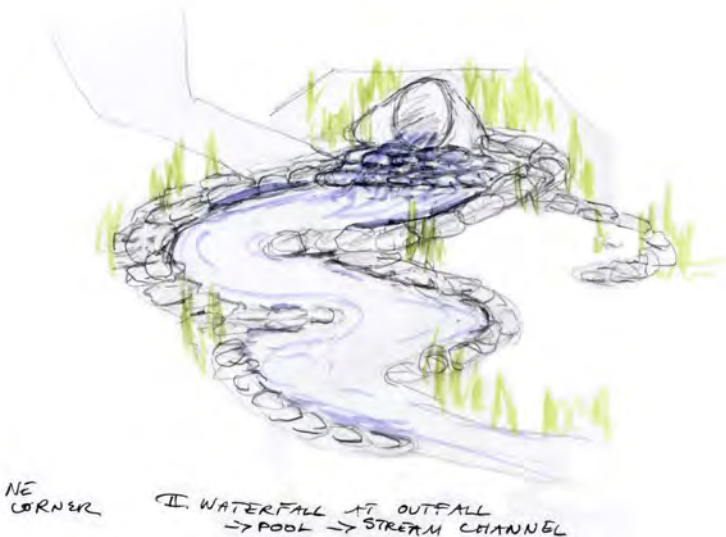
Shaping The Fargo Project

Roles of the Artist

With the artist providing the spark for community engagement, activities were often folded into ongoing community discussions and workshops. The introduction of such activities set the tone and expectations for participation while engaging additional human senses and emotions to create opportunities for deeper interaction, such as storytelling.

A long-held personal goal for Jackie was to integrate a creative process led by the people in their own community. Before participating in any level of design, Jackie Brookner, the artist, wanted to hear from people in all roles of the community. She organized gatherings of people known to share like interests, plants, people, religion, art, and conservation. Through all phases of the project, Jackie served as the project's vision keeper, the link between members of the community and their desires and interests so that The Fargo Project's outcomes would speak to community vision. Through weekly calls, Nicole and Jackie coordinated discussions and findings and divided responsibilities to coordinate with each of the teams.

Lesson Learned: Develop activities integrated into existing programs or build on the shoulders of existing partners. This provides a depth and sustainability to the project.



Deep Listening

Jackie was a master inquisitor, asking the team members to share stories, personal backgrounds and interests. As people shared stories, Jackie engaged all her senses to listen deeply for cues to tell her more about an individual's vision. During one meeting, a professor at NDSU, Carolyn Grygiel talked about the ability to transform the basin using her hands to gesture large round shapes. Jackie asked her what the gestures meant, and Carolyn remarked that she didn't even realize she was making the shape of a buffalo boulder. Not knowing what buffalo boulders were, Carolyn explained to Jackie that the geology of glacial movement across the Red River Basin left behind various kinds of large rocks, "buffalo boulders," that would not otherwise be found in the region. That gesture was used in the design outcomes.

Connector and Facilitator

The artist and city planner reached out to a large range of people. Then they ended up discovering connections and identifying interests and needs. For example, a regional community garden group, Growing Together, tended by Jack Wood and Nola Storm, provides a safe place for New Americans to meet new friends, grow food and relationships. In 2012, Growing Together was seeking additional garden space at locations accessible to New Americans. Many of the New Americans lived near Rabanus Park. Through conversations with Wood and connecting his need for open land and rich soil near a water source, Jackie and City Planner Nicole devised a strategy to connect Growing Together with Lutheran Social Services through a lease from the Fargo Park District (a separate taxing entity and owner of Rabanus Park). This resulted in a change in Fargo Park District policy to help usher the first garden site on public property at the Rabanus site.

Lesson Learned: Lesson Learned: The project management style has to be adaptive and reiterative, focused on context-sensitive solutions appropriate and customized for the surroundings.

Image: Sketch, Jackie Brookner

Imagining Together: WeDesign

The transformation of the Rabanus Park stormwater pond into the World Garden Commons derived from extensive outreach and deep listening. By connecting the community interests, plans for the basin renovation came together. The primary design process culminated at the community WeDesign event April 12, 2012.

The first 6 months of community conversation and research shaped the purpose of WeDesign: to celebrate and host a design workshop. To create interest and excitement, the local artist team, under the leadership of Jackie, developed invitations through creative means.

“We have to find really compelling ways for people to have a vested interest in the project,” said Michael Strand, a project member and head of North Dakota State University’s visual arts department.

Strand organized Saturday’s Bowl-A-Thon at NDSU’s Renaissance Hall in downtown Fargo, where he and eight other artists threw roughly 350 bowls in less than four hours.” -Potters Throw 350 Bowls for Arts Effort, By: Mike Nowatzki, INFORUM

Their work paid off. Over 200 people of all ages, ethnicities, and socio-economic means attended the daylong workshop. The event design included dedication of the basin celebrated by a Native American drum circle and intertribal dance followed by a shared meal of fry bread tacos to prime the participants for design participation.



Image: Artists throw 350 bowls for use as invitations to the community design charrette

Lesson Learned: Design with, not for.

“I believe that you cannot do ecological projects without working with people, because our values need as much healing as our ecosystems do. I realized that I had to go beyond engaging people to help implement my ideas. I needed to challenge and share authorship, to provide opportunities where people could exercise their own ability to solve local ecological problems in creative ways.”

Jackie Brookner





Images: Items used to invite neighbors to the WeDesign Charrette





Image: WeDesign Charrette opening ceremony held in the Rabanus Park stormwater basin



WeDesign Charrette

At the opening dedication, Willard Yellowbird proclaimed the importance of recognizing that all peoples are connected to each other and to the land. From there, the concept of “World Gardens” was developed. The artist team coordinated translation and access to eliminate as many barriers to participation as possible. Themes were presented to connect community issues in a purposeful way, including the celebration of ethnicities and cultures, an overview of water management, a discussion of geographic context, and the history of Native American communities. The designers shaped the vision of the basin using small pebbles, colored feathers, and other trinkets provided as a reference for trees, rocks, waterways, and flowers. The community output consisted of models and drawings placed on display.

Lesson Learned: Provide an activity with an educational component for learning when trying to encourage participation and engagement in order to shape and influence the community values. This connection could replicate in the community.



Images: Community design at WeDesign



World Garden Commons Conception

In the months following WeDesign, the artists and the City Planner Nicole collaborated once a week to synthesize further the concepts gathered at the event. Jackie, the artist, continued her visits to Fargo every two months, and conducted weekly phone calls, skype meetings and conversations with community members.

Continue Community Involvement

An important discussion the team continued to deliberate was how to maintain participants' interaction into the next stages of plan development. To keep the community involved, the team looked for partnership opportunities with other community events. The Park District hosts an annual block party at Rabanus Park. The artists developed outreach activities, volunteered to attend, engaged community members in a seed swap with Growing Together, and lead an activity making clay "elbow pots" with adults and children. Through a joint effort with Plains Art Museum, artists created an exhibit and gallery talk to attract other artists to the conversation, invite their participation, and spread the word about the project. The Plains Art Museum also hosted a workroom and table for the public to access the project and coordinate with the artists about design details such as The Listening Garden and a Natural Play area of World Garden Commons, with the involved artists leading the activities.

Lesson Learned: Listen for opportunities to connect partnerships and bridge needs to foster more allies. Partnerships that are multi-purposed and multi-serving will grow the project and help sustain it.



Images: Artist Michael Strand led an “elbow pot” activity: people pushed small rounds of clay against their elbows to form a concave bowl. The elbow pots provided a metaphor for the World Garden conversations, as a basin holding water and a diverse group of people and native plants and animals, concepts embraced in the decision-making about the future of the site.



Lessons Learned

Prior to the Fargo Project, local artists were primarily involved in the community through traditional roles. This project has helped build capacity among our local artist team members to pass those skills and lessons to others including partners for new activities in the community. In addition, it has taught the regulatory agencies and other community organizations the value of artists involved in the problem solving and shaping of our community.

Sketch and Test

To bring the design to reality required Jackie and Nicole to connect continuously with experts, volunteers, and community. As they determined the plan for construction and the environmental restoration parameters they learned there was a substantial gap in knowledge related to wet meadow plant restoration, sediment and stormwater practices. The knowledge needed to implement World Garden Commons did not exist with a high degree of certainty so the approach for implementation had to be experimental.

The experimental nature led to the Sketch and Test method. The concept was to begin with an idea and vet it through many avenues, allowing time and thought to be involved. Once the idea made it through the initial vetting process, it transitioned to implementation. Small construction phases allow for flexibility, a vital component when working with so many unknowns and the time to gain the new knowledge needed to implement. Sketch and Test method also reflects the artist-lead design.

During the transition from an idea to implementation, the team took on an adaptive management approach as a structured, iterative process of decision-making. As actual ecological, hydrologic, and social outcomes of the project were (and continue to be) uncertain, monitoring reduces the number of unknowns over time, and the team acquires new information needed to improve and adapt the development and management for future sites.

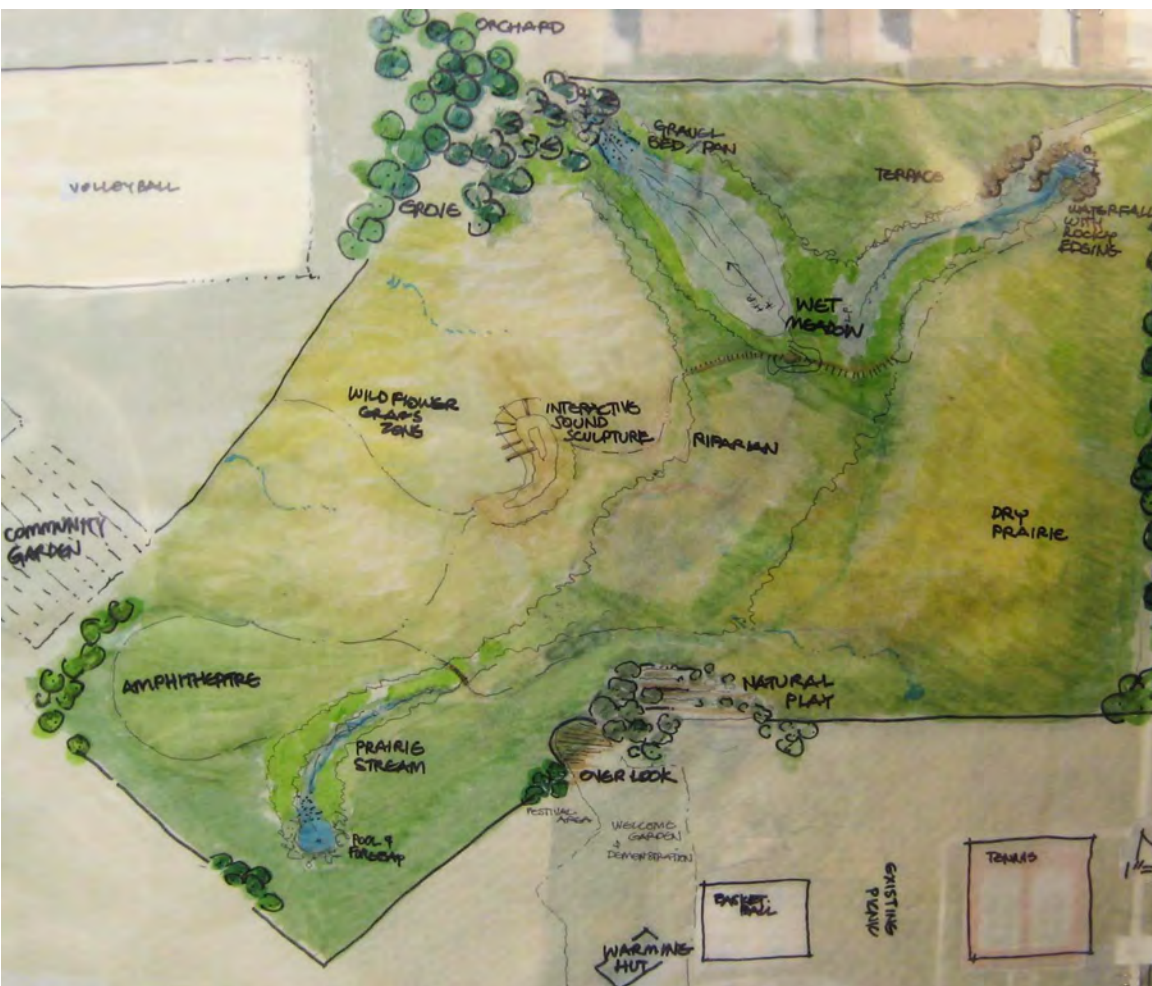


Image: Design outcome of WeDesign Charrette. The World Garden Commons includes an amphetheatre, overlook, listening garden, community garden, trails, and boardwalk.

Lesson Learned: Build in project-wide experimentation to allow for flexibility, adaptability, and uncertainty. For budgetary purposes, it includes bringing in contingency for failure.

A New Construction Paradigm

Jackie was the translator of the community's vision developed through WeDesign, positioned as project lead, construction manager, client representative, and designer. The team looked to her to consolidate the extensive outreach from the area experts and advisory team members. Nicole's role was to provide information and seek questions from City leaders to gauge support and coordinate a construction administration process. Jackie and Nicole both recognized they needed to expand and replicate their roles to gain additional reach and enable the project to be more sustainable.

The City hired a project manager and landscape architect to support the project. However, the community-driven design process was foreign to the contractors hired. Through this process, the project team learned that when seeking consultants, it was necessary to look for flexibility and adaptability to new approaches. The contractors learned from the experimental nature of the project and eventually expanded its application to other projects in the community. The project taught everyone to be more flexible, learn new skills, approach problems and design differently, and work collaboratively with a completely different type of stakeholder group.



Image: Rabanus Park stormwater basin viewing west, Jackie Brookner

Lessons Learned: A public communication specialist is needed to keep the communication active to build community interest and capacity. Building outreach and community awareness takes time, energy and clear messaging.

New No-Mow Practice

The Fargo Project initiated small changes in City practice. Previously, basins intended as parks were mowed frequently, requiring time and energy, while also preventing a more diverse ecological system to evolve. The Fargo Project team requested that the Parks District stop mowing at Rabanus Park so the team and experts could inventory vegetation. Many native grass species were identified which meant that with selective control, the project team could manage invasive species. While simple in concept, this change in city practice proved difficult and required patience. Since then, the other departments have learned the value of not mowing as frequently and has altered practices city-wide.

Sustain Engagement

Sketch and testing, onboarding new contractors, and learning from experts takes time. While the project team advisors worked through the implementation of the World Garden Commons, it was difficult to keep community stakeholders engaged. As the project unfolded, the team realized that the project needed a communications manager to connect the community and develop programming.

In lieu of maintenance, as perceived by the Park District, Jackie believed in the community's ownership in the care of the space through programing. For instance, she dreamed of a job-training program for New Americans with agrarian backgrounds and interest to gain skills in the native plant industry and fulfill a greater community need of sustainable land management practices in the larger community. The site could house a greenhouse for year-round native plant development and connect people with the shared interest.

Images: Seasons of the Rabanus Park stormwater basin



Continuously Seek Funding

The NEA Our Town Grant awarded in 2011 encouraged Jackie to link the project to additional funding sources. She readily assisted in writing grants for funding about once every 6 months to address the project's programming components, scale, and reach across many community needs. As such, relating the central tenants of the project as artist-led, community driven, focused on ecological urban restoration, and the merits of her work being recognized world-wide proved fruitful in securing additional funding sources.

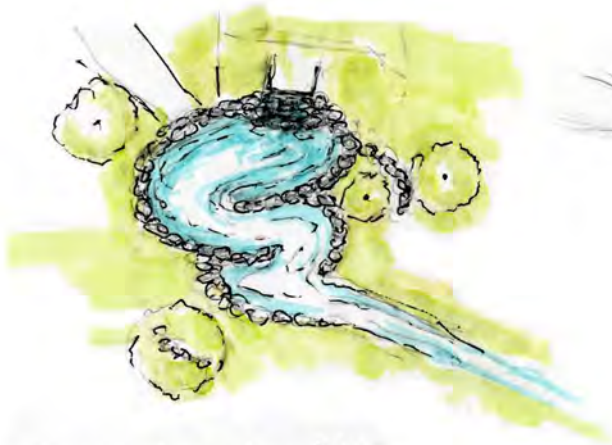
Keep the Approach Alive

There continues to be behind-the-scenes administrative work to support the needs of this project, beyond what is allocated by the city for in-kind support. The long-term goal is to incorporate the skill sets into the City administration to replicate the social engagement skills learned and incorporate the construction and design practice in other City projects.

Lessons Learned: Integrate the project's approach into existing government structure and the parameters that come with typical project management such as time and resources.

Images: Volunteers planting





NE corner If waterfall right at outfall
into pool then narrows to

Image: Sketch, Jackie Brookner

Epilogue

When Cali first brought Jackie's work to the attention of her friend the City Administrator in early 2010, no one imagined the scope and reach The Fargo Project would have into connecting the natural world with the under-told stories of community ethic groups and bridging the gap between engineering and a community-based social approach to land management and Creative Placemaking. Under Jackie's direction, with the community beside her, The Fargo Project took on its own life, spread its own connective tendrils, and operated under its own timeline.

When she first started on the project as an outsider to the community, Jackie consciously monitored her boundaries to avoid bringing in her own "big ideas" and built a Fargo-centric community of interest, starting with a team of local artists to whom she could teach her approach. Because of her passion, the deep connections of those relationships, and the links to like-interests, she built a successful community of interest without inserting herself. Yet, by the time of her death in May 2015, Jackie had become a member of the community, engrained in the project and the stakeholders.

"After 5 years we are just breaking ground and there are years to go--but it is the most amazing and rewarding work I have ever done. Your wonderful questions will prod our thinking My own health is unfortunately quite fragile right now. I am not sure I will get to see this through, but none of us will get to do more than start the turning of the Great Wheel." Jackie Brookner

The last phase of construction resumes the spring and summer of 2016. Fargo continues towards its goals of empowering citizens to activate the space with festivals, community gardening, citizen science labs and social functions. In addition, the Fargo Project aims to incorporate these lessons learned to build a city-sponsored program using the artist-led community based approach into more infrastructure and city building projects and eventually broaden the reach to the entire watershed.

