



Measurable Results

Thoughtful process leads to Design Workshop's legacy design

WORDS: **Sean O'Keefe**

For 50 years Design Workshop has been cultivating a pragmatic design ethos, which is shaped by the thoughtful consideration of four guiding principles - environment, community, economics, and art. The sum of the whole is a well-established legacy of design excellence that stretches across 30 different countries in communities around the world. The firm's acclaimed portfolio of projects addresses virtually every scope, scale, place, purpose and client expectation imaginable.

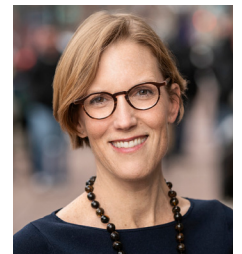
Allyson Mendenhall, landscape architect and principal, has been with Design Workshop for the last 16 years and is the director of DW Legacy Design®. She is especially proud of her role in helping coalesce a broad spectrum of design perspectives into a cohesive way of working that is implemented on every project Design Workshop touches.

"We are striving for excellence across an extremely wide range of projects from eight offices," says Mendenhall who initially became interested in design after graduating from college and moving to New York City. It was there that she first took notice of urban public spaces, recognizing some to be vibrant hubs of activity and engagement and others to be stagnant, unloved dead zones between structures. Wondering why, she decided to pursue a graduate degree in landscape architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design before eventually returning to her Colorado roots in 2003.

Design Workshop's well-established collection of local notes includes deft expressions of place and prestige like Cherry Creek North's streetscape improvements, Riverfront Park's master plan and design at the base of the Millennium Bridge, and Lowry's new Boulevard One neighborhood for which the firm led the visioning, master plan, design and implementation. More than landscape architecture, Design Workshop's work is often integrally involved in the large-scale transformation of place, reshaping urban contexts, analyzing market opportunities and improving human connectivity.

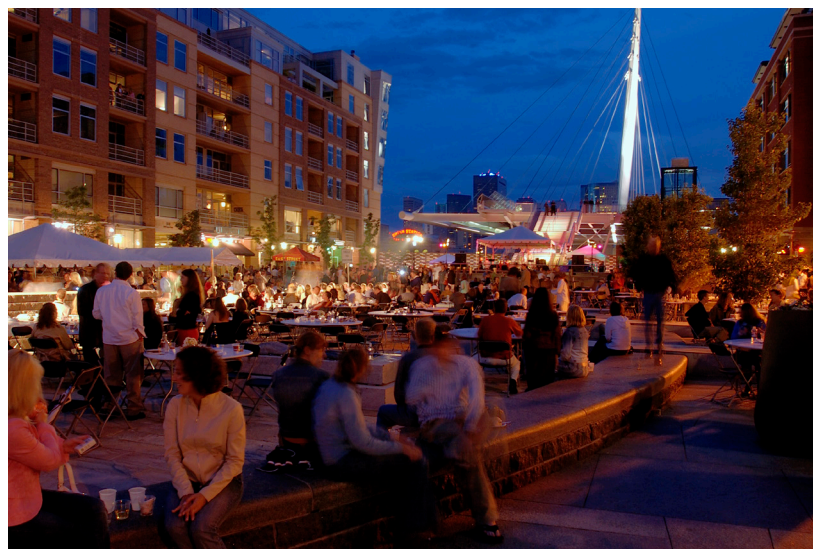
"The name workshop is central to who we are," says Mendenhall. "I lead the implementation of Design Workshop's Legacy Design methodology and best practices in contemplation of the environmental, social, economic and artistic contexts surrounding each project. I keep an eye on the workshop culture to ensure that we are sharing knowledge and design critique across project teams."

Design Workshop's trademarked methodology, DW Legacy Design®, aims to harmonize these four firm values with all project sites and owner's objectives to create enduring places. The firm's



Allyson Mendenhall





commitment to an elevated inquiry often leads to a design envelope that addresses connections to surrounding contexts beyond the project's boundaries. The nexus of Cherry Creek North, for example, is a 16-block commercial district that has earned the distinction of being Colorado's premier outdoor shopping experience. The impact of those 16 blocks, however, is much broader.

Mendenhall points to the reconfiguration of Filmore Plaza as a particularly interesting challenge within the district's overall reconsideration. As the central pedestrian passage to the contending, yet also complementary, Cherry Creek Mall across First Avenue, Filmore Plaza was an open courtyard surrounded by high-rent retailers. Despite the prominent placement, unless a specific event was in progress, the plaza was generally inactive. "Plaza-facing retail-

ers weren't seeing an equitable volume of business due to the lack of vehicular traffic passing by," says Mendenhall. "The challenge was to create a hybrid plaza by reopening a two-way street without diminishing the plaza's value as an occasional community gathering space."

Helping to develop and define the road map that leads the firm's 115 professionals from client engagement and design concept to delivered project and measurable result has been an important part of Mendenhall's work for more than a decade. Starting with the widest funnel, the DW Legacy Design process explores opportunities across each of the four fundamentals at the beginning of the project. Continuous feedback is central to success. Teams are compelled to think critically about the equitable balance of objectives through structured processes that permeate



OPENING ART:

Design Workshop recreated Filmore Plaza by reopening a two-way street that allowed the space also to be used as an occasional community gathering space.

TOP LEFT:

For Lowry's new Boulevard One neighborhood, Design Workshop led the project's visioning, master plan, design and implementation.

BOTTOM LEFT:

Cherry Creek North's Filmore Plaza pops during a summer storm.

MIDDLE:

Riverfront Park sits at the base of the Millennium Bridge.

FAR RIGHT:

Filmore Plaza is activated not only as retail space during the day but also as a community gathering space in the evenings.

every activity. Each new project, no matter how small, begins with a kick-off meeting; follows a formalized project management plan and quality assurance process; and has a series of requisite on-the-wall reviews within the team and by external peer assessment. Established methodologies, meticulous documentation and rigorous review are important, but like the projects themselves, connecting people to one another is the central purpose of the workshop process.

"The work has to be pinned up, people have to get away from their computers," says Mendenhall with a smile. While on-time and on-budget project execution is essential to any measure of success, Design Workshop also trains its staff on how to deliver a great client experience and every project is scrutinized against its original objectives



ABOVE:

*The view of Millennium Bridge
from Riverfront Plaza.*

in a formal closeout meeting. For Mendenhall, measuring effectiveness and capturing lessons learned across a wide range of project and client types is one of the firm's most important initiatives.

As a board member of the Landscape Architecture Foundation, Mendenhall helped refine the Landscape Performance Series (landscapeperformance.org). This innovative, nationwide program makes a tactical investigation of design effectiveness, by pairing academic research partners with a built landscape to review design objectives against in-use realities. Thirteen different Design Workshop projects have been accepted into the program, allowing the firm to collaborate with research teams from five different universities to review projects. Included among the 13, the case study submitted on the improvements to Filmore Plaza and Cherry Creek North showed a significant validation of benefits across all of Design Workshop's Legacy Design metrics. Among the results, improvements reduced annual water consumption in the plaza by approximately 33 million gallons; reduced energy consumption by outdoor lighting by 223,000 kilowatts a year; contributed to markedly lower district crime; and helped boost a 16% increase in sales tax revenue in the first year after the street was reopened.

"The wonderful thing about the Landscape Performance Series is that each of these case studies becomes a valuable reference, a precedent benchmark for anyone looking for a design idea with an environmental, social or economic landscape benefit," says Mendenhall. "These aren't marketing pieces. Where projects have shortcomings, the rigor of this type of review will expose them. Sharing lessons learned is essential to moving the best sustainable methods forward."

Asked about landscape architecture as a practice today, Mendenhall is effusive in her enthusiasm for the growing impact her profession has on the design process in general.

"I think landscape architects are incredibly well-suited to convene and lead important conversations around urban planning, design, social interaction, and salient topics that impact placemaking and livability," says Mendenhall. "As landscape architecture has become more thoughtful about establishing performance goals and meeting them, we are able to better make the case for landscape as an important part of the client's investment on projects that aim to realize environmental, social, and economic benefits."

Just as Design Workshop is keen on quantification to understand the value of design proposals, so too is the design and construction industry. In November, Mendenhall will be elevated to Fellow by the American Society of Landscape Architects, the highest distinction bestowed on members, and one she is exceptionally proud of.

"Being recognized by the ASLA as a Fellow for leadership rather than a collection of projects is thrilling to me," says Mendenhall, whose post-nominal title following the professional organization's fall meeting will be FASLA. "I am thankful that Design Workshop has enabled me to carve out a unique role focused on developing ways to improve process and performance and deliver measurable results."\\