Innovations

The Roaming Forest: setting public space free

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Clues to the nature of the future city can be revealed by exploring the relationship between formal and informal design approaches

The Roaming Forest was developed for Timing 2010: The Biennale of Landscape Urbanism. Responding to that call for proposals, which asked designers to examine the tension between temporality and permanence, and between the planned and the experienced, the Roaming Forest has become a series of installations that individuals can move around the city of Bat-Yam, Israel, to create new public spaces.

The concept for the Roaming Forest interprets the lifecycle of a tree in order to explore new ways of creating public space. It proposes a dynamic process between the planned structures of the municipality and the self-organising nature of individuals and the community. Young trees are transplanted into moveable containers and then moved by both the municipality and the community to create new social spaces in the city.

These 'roaming trees' are designed to be lifted, pushed or pulled to transform the urban landscape. They will be used, moved and re-used and, as the trees outgrow the size of the containers, planted where they stand. Some roaming trees may move only short distances within the community, while others may go further and even disappear into the private urban realm.

It is the relationship between formal plans and informal action, that defines processes of urban change. Design code, masterplans, red-lines and legal regulations represent the language of the formal, while expressions of appropriation, resistance and contradiction evoke those of the informal. The future city requires a vision for what could result from actions that challenge and inform urban change as it unfolds.

THE ROAMING FOREST PROJECT was embraced by Yael Moria-Klain and Sigal Barnir, the curators of the biennale, and by the municipality of Bat-Yam. As a small regional city, Bat-Yam expresses its ambition for public space through the biennale, allowing teams of designers to experiment with alternative approaches to the public city. During the Biennale, the Roaming Forest made its first steps by providing an informal resting area for visitors and passers-by. Since then, it has moved to different locations across the city. The trees are free to be moved and used without restrictions.

International collaboration that is charged with social, political, environmental and economic challenges is not uncommon in contemporary landscape projects. However, a design process that requires the involvement of different groups and individuals must have significant local knowledge and engagement. The Roaming Forest gained the support of the biennale's curatorial team and Bat-Yam municipality, but only the test of time will reveal the engagement from the local residents and visitors who will create these new public spaces.

The Roaming Forest is a framework for action rather than a specific masterplan. Therefore, there is potential for this type of approach, which allows the form of public space to be determined from the bottom up, to have very different outcomes at other sites and in other cities. ●

ILLUSTRATION: ED WALL