

Landscaping a fine light-rail line

Landscape architects took lead in designing new light-rail line

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The new Tilikum Crossing over the Willamette River is a dramatic visual addition to Portland, but it's the work of landscape architects that will dominate the sights along the new light-rail Orange Line when it opens in the fall.

Landscape architects took the lead in the design along the line, said Bob Hastings, agency architect for TriMet, and provided vital direction for the massive undertaking.

The landscape architects got a chance to see their finished work last week when Hastings and about 40 others, including landscape architects who had contributed to the massive project and members of the American Society of Landscape Architects, took a private tour of the Orange Line. The group started on the west side of Tilikum Crossing near Oregon Health and Science University's Collaborative Life Sciences Building, crossed the new bridge and traveled all the way to the Southeast Park Avenue light-rail station in the Oak Grove neighborhood in Clackamas County.

Hastings said it was the first time the landscape architects had seen the entirety of their work.

"It's like a kid with a new bike, like a fifth-grade field trip," he said. "When we pulled into the station, everyone applauded."

Landscape architect Sean Batty said that Carol Mayer-Reed of Mayer/Reed Landscape Architecture, who has a long history of working for TriMet, took on the role of urban designer for the Orange Line, which made it more than just a transit project.

"It's an integral piece of the fabric of the city. A city is not static but is creative and evolves over time, and landscape architects account for that mindset," said Batty, who was one of the first landscape architects hired by TriMet to work on the Orange Line back in 2000.

Batty said the field of landscape architecture has become increasingly appreciated in recent years thanks to professionals like Mayer-Reed and projects like the Orange Line.

"There's a sense in the public that landscape architecture is about planting," Batty said. "But when you think about the profession historically, really a more accurate representation of what the profession does typically, it's really creating a form for the city."

James McGrath, a landscape architect with CH2M, has been working on the Orange Line for more than five years. He said landscape architects are beginning to get recognition for their contributions to



Sam Tenney/DJC
Carol Mayer-Reed is among the landscape architects who had a hand in designing the stations along the 7.3-mile MAX Orange Line.

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other disciplines.

"The profession is coming into its own in this decade," he said. "We are the only profession uniquely positioned to lead all of these disciplines, the one place where people are trained to understand all of it, not just tracks and elevations. How it all comes together for people is indicative of having landscape architects in leading positions."

Landscape architects were truly in a leadership position for the entire Orange Line project, Hastings said, because the 7.3-mile route and the 10 stations along it were about more than just the construction.

"We felt that so much of the landscaping wasn't just about plants and shrubs, but about how design happens in a street environment," Hastings said. "How do we stitch all the component parts and pieces into a unified whole, and how do we celebrate the distinctive character of each station and neighborhood?"

To accomplish the latter, more than a dozen public meetings were held in the different neighborhoods, according to Hastings.

"We did wonderful things because



Sam Tenney/DJC

Landscape architects who worked on the MAX Orange Line designed each of the line's 10 stations to be characteristic of their respective neighborhoods. The Southeast 17th Avenue corridor features green street improvements, including new trees, vegetation, and stormwater treatment planters, as well as public art that celebrates the area's natural past.

neighborhood communities and activists created a vision and held our feet to the fire," he said.

He also gives a lot of credit to Mayer-Reed, who headed up many meetings in many different neighborhoods to find out what people wanted for their particular stations.

"She is a very accomplished landscape architect and people are very comfortable with her," Hastings said. "It was a whole wall of listening and paying attention and presenting ideas that would not be patronizing, but instead elevating."

For example, Hastings said, residents of Milwaukie were hesitant at first about light rail coming to their town, which has the nickname "Dogwood City of the West." However, Mayer-Reed drew them in and eventually came up with a way to add dogwood symbols to custom railings at the

station in the neighborhood.

Mayer-Reed felt that level of attention to detail was necessary for the light rail station in Milwaukie, the next to the last on the line, because people there care about the integrity of their city.

"Milwaukie has a wonderful small town feel with a great business district and a main street that is active and interesting," she said. "So when you're working on something as new and muscular as a light-rail station, it's a delicate operation."

At the Southeast Park Avenue stop in Clackamas, the last stop on the line, the opposite was true.

"Park Avenue (transit station) is in an unincorporated part of the county and there wasn't something to match to," Mayer-Reed said. As a result, a strong emphasis was placed on art to make the station more appealing.