Project: The Great Green Way
Location: New York City
Key Player: Mary Miss
Major Themes: Flow, Low, Local, Nature in the city, Connected open space systems, Entrepreneurial creativity, Collaborative teams, Co-creation with stakeholders, Community engagement, Conversations about urbanism

by Elizabeth Gray and Nan Ellin

Broadway: 1000 Steps (http://www.broadway1000steps.com/menu.html) directs attention to the entwined urban and ecological systems of New York City by distributing public art along the 275 blocks of Broadway. At up to 20 selected hubs, a series of convex mirrors, color coded systems, pavement markings, and interactive tools engage the public “to re-envision the New York thoroughfare as a ‘green corridor,’ while educating people on the street about sustainability” (Snodgrass 2011).
The seed for the Broadway project was planted when artist Mary Miss (http://www.marymiss.com) was invited to speak with the New York City Planning Commission about CaLL, the City as Living Laboratory: Sustainability Made Tangible through the Arts. Miss developed CaLL with Marda Kirn of EcoArts Connections (http://www.ecoartsonline.org/) to link the arts and sustainability through “modest interventions that act as catalysts for future initiatives” (Kirn cited by Snodgrass 2011). CaLL aims “to make sustainability personal, visceral, and tangible so that city residents are empowered to take positive action” (Miss et al 2011).

The head of City Planning responded enthusiastically to Miss’s presentation and challenged her to develop a NYC project. She began thinking about a corridor that would physically and visually articulate New York City as a leader in creating livable places. Broadway seemed an ideal site for the project. Beginning as a foot path before the arrival of European settlers, Broadway is currently the locus for numerous cultural institutions and green markets, ridge line for the City’s drainage system, and home to a diverse range of neighborhoods (Miss 2011b). The thoroughfare breaks the traditional grid pattern, creating interesting and notable spots in the city including Union Square, Madison Square Park, and Times Square. It is also bordered by multiple landmarks such as City Hall, New York University, Columbia University, and City College. Through extensive community engagement, Miss mapped these and other assets, identifying hubs of one to two blocks where assets clustered.
At a Tipping Point Conference (http://www.britishcouncil.org/usa-arts-tippingpoint-09.htm), which brings together artists and scientists, Miss met scientists Eric Sanderson and William Solecki, who would become collaborators on the project. While she had been wondering how artists could “have a voice or a place at the table to be heard,” she discovered that scientists “feel helpless in communicating their [climate change] research to the public” (Miss 2011b). Bringing together their respective skills and knowledge, Miss surmised, they could move their messages into the world most effectively and powerfully. She also assembled an advisory board of prestigious scientists and community members and partnered with the Department of Parks and Recreation, Department of Transportation, Department of Cultural Affairs, Mayor’s Office of Long Term Planning and Sustainability, NASA Goddard Institute for Space Science, Center for Research on Environmental Decisions at the Earth Institute of Columbia University, Institute for Sustainable Cities at CUNY, the Wallerstein Collaborative for Environmental Education at NYU, and writer Tony Hiss. To build support for the project, Miss met with various city agencies, private foundations, and granting agencies.

After years of working on large-scale projects that were cancelled for lack of funds, Miss deduced this project should operate through small-scale temporary interventions that would not be subject to a lengthy design review by the city (Miss 2011b). Going with various flows, Broadway: 1000 Steps would build upon sustainability initiatives already put in place by the city through PlaNYC (http://www.nyc.gov/html/planyc2030/html/home/home.shtml) in 2007 to envision a “greener, greater New York” (City of New York). The project would also “create a multidisciplinary, innovative, and replicable framework to communicate and engage diverse urban communities on issues of sustainability” (Miss 2011c).

With support from the New York Foundation for the Arts, National Science Foundation EARly-concept Grant for Exploratory Research (EAGER), and the Institute for Urban Design, a prototype hub at 137th Street was unveiled at Urban Design Week 2011 to demonstrate the project and build support for implementing additional ones. This installation, which was up for three months, “included an array of 54 green vertical poles that supported convex mirrors with text, images, and guide-by-cell phone numbers. The poles, arranged in clusters, addressed broad environmental subjects, including land, air, water, waste, life, energy, food and health. The mirrors reflected passers-by and highlighted elements of the streetscape, such as storm sewers, water towers, and green roofs. Attached to each mirror were smaller discs with information about related systems – infrastructure on which our urban lifestyle depends” (Miss 2011c). A short video documenting the project was produced (http://vimeo.com/24331826, 2011).
Some predicted no one would interact with the installation and it would be ignored and fade into the streetscape. According to Miss, however, the test site has “been like a magnet – initially people stop to check themselves out and then notice the content reflected in the mirror. It becomes very engaging” (Miss 2011b). Planning and architecture students at ten nearby universities assessed the prototype hub and are working to develop proposals for others.

Recognizing the simultaneous potential for a city to degrade or restore itself, Miss intends Broadway: 1000 Steps as “a catalyst for future projects that would incrementally change the corridor of Broadway over time” (Miss 2011b). Through this process, she points out, people can “begin to see how small steps to create change can aggregate from a neighborhood to the scale of the city” (Miss 2011b). Perhaps, Miss suggests, it will also “get urban designers, artists, architects, and landscape architects thinking in terms of how to do things directly on the street and make issues visible” (Miss 2011b). While she pursues full-scale development of the project in NYC, she is also leveraging this project to “put art and visual thinking at the center of civic engagement” and to “turn city streets into places of learning” (Miss 2011c) in other cities as well.
ON AVERAGE, A NYC RESIDENT USES 130 GALLONS OF WATER PER DAY.
References


Miss, Mary. 2011c. “City as Living Laboratory.”

Miss, Mary et al. 2011. Framework for a 21st century city, sustainability made tangible through the arts, city as living Laboratory, Broadway: 1000 Steps. April 18, 2011.
