

News & Issues

Can our living landscapes actually do work for us?

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"Mechanical systems degrade over time while natural systems increase in efficiency over time." — unknown

Jeffrey Bruce, FASLA, GRP, suggests that designers and builders of urban landscapes consider them in a broader context – beyond aesthetics. This means landscapes that, apart from their beauty, solve environmental problems and improve urban ecologies.

Since Bruce was speaking at a regional conference of the American Society of Irrigation Consultants (ASIC) in April, he focused on landscape water use. But, as Bruce and others in ASIC are wont to do, they extended their discussion beyond irrigation.

Living, regenerative machines

"To this point we've been managing our landscapes to look nice," says Bruce, founder of Jeffrey L. Bruce & Co., Kansas City, MO. "But can we re-engineer landscapes to be living machines, to do work for us?"

Landscapes as "living machines?" That's a concept that most of us probably have not dwelt on before. But, considering the amazing recuperative tendencies of natural systems — including systems that landscape professionals can provide — it's not as outlandish as it might seem.

The industry will have to grow in that direction given ever increasing regulations, says Bruce. It must also be able to measure and document the ecological benefits it provides our communities.

Yes, we all know that the landscapes that we design and install provide these benefits, to a certain degree anyway. For example, suppliers and maintainers of turfgrass point to its roll in reducing the urban heat island effect, capturing dust and slowing storm water runoff. There's solid research to back these claims. To date, however, we haven't been able to convincingly quantify this or promote it to regulators or the public.

Much yet to understand

Bruce feels the industry still has a long way to go in providing and quantifying landscapes that come out on the plus side of the ecological equation.

Ultimately, as we all realize, curb appeal is king. It will remain the principle driver for our Green Industry. The degree of beauty depends mostly upon customers' budgets. If they're willing to spend the money, industry professionals can give them just about anything they want in terms of outdoor beauty.

The next step for the industry is to better understand the complexity of natural systems so that the urban landscapes that it provides offer measureable benefits to urban environments in addition to being beautiful.

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