

Through the work of landscape architects Martha Schwartz Partners *Recycling Spaces* examines the role of the designed landscape in answering some of the most difficult questions facing 21st century cities: How to breathe new life into dying city centers, how to creating meaningful neighborhoods in rapidly growing urban areas, how to add economic and social value to depleted resource landscapes, and how to curate the evolution of healthy, vital, and sustainable urban centers.

Recycling Spaces Curating Urban Evolution
The Work of Martha Schwartz Partners

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The Changing City

Cities are constantly changing. With the inevitable cycles of prosperity and decline, political succession, ideological shifts, the rise and fall of industry, war, resources, and immigration, urban areas continue to evolve—growing, shrinking, diversifying, sprawling, and densifying in response to forces of change that act upon them.

Major urban change can be sudden and dramatic (the destruction of London during the Second World War or the arrival of more than one million immigrants to Germany’s Ruhr Valley during the Industrial Revolution) or steady and gradual (the consistent growth of New York City or the slowly declining birth rates in Western Europe). Sometimes, a steady and gradual change becomes sudden and dramatic when it hits a critical point. We see this today as the centuries-long trend of urban migration has resulted in more than half of the world’s population living in cities. These changes, fast or slow, are the result of the natural processes and human interventions that impact the shape and size of cities around the world.

Change moves with the economic cycles of the city. When the economy grows, the city grows. When the economy suffers, the city suffers along with it. Industries and populations flee in search of other opportunities, leaving behind abandoned buildings, toxic industrial sites, and vacant and derelict downtown cores.

Change follows resources. When a new ore-body is uncovered or an oil well struck, floods of people and industries descend on the area, hastily settling lands that are often too isolated or inhospitable for development. When resources are depleted, these communities disappear as quickly as they emerged, leaving unemployment, shrinking populations, and in many cases, severely degraded and devalued landscapes.

Change can be political. As governmental turmoil and civil wars force large populations to seek refuge elsewhere, these displaced populations must relocate to cities around the world, beginning the difficult process of accommodation and integration. In other urban areas, everyday political decisions lead to shifting land-use patterns, changing development frameworks, and new growth policies, each altering the shape and form of the cities around them.

Change can be brutal. Around the world, war and terrorism continue to blast holes through urban fabric, and natural disasters like hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions swiftly level entire cities and regions. These sudden and violent acts can destroy centuries of history and incremental growth, forcing cities to recover and reinvent urban centers from the rubble and destruction.

These changes, from regional to global, are often played out in detail at the neighborhood scale: previously vibrant city centers become vacant with the death of industry; some derelict post-industrial sites and toxic resource-extraction landscapes gentrify while others further decay; some districts become denser and more diverse with surges of immigration while others thin out; and new neighborhoods emerge on the outskirts of cities as urban populations continue to grow.

To successfully navigate this change, cities must adapt, shift, grow, build, re-build, preserve, and renew—providing a solid and flexible base to efficiently guide transition toward a healthy *and* sustainable future.

The Stable and Elastic Urban Landscape

Within these constantly evolving urban conditions, the city’s public realm landscapes—streets, parks, and open spaces—carry an intense responsibility as the shared resources of the city and the physical connections that bind it together. They can both catalyze change and absorb it. They can remain constant through cycles of upheaval and they can adapt to new conditions as cities transform around them. To remain sustainable, they must be both stable and elastic, capable of holding the past and catalyzing change for the future. This is no easy task.

The most successful and enduring public spaces are those that have made indelible impacts on the lives of the people who use them, and that have become entrenched in the identity, culture, and daily activity of their cities and neighborhoods. These spaces, like Central Park in New York and Hyde Park in London, offer an ideal paradigm for sustainability, as they remain vital by continuing to evolve along with the increasing complexities and demands of the contemporary city. They perform socially, economically, politically, and environmentally, providing for existing populations while accommodating new and diverse ones, structuring new uses, attracting growth, and sustaining ecological health.

Agents for Change

Parks and open spaces do not only adapt to forces of change, but also have the power to guide, shape, and curate the evolution of cities as the most effective catalysts for urban transformation.

Over short periods of time and for relatively small budgets (compared to building development or major infrastructural works), urban landscapes can dramatically change the character of a neighborhood and provide an immediate emotional,

physical, and visual impact on the people who use them—completely transforming the perception of a place, and as a result, transforming the place itself.

These agents for change breathe new life into dying city centers, reclaim toxic resource landscapes, adapt to and accommodate shifting populations, and provide the framework to guide the growth of the city. They can forge an identity for a new development or an old neighborhood in need of regeneration, they can stand as beacons of positive change to a suffering area of a city, they can create a destination within a neighborhood to attract visitors and residents, and they can serve as visible signals of transformation for potential investors and existing residents.

Recycling Space

Contemporary cities are the result of ongoing evolution and change, of natural processes and human interventions built in between and layered on top of one another, constantly evolving into new or altered versions of themselves.

What appears to be an innocuous meadow may be a toxic industrial site, an urban square the roof of a hidden parking garage, and a park may once have been an active quarry. Traffic interchanges, brownfields, vacant lots, streetscapes, industrial waterfronts, derelict parklands, polluted waterways, failed housing developments, and defunct transportation infrastructure provide an opportunity for new life and a new role within the changing city.

Recycling space is not an incidental process, but rather, a deliberate and creative act. It is shaped by a strategic outlook requiring intense understanding of a place and the ability to translate the historic, present, and future needs of the city into a precise and effective landscape design that will become part of its identity and its daily life. Recycling space means guiding the transformation of urban sites, neighborhoods, and cities as they continue to evolve into the future.

In the process of curating urban evolution, the questions become: How can we breathe new life into urban sites and shape the process of their transformation? What will most effectively translate the benefits of the past into the foundations for a sustainable future? And what will provide the most powerful visual, emotional, and experiential connection to the place for its current and future users?

The Work of Martha Schwartz Partners and the Expanded Field

Martha Schwartz Partners’ work catalyzes urban change. Their unmistakable public spaces bring new vitality into neighborhoods through their visual clarity, their emotional impact, and their ability to be absorbed completely into the life and culture of the cities around them.

From defunct mining villages and depleted resource landscapes to dying industrial centers and rapidly expanding urban neighborhoods, Martha Schwartz Partners’ work employs the power of design to transform spaces, neighborhoods, cities, and regions. By providing beacons of hope, visible signals of

positive change, an unmistakable sense of place, clear identities, and powerful destinations, their work generates change, attracts new populations, integrates diverse user groups, and creates excitement about urban areas that were previously seen as derelict, dangerous, or negative places.

In their unique approach to urban landscapes, Martha Schwartz Partners uses the transformative power of the visual experience to provide new readings, new relationships, and new purpose to urban sites. They recontextualize existing landscapes and objects to provide a heightened awareness of context, and as a result, a closer relationship to the place. They foster a sense of community and emotional connection to garner stewardship for a public space—if people don’t love it, it will not succeed. They break past the boundaries of the typical sustainability checklist to embrace an expanded notion of the term that includes social, economic, *and* environmental sustainability.

These principles have long been the foundation of Martha Schwartz Partners’ practice, and in the following pages, we will explore how they impact the transformation of urban spaces, each in a different stage of evolution, each requiring a different solution, and each guiding their neighborhoods and cities toward a sustainable future.

A Map to the Book

Recycling Spaces identifies four critical expressions of urban evolution in cities around the world today: dying city centers, depleted resource landscapes, shifting populations, and non-existent urbanism. The different consequences of, and approaches to, each of these phases of evolution are explored through twelve recent projects of Martha Schwartz Partners, from urban squares and parks, to town master plans, to art installations, to brownfield reclamations. Each demonstrates the transformative role of the designed landscape in curating urban evolution. Through illustrations, photographs, and personal stories from stakeholders, designers, collaborators, neighborhood residents, and Martha Schwartz (in blue text) each of the projects tells a different story about the evolution of a site, a neighborhood, a city, or a region.

A testament to the impact that Martha Schwartz Partners’ work has had on the lives of the neighborhoods and cities around them is their substantial presence on photo websites such as Flickr and Google Images. In these venues, they are celebrated as the hosts to an endless range of urban activity and city life. Where possible, we have shown you these projects through the eyes (and cameras) of the many people who use and love these popular urban spaces every day around the world.



Dying City Centers 01.



No longer able to rely on their primary industries for survival, many post-industrial cities lose their vitality, as shrinking populations and depressed economies lead to vacant and derelict downtown cores. These cities need to regenerate, finding new ways to cultivate stable populations, diverse economies, and vibrant urban life.



From left: St. Mary's Churchyard, London, England; ; Grand Canal Square, Dublin, Ireland; New Village Green, Fryston, England.

Grand Canal Square

Since the late 17th century, the Dublin Docklands area has transformed from river estuary, to agricultural fields, to industrial port, to gasworks, to toxic brownfield, to vibrant urban neighborhood. Grand Canal Square, the centerpiece of the new development, has played a catalytic role in the most recent reshaping of this once-forgotten part of town.

Aerial view looking west toward the River Liffey and Dublin city center.



Grand Canal Square

Dublin is a city of change. Through its more than 1,000-year history, the city has been ruled by the Norse, the Normans, the British, and the Irish.¹ It has been an agricultural city, a shipping city, a manufacturing city, a service city, and a technology city. As the economy shifts, Dublin shifts.

Following the flux of Ireland's tumultuous political and economic history, Dublin has been subject to constant cycles of emigration out of the city followed by floods of people moving back in. The city's population has ebbed and flowed with each cycle of upheaval and growth, plague and opportunity, employment and unemployment, boom and crisis.

From its explosive growth in the late 19th century to the unprecedented outflow during the recessions of the 1950s, from the overcrowded Georgian slums to the overburdened outer suburbs following the 1960s clearing of those slums, from the steady decline through the 20th century to the meteoric rise of the Celtic Tiger period, the cycle continues.²

The most recent wave of movement to Dublin came during the Celtic Tiger boom of the mid-1990s, when Ireland transitioned from being one of the poorest countries in Western Europe to having one of the fastest growing economies on the continent. As Dublin's new service economy steadily grew and as tech



High density, poor quality living conditions typical of Dublin's working class neighborhoods. c. 1910.



giants Google, Microsoft, Facebook, Amazon, and Yahoo! began establishing their European headquarters in the area, an intense demand was made on the city's limited housing stock. Housing supplies were too low, rents were too high, and many young families were forced to buy homes in Dublin's less crowded and more affordable suburbs.

The Dublin Docklands Development Authority (DDDA) saw an alternative. With a vision to establish a permanent, sustainable population in downtown Dublin, the DDDA developed a plan to transform the derelict 5-square-kilometer Eastern Docklands district into an extension of the city that would not only be the base for new businesses and cultural programs, but also a vibrant residential hub of 22,000 people, providing an attractive alternative for young families who might otherwise move to the suburbs.

The central core of the Docklands area, formerly the site of an active gasworks and some of the city's worst slums, fell

dormant when gas production ceased in the early 1980s, leaving a toxic brownfield badly in need of remediation. To transform the area from a derelict industrial site to a vibrant mixed-use development, the DDDA combined an innovative reclamation strategy with a mandate for high-quality architecture and public realm design. The quality of the new buildings and open spaces—especially Daniel Libeskind's Grand Canal Theater, and Martha Schwartz's centrally located Grand Canal Square—would signal the rebirth of the district and announce the Docklands as a new destination in the city.

The Square, which would be implemented months, and in some cases, even years before the rest of the development, was charged with shaping the image of the new district, attracting investment to the neighborhood, and generating excitement for the upcoming transformation.



Grand Canal Square

“The Docklands area has historically been an important part of Dublin, but it was a really tough place to live. Just look at some of the street names around here—there’s Bloodstone Alley, and Misery Hill. Now, we’ve got about 80,000 people living here and nearly 30,000 jobs. We’ve got Facebook up the road, we’ve got Google, who just opened their European headquarters here—it is a totally vibrant sector of the city and it’s a great place to live. You have restaurants, you have the theater, you have the river. Businesses are growing and there’s a young and energetic population. Even in the midst of the recession, you can’t get a table on the square at lunchtime. If you look at what this place was 100 years ago, 20 years ago, or even 5, it’s amazing.”

— John Doorly, Dublin Docklands Business Forum



Top: Fractured green marble fountain in front of the Grand Canal Theater. Bottom: Perforated metal seating and native grass planters along Quay wall.



View looking south across the waterfront plaza

The Dublin Docklands needed an identity that would be immediately recognizable and associated with the place. The dramatic Libeskind Theater already promised to deliver a clear and powerful aesthetic to the district, so rather than weaken it with a conflicting formal language, MSP extended Libeskind's angular lines down to the ground plane, uniting the building and landscape into one larger public space with a cohesive identity. When the sharp lines of the architecture hit the ground, they become a network of dark gray pathways criss-crossing the square and creating a fragmented pattern across the light gray plaza. The paths connect the buildings within the square, but also reach out into the surrounding streets to pull people into and through the plaza.

Site plan, not to scale.



An Invitation to the Grand Canal

“We knew we had to create a sense of excitement about the place, to build up momentum for the project. You need to get people excited, and hopeful, and curious about what was going on. The square was going to be the first visible sign of the upcoming change in the area, so it had to turn around people’s beliefs that something could happen here.”

To signal that the theater is open to the world, Schwartz created a sparkling red carpet that crosses through the square and up to the front door of the new theater. The red carpet not only welcomes people to the theater, but to the Docklands themselves, signifying the positive change that was beginning to take place in the area. The other end of the carpet extends out over the canal, inviting Dubliners to reconnect with their waterfront. Despite being a waterfront city, the tidal fluctuations of the river and the high quay walls do not afford many opportunities for people to actually engage with the water. Almost without exception, everyone who walks across the site, whether cutting through on their lunch break or coming to the Docklands for a pre-show

dinner, takes a detour out over the water before continuing on through the square.

In contrast to the dramatic bustle of the red carpet, the green carpet, which cuts the opposite direction across the square, provides visitors with a more relaxed experience of the site. The 15-meter-wide swath is defined by raised concrete planters and gets its color from the native grass and perennial plantings within. The vegetation creates a reminder of the river estuary that once lay beneath the reclaimed land. Bright green perforated metal benches add even more color and provide a place for people to sit down and seek shelter from the wind, a rare opportunity on Dublin’s blustery waterfront.

Activity on the red and green carpets.



View down the red carpet toward the Grand Canal Theater.



Color in the Gray City

Dublin is a gray city with streets made of granite, cloudy skies, and winter sunsets as early as 4:10pm. The square provides a source of color and light to the otherwise colorless landscape.

Unable to add the color with vegetation (the parking garage below could not support soil for large trees), MSP added brightness to the northern nights with 7-meter-high red light poles jutting at playful angles out of the surface of the square. The lights are programmed to dance up and down the poles, enhancing the energy of the plaza during bustling theater events and providing additional life to the square during quieter times. The light poles, which serve to break down the scale shift between the buildings and the ground plane, instantly became the most identifiable feature of the square and are now synonymous with Grand Canal. Ask anyone in Dublin how to get to the “square with the red poles” and they will be able to point you to the Docklands.

7-meter-high red poles are reflected in the water at night.

“The initial focus in people’s minds was on development and on the buildings, but no matter what the quality of the individual buildings, people’s overwhelming sense of place was going to be determined by that public space and the public realm of the wider district, as well.

There’s a way in which we navigate the city which is about following certain mental landmarks, so it wasn’t as much a physical landmark that was important for Grand Canal, but how it registered in people’s consciousness and how it entered into their mental maps of the city. If you want to make it something that people are drawn to, you need to imprint it in people’s imaginations, in a way that is fun, that is lively. It had to have an identity in and of itself and had to be of cultural and artistic value.

The plaza was built before the theater, so there was a risk that it would feel incomplete without the building, but Martha’s work has such a strong visual sense and coherence, that even when it was

in place without any of its intended context, people registered it straightaway. They got it visually. They got that the grasses and the planters were the re-emergence of the mud flats that had been there once before. They got the idea of coast...things that weren’t that explicit. People got it very quickly and they loved it. And they still love it. It has become symbolic of this area and of the regeneration of the city.

The perception of the Docklands before Grand Canal Square was that it was full of people in gray suits doing business. Now the square says very clearly: this is somewhere fun to hang out, there’s waterfront, there’s the theater, there are restaurants, there are bars. This is really part of the city. Huge numbers of people began to move into the area with apartments, galleries, shops... it lit a fire of enthusiasm under the whole place.”

— John McLaughlin, former Director of Architecture and Planning,
Dublin Docklands Development Authority





24-Hour Urban Activity

The square is further activated by the near-constant flow of people busily shuffling between meetings, lining up for a performance at the theater, or taking the time to just sit and ponder the river. From businessmen and women, to black-tie theater goers, to teens from the surrounding Docklands neighborhood, everyone finds his or her own way of occupying the space and colonizing it temporarily while they are at the square.

Along the water's edge, rows of granite benches offer places for people to eat lunch in the sun or to set down their heavy groceries on the way home from the market. These benches, of all different lengths, become fun stepping stones for the population of children who have begun to move in the neighborhood.

The water fountain, which flows out from the theater end of the square, lends constant movement to the site. Its fractured, multi-level surface encourages people, especially small children, to explore and play.

The square's colorful energy and flexible design have allowed it to be heavily programmed with cultural events, performances, and community gatherings. It has provided the set for television shows, lighting installations, rock concerts, and dance parties, and continues to play its own role in Dublin city life.



The square is activated at all hours by the movement of people, water, and light.



Grand Canal Square

Fortified Against Change

For the first time in 20 years, Dublin is once again losing its population. The Dublin Docklands, however, has maintained a stable population and a level of optimism even within the current recession. Nearly all of the residential units are occupied, new restaurants are opening, and the neighborhood continues to attract business to the area. Through the inevitable cycles of Dublin's fluctuating economy, Grand Canal Square remains as a fixed signal of the vibrancy and optimism of Dublin's newest downtown population.



“Even when the rest of the country has no jobs, we were recruiting for the convention center, for the Grand Canal Theater, the Aviva Stadium. It makes people feel that it's all happening here at Docklands. It's the one place where it's happening.”

— Betty Ashe, St. Andrews Resource Center and former Chair,
Dublin Docklands Business Forum

Top: The Hive, interactive sound and light show, 2008.
Bottom: The Spheres perform the St. Patrick's day festival, 2009.

“We’ve learned that what we really need are what we call bumping points: parks for kids to play in, BBQ areas, libraries—places where neighbors and community can come together. Grand Canal square is absolutely one of those.”

— John Doorly, Dublin Docklands Business Forum



Opening night at the Grand Canal Theater.