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An ordinary street-resurfacing project became an extraordinary experiment in changing neighborhood perceptions to benefit ecological health when Ken Haider reconsidered Birmingham Street. For the past two years, the city engineer for Maplewood, Minnesota, had participated in the Phalen Watershed urban ecosystem management project, and now he saw the Birmingham Street resurfacing as an opportunity to improve water quality by infiltrating stormwater into the sandy soil rather than sending it through pipes to area lakes.

Haider knew that the success of the experiment would depend partly on how people who lived on the street perceived the changes that would happen in their front yards. Joan Nassauer and several graduate research assistants worked to understand neighborhood aesthetic values. Respecting these values, they worked with neighbors and staff of the city, Phalen Watershed project, and Ramsey Washington Metro Watershed District to design a new landscape that

- Retrifs the existing street and front yard municipal stormwater easement with gardens that infiltrate stormwater into the sandy soil
- Builds landscape ecological structure to support biodiversity in the context and at the scale of an urban neighborhood
- Enhances the amenity value of the neighborhood
- Reduces the capital costs for municipal infrastructure

Throughout the project, photographer Chris Faust observed the characteristics and transformation of the neighborhood landscape. Now people in the neighborhood recognize the attractiveness of the new landscape, and they have begun to take care of it. Rather than merely building a new street, this more cost-effective approach retrofits the urban fabric to make it more ecologically healthy and culturally sustainable.
Mundane 1. of or pertaining to the earth 2. common; ordinary

If ordinary places can be changed, whole watersheds can change incrementally. Birmingham Street in Maplewood, Minnesota, is a working-class 1950s neighborhood of modest homes just beyond the St. Paul city limits. Many of the people who live in the neighborhood bought their first home there in the 1950s and have lived there ever since. Two or three generations of some families live in different houses on the street. Other residents moved to Birmingham Street only recently, when they bought their first home. Small children play in the yards, old people tend gardens or keep watch over the neighborhood through their front windows. Teenagers retreat to the backyard to have a smoke.

Birmingham Street is mundane in that it looks ordinary. The landscape expresses the aesthetic common to other well-kept, affordable urban neighborhoods. People take care of their own lawns. The many fences and hedges clearly express property ownership. These edges connect to make a fine-scale landscape network that separates one yard from another. It is a tidy street, where your character is judged by the way that you take care of your yard. The landscape might not be described as beautiful. It is not dramatic, but it is very attractive in the way that only a place that has been invested with a great deal of continuous care can be. It is neat and hospitable. You would feel comfortable walking up to any door.

Disturbance 1. the act of interrupting the quiet, rest, peace, or order of 2. a part of natural ecosystems; a relatively discrete event in time that disrupts ecosystems, community, or population structure

The street was disturbed for an important purpose, but any disturbance disrupts peace and removes familiar order. If residents did not perceive improvement when they saw the new landscape, they would not be likely to sustain the new design by caring for the landscape or by supporting the city’s innovative approach to stormwater management.

The project was designed to be appreciated by the people who live on Birmingham Street. Neighborhood people can judge the attractiveness of the new gardens in the same way that they enjoy and judge their own front yards. The design plan situates the disorder of change and the apparent disorder of biodiversity in an orderly pattern of native plant gardens recognizable by their relationship to the house, their conventional shapes and structural materials, and turf frames. The French drains constructed at key locations to increase the infiltration capacity of the local sandy soil fit within rainwater gardens as seen by people who live on the street. The finely meshed landscape structure of native wetland and prairie plant gardens up and down the street connects to gardens and fences along the edges of each property. The stormwater retention area on the site of a tax forfeiture lot has become the neighborhood nature garden. None of these gardens camouflage the ecological function of the landscape. Instead, each of them portrays ecological function in the cultural landscape language of the place, presenting nature to be seen through the eyes of Birmingham Street.
Recognition 1. the identification of something as having been previously seen, heard, or known. 2. the perception of something as existing or true.

The plan to retrofit Birmingham Street recognizes the ordinary aesthetic that local people see in their front yards; it tweaks that aesthetic to embody richer ecological function; and then it returns that common aesthetic to the street. This allows people who live on the street to see the rainwater gardens of native plants as an improvement. Many homeowners were skeptical at initial neighborhood meetings to develop the design for the project. When the project was bid, “optional gardens” were specified so that residents could decide to include a rainwater garden in their own yard during the course of construction. When construction began, each of the fifteen optional gardens was taken.

Construction costs for an urban retrofit like Birmingham Street would be about 10 percent less than a conventional project. Birmingham Street has become a regionally emulated and nationally recognized model for neighborhoods and cities.

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Credits