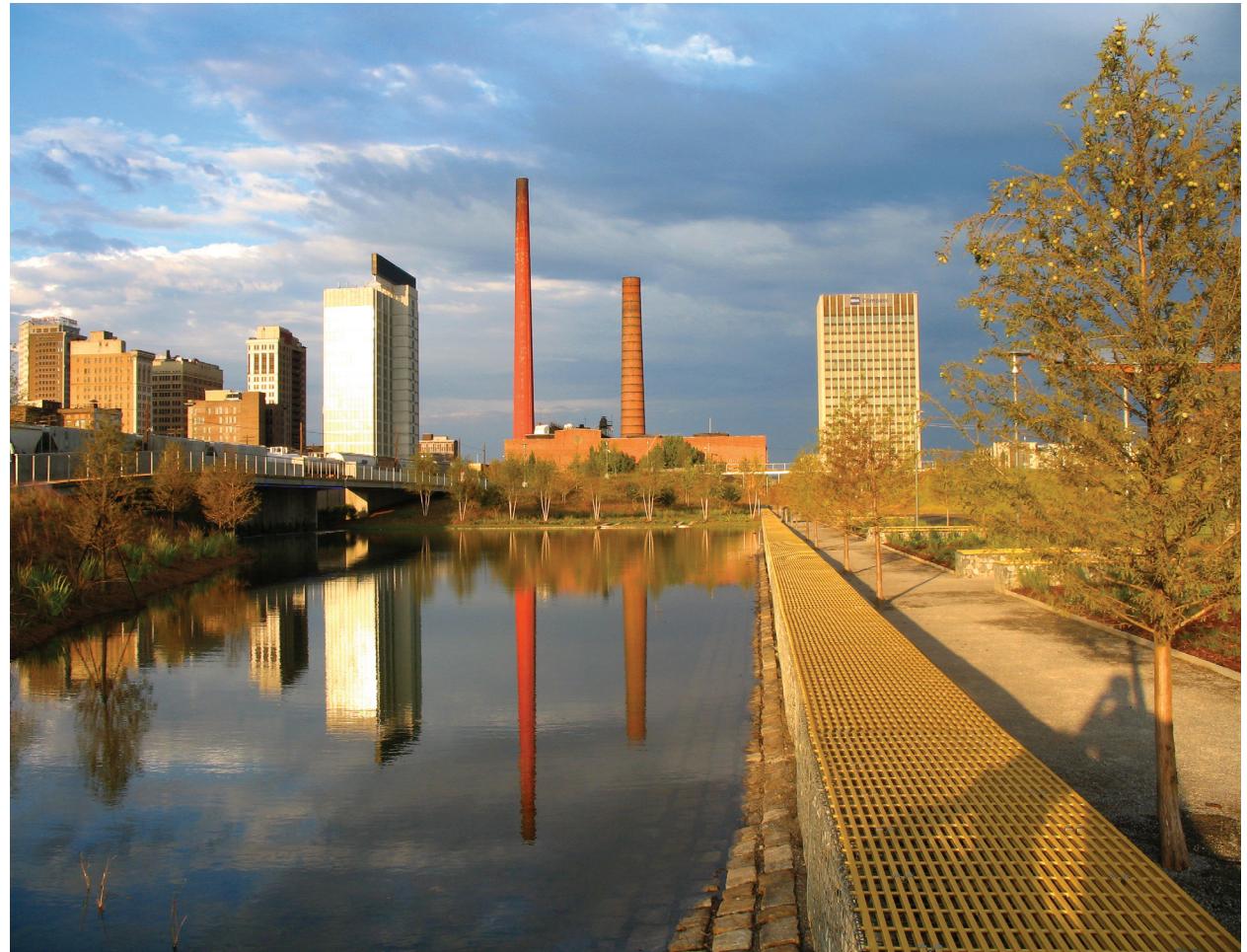


Footsteps

Tom Leader

It's fascinating to learn the stories of how people ended up in the work they do and why....and then how their work changed over their lives. More often than not relationships to mothers and fathers have a lot to do with it. Trying to please them, rebel against them, outdo them, live up to them, remember them. As a teenager, I wanted to write fiction and model myself after Hemingway. I thought I might be good at it and I knew my mother would be gratified, partly because of her own ambitions that weren't realized. My father wasn't so sure. He was an engineer and the idea of just putting made-up notions out there, unsupported by life experience or research or facts seemed a little preposterous. Go on a few spell-binding adventures in exotic places, then there might be something worth writing about.

I was in college; my father got me worried I would never have a job when I got out. I needed remedial grammar classes and I got discouraged about writing. I was good at drafting and geometry in high school but not much for math or physics. I felt I needed a vocation. I saw a picture in a course catalog of people with backpacks holding clipboards hiking in a ferny redwood canyon. I thought...I can do that, how hard could it be? Arranging planters on somebody's deck. That's how I got into landscape architecture. I suspect I'm not the only who decided a big part of their life in some similar manner. A combination of insecurities and ignorance in one's early twenties



when most people are not fit to make life-altering decisions but do. When my father heard about this decision from my mother and realized the impact he'd had, he wept.

I never gave up landscape architecture and in many ways stuck with it because I was determined to prove to my father it was something to be proud of, something "professional".

And I was determined to prove to my mother it was something with artistic value.

These two threads wove together in strange ways over time. I spent a long time working for someone who was a "master" with great reputation and concern for artistic authorship, the hero to be admired for singular imagination, a person who needed

followers. The last time I talked with my mother I had been promoted at that office and got a raise. My father was pleased and no doubt relieved. My mother was happy to hear my report...but only somewhat, and asked "is that what you want?"

That question served me well. I started a practice based partly on being rebellious as well as experiments and



alternatives to convention, being part of the “resistance”. We were two or three people working out of my cheap apartment without big expenses so we could take risks and get published for our provocations. When we got involved in the World Trade Center Master Plan and got interviewed on local news, one of the last things my father’s said was “I think maybe he’ll be famous” - which I hope made him

happy, even if it didn’t quite happen. Then they were both my parents were gone.

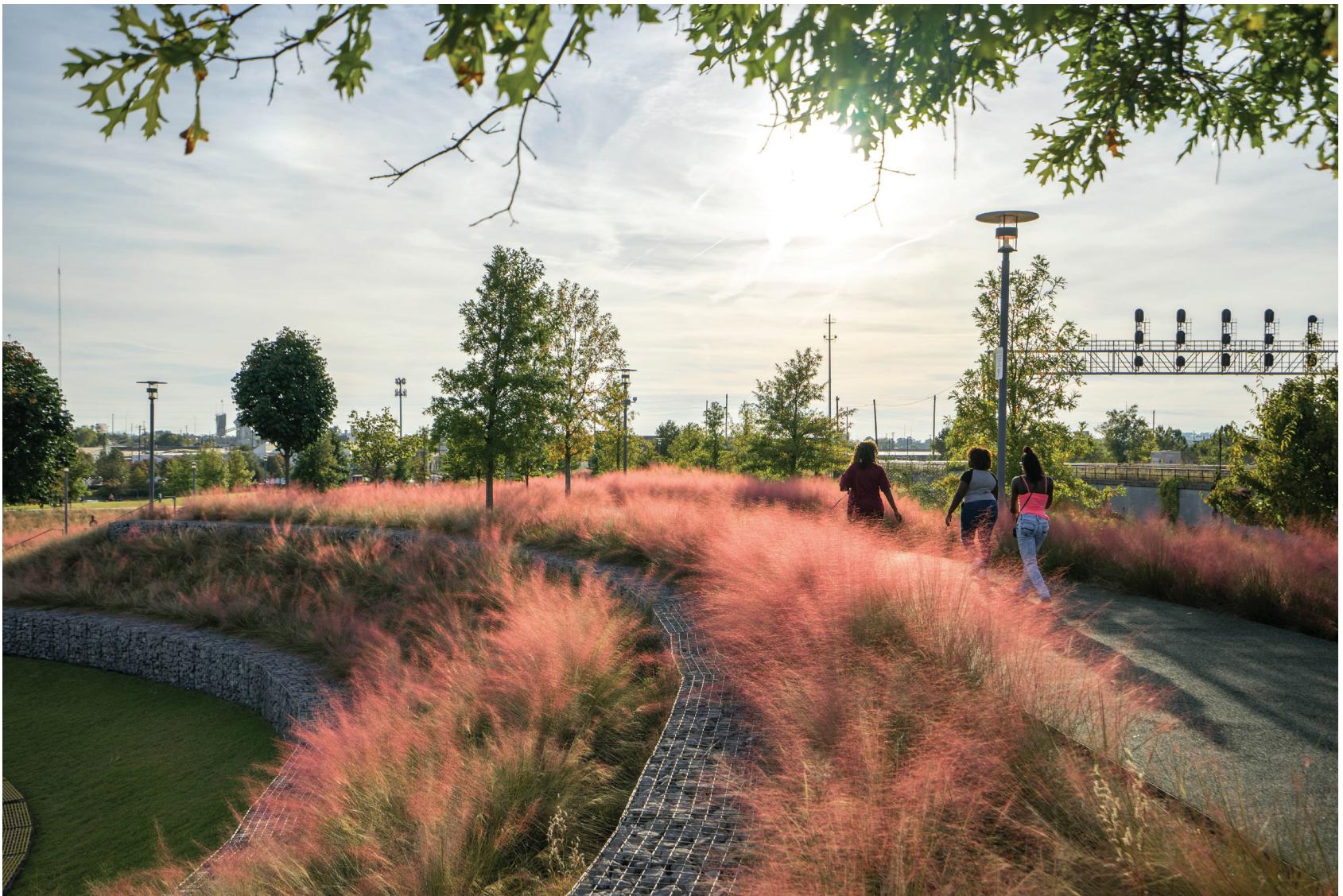
What’s interesting about that point in your life is you internalize these voices. They become part of you. You get to referee and mediate them, put them to use and maybe reconcile the conflicting impulses for something good. I think it’s fair to say you begin

to see things better, more for what they are. These days I think if there is something that leads to personal authenticity, I think it’s less about being a warrior for art, fighting convention, leading the resistance. It’s more about seeing. Seeing in the way Robert Irwin talked about, where you forget the names of what you see. Where you let go of what something does or doesn’t do for you and

hopefully more for what it does for others.

From that time our work has really been less about manufacturing coolness than finding things. What are the qualities of places that may have been hiding in plain sight, making them visible, putting people in contact with those things they can agree are part of everyone’s lives.





Railroad Park was an example of that. Just stepping back and letting the invisible fact of trains lumbering through Birmingham on 11 tracks in a weird industrial ballet become the central fact of a trainfront park. The best compliment we got was that people never looked at the trains that way before, the downtown that way before, each other, black and white, that way before. Birmingham found a way to work together again and find what they had in common all along. I think the project was an artistic success, stimulated a new economy, but also launched a surprising social dynamic that probably no one had anticipated.

This was something all my previous experience had not prepared me for – the satisfaction that comes from making a difference in a whole community. Once it's happened to you, it's like a drug and you need to keep finding that over and over. I try to teach my daughter the value of this and took her to Birmingham to see what Dad does. If I had my mother and father today I would take them there to see what it all meant in the end and maybe they could see themselves in that too.