Rosslyn Streetscape

ROSSLYN, VA

Landscape Forms Elements:
Custom Benches, Custom Chairs, Custom Tables, Custom Litter & Recycle Bins, Custom Planters, Custom Bike Racks, Custom Newspaper Corrals, Custom Information Kiosks & Tableaus, Custom Charging Tables, Custom Parklet

Design Partner:
Ignacio Ciocchini

Team Members:
Rosslyn BID, Arlington County

Rosslyn, Virginia, has evolved dramatically over the past 10 years. What was once a primarily commercial district is now a vibrant mixed-use neighborhood—15,000+ people live there, 25,000+ work there, and well over a million people visit each year. How did urban planners ensure that the neighborhood would also evolve to become an enticing and comfortable place for people to work, visit, and live?

Fortunately, the Rosslyn Business Improvement District (BID) had a vision. Rosslyn BID’s placemaking efforts included a streetscape master plan conceived with Arlington County’s Urban Planning team that would “use the public realm as a convening element and make Rosslyn an active, fun place where people want to be,” explains Rosslyn BID President Mary-Claire Burick.

Rosslyn had several public projects underway, but none addressed streetscape. When industrial designer Ignacio Ciocchini, who would design the streetscape elements, first visited Rosslyn, he saw public spaces that had been designed in isolation to others, and there wasn’t a cohesive aesthetic tying the disparate elements and public spaces together. “Sidewalks are the connective tissue among buildings, transportation hubs, and parks,” says Ciocchini. “Each of these things may be great on its own, but they need good, friendly sidewalks for human beings to connect them. Sidewalks are an essential part of public space.”

Rosslyn BID’s streetscape master plan reflects a unified collection of elements that achieve the goal of livable streets. Doug Plowman, urban planning and design manager for Rosslyn BID, agrees: “Holistic elements together tell a story. In the public realm, we now have a consistent design aesthetic. We saw the opportunity to clean up the visual clutter that had occupied downtown Rosslyn’s public spaces.”

With the completed designs and the necessary governmental approvals behind them, the Rosslyn BID and Ciocchini enlisted the help of Landscape Forms’ Studio 431 to fabricate a family of streetscape elements that, to use Burick and
Ciocchini’s words, would convene and connect the people and activities and create a unique identity for an evolving Rosslyn. “The Rosslyn BID understood that they needed vision and a great design, but we also needed a manufacturer that could turn the designs into reality and with the desired quality and attention to detail,” says Ciocchini. “The engineering and manufacturing services Studio 431 provides are the best in the industry.”

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The 17 blocks of mixed-use development that comprise the Rosslyn BID showcase modern, sleek, and simple architecture, and the streetscape elements reflect that aesthetic. For one of the design features, Ciocchini took black and white images of the Rosslyn skyline at night and created a template that would eventually take form in laser cut patterns on all of the site elements. “I was looking for a way to represent the skyline, a 21st-century digital world, and the continuous movement of people in a city,” explains Ciocchini. “The view of Rosslyn at night with windows lit, others dark, and windows of different sizes creates a pattern that is digital in nature, has a sense of movement, and belongs uniquely to Rosslyn.”

The streetscape elements include benches with and without backs, chairs, tables, litter and recycle bins, planters, bike racks, newspaper corrals, information kiosks and tableaus, charging tables, and a parklet prototype. To date, the parklet with tables and chairs, planters, litter and recycle bins, a newspaper corral, and benches have been installed. All of the elements are mobile and can be deployed around the BID as needed. The elements’ palette–purple, silver, and graphite–mirrors that of the Rosslyn identity.

Brett Wallace, urban designer and landscape architect for Arlington County, believes the site elements have achieved what the stakeholders envisioned early on. “The furniture looks sophisticated and fits within the context of Rosslyn. The design translates from the buildings down to the street at a pedestrian scale. The pieces are visually interesting and appealing. Ultimately, they contribute to a more pedestrian friendly environment.”

“These are truly custom products with sophisticated refinement, intricacy, and detail that required a high level of engineering expertise,” says Studio 431’s Darin Pippo. Beyond being an industrial designer, Ciocchini is the VP of Design and Planning for NYC’s Bryant Park and 34th Street Partnership. “Busy, active environments are what Ignacio knows,” says Pippo. “He understands the balance of design, functionality, and durability and what will be successful in the public realm.” The benches have extra-wide seats, which give people personal space as well as room for handbags, briefcases, and bulky winter coats. “Wider seats with
divisions between the individual seats makes people use the benches more,” says Ciocchini, something he learned through observation of people using park benches in NYC. “People feel more comfortable taking a seat when there is more separation.”

The laser cut surfaces on the site elements give a unique look and subtle nod to Rosslyn's skyline, but they also provide air movement and heat dissipation in the benches and chairs, air flow to minimize odor dissipation in the litter bins, and a view to the news racks in the newspaper corral. The tableau provides wayfinding assistance and informs visitors of Rosslyn's history and its large collection of public art.

The stakeholders involved in the Rosslyn BID streetscape master plan shared the goal of creating spaces that put pedestrians first and give them reasons to use public space. The parklet is the first in Arlington County. Installed in the spring of 2018, it become an instant hit. Positioned on a busy corner, people are using it for meetings, breaks, and lunches. Signage makes clear that it is for public use. Streetscape elements will be added as public spaces are developed, so the current set of elements also serve to inform the BID of potential uses and how to improve the site elements.

“We're soliciting feedback from the public on their use of the parklet,” says Burick. “We're learning how people are using the space and observing how it works, and we'll share that information with the County as it develops parklet guidelines for future locations.”

The Rosslyn BID and Arlington County had the vision years earlier to plan—and plan well—for the future. Master planning and implementation is often a protracted process, and champions are important to keep the project moving.

“The Rosslyn BID and Arlington County staff are all leaders in their respective fields,” says Piippo. “They are visionary and needed to be to bring a project like this to fruition. They are working to make Rosslyn a destination in the Washington area, build a brand that distinguishes it from other DC neighborhoods, and entice people to live and work in Rosslyn.”