

# Adaptive Design: Field Reconnaissance

Chris Reed, StoSS landscape urbanism

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Adaptive design and planning strategies have recently made their way onto the international stage as an emerging direction of inquiry for urbanism, architectural, and landscape practices. By their inherent flexibility and responsiveness to a range of inputs through time, adaptive design strategies can nimbly negotiate the complexities of project implementation, fiscal fluctuations, shifts in programmatic priorities, and even material weathering and change. As such, adaptive strategies redefine potential roles for architects and landscape architects, at once expanding their purview to include project conception, research, design, implementation, maintenance, administration, and even fundraising and political stage-setting. In so doing, hard lines between research and practice give way to more integrated operations, whereby discoveries made through ongoing design research explorations can be immediately fed back into the study process as projects are being realized in the field.

## BACKGROUND

Adaptive design and planning strategies are an outgrowth of developments in the field of ecology, which has experienced a dramatic shift away from an understanding of systems that attempt to achieve a predictable equilibrium (“steady-state”) condition to systems typically in states of change, adapting to subtle or dramatic changes in inputs, forces, resources, climate, etc. Adaptation, appropriation, and flexibility are now the hallmarks of “successful” systems, as it is through their ability to respond to contextual and environmental conditions that they persist (see research by Robert E. Cook, Nina-Marie Lister, Richard Formann, and others).

Urbanists, architects, and landscape architects have recently experimented with the implications of adaptive strategies. While these revised, flexible models have made their way into architectural discourse and onto the boards of national and international design competitions, little or no field testing of these scenarios has proceeded, often for want of a client interested in experimentation in the public realm.

## PROJECT

This initiative involves a series of field tests of adaptive design and management strategies on an underutilized site in the city of Somerville, Massachusetts. This field research project will study and measure the physical, hydrologic, and ecological effects of earth-moving in response to stormwater runoff. The goal is to explore how one might design and seed a self-sustaining landscape system using only available stormwater and an understanding of inherent plant mechanisms (seed-dispersal, dormancy, etc.).