

# **WASTE TO PLACE**

A New Model for Reclamation in the American West

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## P-REX AND EPA

A priority co-interest of EPA and P-REX is identifying potential projects for integrating design in the remediation process of post-mined sites that will be redeveloped for new uses. For the past six years, P-REX has been working with EPA to develop tools for envisioning how to turn post-mining landscape liabilities into community assets. The Wellington site and larger French Gulch valley presented the opportunity for EPA and P-REX to put their previous joint research on design and remediation integration into action.

When EPA asked P-REX to assist in reconceptualizing and designing the valley landscape, the public process at French Gulch was already different from a typical public process in which the government is involved. The normal protocol for government-driven process is quite linear, and consists of the EPA providing a plan for remediation followed by several public meetings to solicit comments and refine the original plan. P-REX's process for French Gulch was radically different: it began by asking the community what they needed, then a plan was constructed from their vision. P-REX's first task was to gain an understanding of the project from the bottom-up, by attending meetings and soliciting information and feedback from parties already deeply involved in French Gulch. Rather than prescribing a top-down rigid design approach, or new master plan, P-REX assessed the logic and

structure of the Phase I and II improvements to see how the neighborhood's landscape and open space components could be better integrated in the EPA's clean-up plans.

Two meetings were held in the Town of Breckenridge between June and November 2007. Representatives from the Town, Summit County, EPA, French Gulch Neighborhood residents and the developer's representatives, as well as selected residents from the community-at-large were invited to participate in the visioning sessions. The first meeting was to solicit community ideas. No plans were proposed, but rather a lengthy list of citizen ideas and visions for the future of the valley landscape was collected by P-REX. Over the following six weeks, P-REX developed three conceptual plans and several series of perspective views on ground level, incorporating various themes and elements from the feedback in meeting one. None of these plans were conceived as better or worse than the others. Rather, each plan incorporated a variety of programmatic elements, landscape remediation ideas, and circulation systems in a variety of configurations. These plans were presented to the community and a second round of feedback was synthesized. A third meeting was held in which a conceptual plan, 3D model, and perspective views were presented to the town and county staff in winter 2007-08. Each

meeting was organized to communicate the EPA's environmental cleanup obligations, the developer's intentions on future phases of development, and the feedback of residents who were already living at French Gulch full-time.

One of the main goals of the meetings was to facilitate a discussion on the environmental problems and remediation strategies needed to return the land to a safe and healthy condition, while integrating programmatic uses based on the desires of local stakeholders and residents of Wellington neighborhood.

# THE “OLD” NEW URBANIST MASTERPLAN

The developer's original vision for Wellington neighborhood was to create a traditional neighborhood with a sense of community and place<sup>1</sup>. To carry out this vision, physical design patterns for buildings, roads and landscape improvements were chosen based on typical New Urbanist design principles, which are controlled by deed restrictions and legally binding design guidelines. Houses are designed to have parking in back alleys, and front façades with generous porches and pedestrian-friendly curbside appeal. Small communal parks are inserted throughout the development giving each subcluster of homes a sense of protected landscape and garden space while still being able to easily access the larger road and path circulation system for walking up-valley into the vast back country. Wellington neighborhood is widely regarded as a success story and has garnered positive press and national awards<sup>2</sup>.

With phase I and II completed, and several hundred new residents living in French Gulch, the neighborhood became the largest development for non-second home residents since tourism became the primary source of Breckenridge's economy. A stronger community voice

grew within Wellington as people became interested in future remediation activities near their homes, and wanted to participate in planning for connections of their neighborhood to the surrounding open space and recreation areas. While the developer's New Urbanist master plan worked well for building phase I and II of the neighborhood, as phase III approached, and the community grew, the shortcomings of the original master plan became obvious.

## Expansion and Connection

The New Urbanist plan treated landscape components of the development as small, internalized spaces, rather than part of the more extensive landscape systems running throughout the valley, thus not physically or visually connecting to the larger environment. Put succinctly, the plan was inward looking and worked well when one stayed within the confines of the develop-

ment boundary. This needed to be resolved because the Town and County owned land parcels immediately adjacent to Wellington neighborhood, and undeveloped land with development would be deeded to town for open space and incorporated into a long-term vision for the neighborhood and valley. There grew a strong desire among all of the stakeholders to ensure continuity between trails and open space improvements with the long-term plans of the Town and County, and the shorter-term plans of the developer.

Additionally, if all of the open space and trails would eventually form a cohesive recreation network, then gateways, trailheads, and other future connections to back country wilderness and recreation areas up-valley from the Wellington neighborhood would need to be considered (which the developer's plan did not do). The community also took an interest in preserving parts of the old mining waste as a cultural landscape, including the old dredge boats and waste rock piles, and to interpret and reuse these elements in a way that makes it more physically accessible and legible for understanding by residents and tourists alike.

1 [http://www.poplarhouse.com/explore\\_vision.htm](http://www.poplarhouse.com/explore_vision.htm)

2 Ibid.

## CONCEPTUAL LANDSCAPE DESIGN PROCESS

As is the case with many reclamation sites, French Gulch had a history of community interest and involvement before many of the engineering and design consultants were asked to provide professional services for redeveloping the area. Specifically, when P-REX and EPA began collaborating together on French Gulch in 2006, phase I of the development was nearing completion and 122 homes were already built and occupied. The completion of phase II in 2008 added 48 homes, and another 112 are entitled to be built in phase III bringing the total neighborhood at built-out to 282 homes. This includes not only the architectural structures but also the associated infrastructure of roads, sidewalks, parking areas, park and open spaces. As described by the developer, as phases II and III are added they include extensions of all of the systems built in phase I to complete a unified neighborhood where cars and people could move seamlessly between all parts of the development. Specific environmental assessments and treatments were also identified and some remediation procedures were already mandated by federal and state laws and institutions. In summary, authorities and the community had already reached a general consensus on mechanical water treatment objectives and toxic soil consolidation in French Gulch.



Waste rock piles near French Gulch, Breckenridge, Colorado