Megan McClellan asks: I love the look of the “alive” trails but I do worry about the additional time and effort for maintenance.

Troy Scott Parker (TSP): Trails feel “alive” when they have the quality without a name. Trails have the quality without a name when they resolve all of the forces in their context such that the system of forces does not destroy itself in the short run. Some of those forces are about intent, stability, and stewardship, and if they are not resolved, some forces leak out and may cause the system of forces to work against the trail, which tends to increase maintenance needs.

For instance, consider the following trails on the same site:

LEFT A trail that feels alive because it resolves all of the forces in its context, including erosion. Erosion is limited by frequent crests and dips in the trail alignment that cause water to fall off of the trail in the dips while forming natural shape in 3D. This trail needs very little maintenance.

ABOVE This trail lacks dips for drainage. As a result, the trail suffers major erosion as water runs down it. This trail is being destroyed in the short run. It feels dead because it doesn’t resolve erosion as a force.

By this logic, a trail that feels more alive often needs less maintenance than a trail that feels more dead, precisely because what makes it feel alive is a deep form of sustainability.
April Durham states: I would be interested to hear a bit more about how visual art can contribute to the quality without a name based on your experience. You had the children’s mural but I’m wondering about other kinds in art in the environment experiences.

Troy Scott Parker (TSP): We can think of art in the environment on a scale of 0 to 10. A 0 rating is art that’s worse than having nothing, art that makes us wish that it was gone, art that feels so “wrong” in that place that it would be better to have nothing there. A 10 rating is art that makes us feel great every time we see/experience it within its location and context, art that’s timeless (we never get tired of it), art beloved by many people, art that many people would fight to keep if someone threatened to take it away. The closer a work of art is to a 10—from tagging to graffiti to fine art—the more it has the quality without a name in its context. Art rated at 10 fully generates the quality without a name because it fully resolves all of the forces in the context—including our own human forces.

When people determine their ratings based on their actual deep feelings—as opposed to their opinions that can be all over the board—a group of strangers can have 90-99% agreement.* Christopher Alexander discusses the validity of measuring feelings vs. opinions in The Timeless Way of Building.

For art in the environment, we have to think about it in the context—physical location, social situation, political situation, budget, ability to maintain the art and its location, and everything else—in which it exists or is proposed. An art concept that seems good on paper or on a computer may fall flat in the field. An art concept selected by a committee based on their opinions may be approved but fall flat with the public that rates it on their true feelings. Both of the above situations often occur.

Personally, I’ve seen art in the environment that I and others would rate at 0, 10, and all points in between. When 0-rated art was removed, there was a collective “good riddance.” Art rated at 10 remains in place for decades, basically forever, and is so beloved that it becomes a landmark of the place, is well-maintained, and is never vandalized or otherwise molested.

William Brennan asks: Do you have recommendations on how to instill an appreciation for aesthetics in seasonal trail workers and manager types, not just the trail designers?

TSP: Before answering your question, let me to set things up with two ideas.

First, trailshaping is designed as a practical, field-friendly system of thought for increasing trail expertise. To use trailshaping in this way, however, requires using all 19 of the forces, not just the four discussed during the webinar. When you use the full set of forces, aesthetics is an integral part of trails, not something free-floating or tacked on, and aesthetics shapes every aspect of working with trails for everyone who uses trailshaping. Organizational culture change happens as a matter of course with little overt effort. The higher up the organizational chart that trailshaping reaches, the more thoroughly and evenly the culture can change.

Second, seeing is believing. People tend to learn best by example (assuming that they permit themselves to even consider examples to be valid). If folks are open-minded enough to see examples of things done well (anywhere, in any context) and realize they could adapt and apply some of those things on the trails they steward, they are more likely to change their ways than if they didn’t see

the examples for themselves. Therefore, if folks can see examples of the type of aesthetics you would like to have, and if they can permit themselves to shape trails that way themselves, it’s easier to get them to change how they work.*

That being said, let me address your question based on working with the four forces I discussed in the webinar.

For seasonals, orientation training that includes aesthetic issues can set initial expectations. Discuss and tour on the ground what you want and don’t want, and practice what you want during orientation by actually building some of it. For the rest of the season (or for all of it if you don’t have orientation training), the classic psychology of behavior modification (i.e., praising the good, especially, and pointing out the bad) works well. Reward works much better than punishment. If anyone in a crew does a good job with anything, no matter who does it, praise it openly and honestly in front of the whole crew. If one crew does better work than other crews, praise that crew in front of the other crews and mention with what it did well. If you praise regularly, frequently, and honestly, you will get more of what you praise—sometimes much more. Finding things to praise requires keeping close and frequent tabs on work in progress, which also enables you to more continually steer work in the desired direction.

For managers, examples and demonstration are important, especially if they can see how and why what you want is a good idea. Find or shape something with the aesthetics you want, then get managers to look at it with you on the ground (which is often the hardest part). Tie its virtues to all manner of positive or improved outcomes such as

- better environmental stewardship or integration of multiple land management objectives (and public demonstration/walking your talk for same)
- lower construction and/or maintenance costs (for solutions that are better, smarter, faster, and cheaper all at the same time, which can happen in trailshaping in some contexts. It especially happens when we give ourselves permission to leave things rougher than we might otherwise, i.e., with more natural shape, when appropriate for the exact context at hand.)
- happier and more supportive users
- increased willingness of people to stay on trails
- increased public respect and appreciation for trails and trail work
- increased public trust and faith in your local agency as a land/trail manager

Managers tend to respond to feedback, positive as well as negative. Positive feedback from trail users and the public on aesthetic-related issues (“I love how you did ________: please do more of that”) tends to carry more weight than positive feedback from subordinates. Consider creating ways to actively encourage positive public feedback that can reach managers. Positive feedback from a manager’s superiors (“your team did a great job with XYZ Trail, especially the ________ part that looks and feels very natural”) carries even more weight.

Ultimately, the best way to improve aesthetic-related issues is for the higher-ups in an organization to actively encourage and support improved aesthetics (culture change). Their support needs to be such that it gets pushed down the chain of command and survives amidst other issues that often seem more pressing.

* I recently gave a PowerPoint presentation, *Time-Tested Trail Work: Better, Smarter, Faster, Cheaper*, at the 2019 Colorado Trails Symposium. The presentation challenged narrow notions of “how things should be,” which professional trail crews often fall into, with examples of things that were done better, smarter, faster, and cheaper with contextual solutions generated by trailshaping. Seeing work that didn’t fit their current trail design and construction methods yet have served well on the ground—for decades to over a century—definitely shook some trees. As one attendee said, “You poked us.”
Megan McClellan asks: What about ADA compliance with bumped-up sidewalks, etc.

TSP: By “bumped up sidewalks,” Megan is referring to the following photo.

In trailshaping, everything is contextual. In the webinar, I mentioned that the uplifted sidewalk section is a problem, a result of nature & change from the growth of tree roots, that would someday need to be removed and replaced. For now, however, being uplifted a little doesn’t work against the quality without a name and, in a small way, contributes to the quality. It contributes by showing the sidewalk responding to nature & change. But if and when the tilted slab becomes a perceived or actual problem in its context—such as a tripping hazard, a nuisance, an impediment to accessibility, or even a visual distraction—then it works against the quality because this instance of nature & change will be destroying the successful resolution of all forces in the context. Currently, the amount of uplift and cross slope is within accessibility guidelines but the tilt will continue to get worse. So the tilting slab is a bug, not a feature.
Megan McClellan states: Many people wouldn’t walk on the narrow tread trail due to poison ivy.

TSP: If these plants were poison ivy, I wouldn’t walk here, either. But they aren’t, and the social, ecological, and management context of this trail allows it to be narrow. Most trails in this region of northern Minnesota are built wide and road-like (for snowmobiles), so having a narrow, highly naturalistic trail is a rare treat here for those who seek them.

Again, everything is contextual. Many people wouldn’t choose to walk on a narrow tread such as this for a number of reasons: they don’t feel comfortable/ safe, they’re afraid of snakes, they worry about their footing, the don’t want to get their legs wet with dew or after rain, they want to walk two or three abreast, etc. Trails intended for folks with these concerns need to be wider in order to satisfy their forces, or such folks need to hike somewhere else. All the other trails in this particular park are wide, road-like, or more “normal” in width, so there are other trails to hike.

Megan McClellan asks: Do you find that people cut corners?

TSP: People tend to cut corners in two contexts:

• The more traffic a trail has, the more that people tend to cut corners. When two parties who need to pass each other happen to meet at the corner, it’s logical and easy for one party to cut the corner (unless the corner is blocked by an anchor). If this shortcutting happens often enough, the trail widens. Unpaved trails may eventually move (creep) to the shorter route.

• Fast-moving users tend to cut corners in order to keep their speed up. This happens frequently with bicyclists, motorcyclists, and ATVers. Some trails are designed with rocks (installed or natively in place), trees, and shrubs as anchors that also serve to prevent corners and sharper curves from being cut.