



**Courageous by Design symposium, Highline Stages 440 West 15th Street, New York**  
The Cultural Landscape Foundation  
15 October 2021

## **Abstracts**

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### **Elizabeth Meyer, FASLA**

Merrill D. Peterson Professor of Landscape Architecture  
University of Virginia School of Architecture

#### *Opening Remarks*

Why are we talking about courage and design today? What role does courage play within the design practices of Lisa Switkin, Kate Orff and Martha Schwartz? These landscape architects are leading teams creating parks, plazas, shorelines and aquatic habitats that respond to and alter the impacts of the climate crisis on urban socio-ecological multi-species publics. They are creating memorable places and performative landscapes that audaciously address the uneven impacts of urban heat island effects, the contested shoreline edge between wet and dry, the loss of biodiversity and habitats. Through design, not policy or legislation, these landscape architects are engaging with the wicked problems of our time. That takes courage. These designers work at the nexus of urban form, climate change and aesthetics. It takes courage to insist that the form, material expression and experiential effects of a cultural product like landscape architecture matter when the stakes for planetary survival are so high.

Drawing on the writings of sociologist Sir Anthony Giddens and ecocritic Lawrence Buell, I argue that artistic courageous and uncanny, if not unsettling, affective experiences as fundamental to the practices of landscape architects engaged in climate science. I identify two reasons why this type of courage is urgent. Scientific data is inadequate to persuade the public to adopt the consumption patterns and lifestyle changes necessary to alter the trajectory and pace of the changing climate. Second, most people cannot comprehend and then act on Giddens's paradox—that there are direct connections between everyday habits and climate change's intangible, invisible dangers to human well-being and societal thriving.

Our morning speakers are courageously inserting landscape architecture at the nexus of gnarly topics like the climate crisis. I comment on ways they share this courage with Cornelia Oberlander by underscoring their shared attributes and reinforcing themes that I have explored in my writings, especially those that challenge the divides between art and science, aesthetics and ethics, space and politics.

## **Three Perspectives on Leading with Landscape Architecture**

**Lisa Switkin**, Senior Principal, James Corner Field Operations

*Cohabitation: imagining and designing a new urban nature*

The concept of aesthetic quality in nature as distinct from beauty was developed in the 18th Century, expressing an appreciation and fear of irregular and uncontrollable forms of nature (or turbulent nature), as opposed to beauty as a pleasurable experience.

Today, humans continue to have an evolving relationship with nature, and beauty. Nature is no longer being defined or perceived as untouched wilderness, yet it is not widely understood as “designed” either. Turbulent nature is more omnipresent than ever with the effects of climate change, and beauty is easily dismissed as superfluous.

I would like to argue that as our natural and built world becomes more and more interwoven, a new urban nature is forming -- providing a significant opportunity to expand and redefine beauty and our relationship to nature...and in the process, invent a new urban nature of cohabitation that conflates the two.

As designers of the built environment, landscape architects are uniquely qualified to contribute to the collective, collaborative and multi-disciplinary action that is necessary to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Now and looking to the future, our work needs to foster environmental health and resilience; social interaction and public wellbeing; and connection to place and community in order to function and be recognized as essential infrastructure. The work also arguably needs to inspire and enrich people’s lives, weaving together the cultural, physical and interpersonal world to be resonant and relevant, foster the long-term stewardship of land and water, and help respond to the global call to climate action.

Using the lens of cohabitation, I will examine projects that provide innovative and strategic responses to stormwater management, resiliency and sea level rise while serving as public space (River Ring, South Bay Sponge, Qianhai Water City); regenerative landscapes where the process of making, remaking, reclaiming and ongoing use and care is part of the design (FreshKills, Shelby Farms Park); and projects that infuse multi-sensory and multi-dimensional experiences and narratives with long-term strategic partnerships and engagement to foster connection (Domino Park, Tidal Basins). All of this work responds at different scales, has intentional form and legibility, and rethinks how we define beauty, aesthetics and nature through process, design, craft, engagement, partnership and material specificity.

**Kate Orff, FASLA**

Professor of Architecture & Urban Design  
Columbia University

*Brief remarks*

Foregrounding courage means challenging the means, methods, outcomes, and professional culture of landscape architecture itself and relegating the inherited notions of professional practice to the background. Rather than achieving excellence within a discipline shaped by modernism and fossil fuel

dependence we need to ask “What are we doing? How are we doing it? Where are we working? Who is participating? What should we be doing? “

Does framing landscapes as coveted and photographed designed objects get in the way of the real work to be done to rapidly decarbonize? How can we advance interventions – not rhetoric -and not referencing our own current / past projects but by anticipating to new modes of creative output and design politics? What needs to be done to deliver the physical landscapes that center environmental and social justice to generations traumatized by our failure to comprehend the magnitude of the situation?

My chapter in the best-selling volume *All We Can Save* is titled “Mending the Landscape.” *All We Can Save* has been listed by the New York Times as one of the “Five Best Climate Books from 2020” and a top 10 nonfiction book on the Washington Post and other news outlets. I will unpack the structure of the book and my writing and my call to action on its pages. Why is landscape – and even the built environment writ large - still on the margins when our knowledge, skills and capabilities should be central to addressing the climate crisis ? What should we be doing and how can we act more cohesively now to address the ongoing landscape emergency?

**Martha Schwartz FASLA, Hon RIBA, Hon RDI**  
Founding Partner, Martha Schwartz Partners

### *My Long and Winding Road*

My presentation is a personal story about my career and my sudden pivot away from landscape architecture in 2016 to become a climate activist. I first came to landscape architecture through my desire to build land-art. Coming from a family packed with architects, I had never heard of the profession of landscape architecture, but it was the only available venue where shaping the land at a large scale was being taught. I wanted to learn how to drive an excavator to shape the land as I imagined it. However, after my first year of classes I was disheartened. There were no courses about driving machines, and as I was unable to take an art class. My chairman explained that landscape and art have nothing to do with each other. Disheartened, I heard of a landscape architecture summer school in California that sounded like fun. During the summer of 1975 I attended the SWA Summer Program where I met Peter Walker. If not for Peter Walker’s support and interest in my art-lead approach to design, I would not be a landscape architect.

I’m somewhat embarrassed to say that unlike most of the other students in school, I was not particularly interested in ecology, but I wasn’t disinterested either. I have always been interested in biological science and had double-majored in biology while in art school, thinking I might go on to medical school, which, thankfully, I didn’t. I continued on my vision that designing landscape could be an art-form.

I am a member of the fringe wherever I am, and have always been at home where boundaries are ill-defined. But due to the fuzziness of this space, I found more room to explore new ideas. One afternoon in 2016, while living in London, a YouTube video, sent by my sister, flattened me with one small scientific fact about the melting of the Eastern Siberian Arctic shelf and the release of methane. Like being under a guillotine, my head was chopped off with one intensely sharp blade. I was horrified at the world I had

made for my three children. I was, and still, feel responsible for my role in climate change. I feared and still fear for their future.

That day, I felt that what I was doing as a landscape architect was irrelevant in the face of such an overwhelming and intractable problem. I knew I had to try to contribute to the solution and dove into reading books about climate change. With some exploration into myself, I searched for a way I might help. My dive into Climate Change over the last 5 years has been a tremendous time of growth for me, and I've gone in a new and different direction. I'm now a stranger in a strange new world of science and scientists. But I am still growing and learning. However, my real surprise is that this journey has brought me home. This is my story.

### **What We Can Do Part 1: Preparing and Adapting Bureaucracies for our Future Climate Panelists**

#### **Heather Morgan**

Sustainability and Risk Management Lead, AECOM New York Metro

#### **Signe Nielsen, RLA, FASLA**

Principal, MNLA

#### **Annette P. Wilkus, FASLA**

Founder, SiteWorks Landscape Architecture

While landscape architects are uniquely qualified to tackle the many challenges arising from climate crisis, we must understand the role that federal, state and local bureaucracies play in setting policy and regulations. We also need to grasp how these jurisdictional tiers of government interact among each other and, in so doing, establish priorities related to climate crisis initiatives. Some agencies are inherently reactive as part of their authorized, appropriated, and operational mandates while others can be proactive in their approach. At the core of bureaucratic decision-making is risk management: which projects will be most effective and where are the best located? Landscape architects must be knowledgeable of the agencies that have jurisdiction over their climate resiliency projects-their regulatory framework, standards or guidelines, risk-reward assessment criteria as well as procedural protocols. Understanding bureaucracies and building trust around risk management is the first step in promoting change within the agencies to look beyond "tried-and-true" policies and move forward towards more adaptive climate change measures. Through the lens of several case studies, the panelists will identify some techniques deployed by landscape architects that have proven effective in advocating for different bureaucracies to modify their regulatory procedures. Some of these include communicating risk both to the public and to the policymakers, leading transdisciplinary collaborations among the design teams, and striving for integration of climate adaptive strategies as the project is designed, implemented and maintained.

### **What We Can Do Part 2: Biological Diversity is as Important as Social Diversity**

#### **Rebecca McMackin, Director of Horticulture**

*Brooklyn Bridge Park*

Brooklyn Bridge Park's first sections opened in 2010. After a decade of ecosystem-inspired design and ecological management, the lessons of this landscape are apparent: constructed habitat can work.

The Park's saltmarshes effectively mitigated flood waters during Hurricane Sandy, and now contain nesting birds and threatened plants. Park woodlands and meadows have seen the return of numerous species not recorded in New York City in decades. Clouds of butterflies hover above the flower field every summer, perfectly illustrating how gracefully 5 million annual visitors and robust wildlife habitat can co-exist.

This lecture will discuss how MVVA's design of the Park laid the groundwork for the thriving ecosystem it has become, as well as how ecological stewardship and respectful labor management cultivate an environment of biological and cultural diversity.

**Barbara Wilks, FASLA, FAIA**

*Principal and Founder, W Architecture and Landscape Architecture*

*The Urban Forest – Designing for Change*

While in NYC sea level rise is an important aspect of climate change design, another critical aspect for the entirety of the City is increased heat. Trees and forests become important mitigators and combatants of climate change, at waterfronts and throughout the city.

W Architecture and Landscape architecture has been designing the waterfront in NYC for over 20 years and adding to the urban forest there and elsewhere. But during this time, we have also started to question what is the best way to combat climate change? We believe it involves not only design but also changing maintenance strategies.

Trees are a part of the forest ecosystem. We need to create dynamic ecosystems – not gardens that are static. To combat climate change, how can projects from large to small help mitigate climate change and how can we find more room for trees in our cities?

We will show examples from our work which illustrate our evolving understanding of working with climate change and the importance of giving agency to trees.

**Edwina von Gal**

Founder / President, Perfect Earth Project

*A Birdcall to Action: Something We All Can Do*

“Restoring viable habitat within human dominated landscapes ...is the single most effective thing we can do....(it) will not only stop species loss but will reverse it.” - Doug Tallamy

**WE HAVE A SERIOUS PROBLEM: Biodiversity Loss**

Birds are a key indicator of a massive global loss of biodiversity North America has lost almost 3 billion birds since the 1970's. Mostly it is the common grassland birds that are disappearing Their decline is

largely attributed to loss of habitat and use of pesticides. Our designed and managed landscapes are too often scrubbed of habitat and doused with pesticides.

#### THE SOLUTION IS IN OUR HANDS

Birds need 70% native plants to maintain healthy populations (Tallamy et al, PNAS Nov 2018). If every landscape design includes 2 native plants for every three on the plan, and prohibits the use of pesticides, that goal is met. Every landscape that does not meet these simple criteria is effectively a food desert and contributes to biodiversity loss. There is enough land within our control to give birds (and bees, and butterflies) the habitat they need to make a comeback. Even small properties can play important roles when they join with others to connect larger protected areas.

#### WHAT IS TWO THIRDS FOR THE BIRDS?

Two Thirds for the Birds is a commitment to landscapes that (at the very least) meet the basic needs of the earth. It is a web based nationwide community of people, organizations, and places that have signed the Two Thirders List to let the world know they have made this commitment and will share their stories with others. The Two Thirds for the Birds website is full of information on how to start and how to succeed. There are no fees or requirements to be a 2/3er. Compliance is integral to commitment.

#### HOW TO BE A TWO THIRDER

Getting started in your practice: typical questions and challenges.

The added benefits of Two Thirthing: health, environmental, social. The joy of it.