

# DESIGNAS ACTIVISM

Landscape Architecture  
Education for Social Change:  
A Framework for Actions  
and Other Propositions



A Project of the 2019 LAF Fellowship  
for Innovation & Leadership

# Design as Activism

Landscape Architecture  
Education for Social Change:  
A Framework for Actions &  
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*Jeffrey Hou*  
Seattle, May 2020

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Facing environmental and social crises on a global scale, how can landscape architecture education prepare students to become changemakers in meeting these challenges? With the support of the Landscape Architecture Foundation Fellowship for Innovation and Leadership, this project presents a framework of actions to reposition and transform landscape architecture education for social change. Working with a group of educators around the United States, the study draws from discussions at workshops from national conferences, an online survey, and interviews with practitioners and program leaders in the United States.

In this study, we use design as a vehicle for social change as a working definition of design as activism. By social change, we don't mean to exclude the environmental or ecological dimensions of design. Rather, we argue that social (including political) change is fundamental to how society approaches and safeguards the environment, including its living systems. Furthermore, we see the engagement of vulnerable and underserved as an important part of the social change, from a system that privileges the few to one that strives for equity and justice.

This report begins by situating design activism in the context of the grand challenges facing the society and the planet, followed by sketching a genealogy and trajectory of activism in landscape architecture through which we argue that activism has been in the DNA of the profession since its beginning days in the 19th Century with efforts to transform the landscapes of the growing cities, using design as a vehicle to address critical social and environmental challenges.

Based on the results of two conference workshops that engaged both educators and students, we explore the skills and knowledge required for design activists and the challenges and opportunities facing the integration of design activism into landscape

architecture education. To learn from the existing efforts in the field, we further examine the current models of engaged learning that include community design centers, community-university partnerships, and service-learning programs.

Building on the findings, we then develop and present a framework for actions for programs and educators to adopt with the goal of transforming landscape architecture education in the face of the critical challenges facing the society and the planet:

**Politicize** – Develop the ability and capacity in students to engage in the political process to effect change; understand better the language and systems of power; accept the responsibility of professionals as engaged citizens and as members of a democracy.

**Hybridize** – Build knowledge and capacity beyond the traditional core of the profession; engage in collaboration on research, teaching, and service with other disciplines; learn from how other fields generate, disseminate, and apply knowledge, and how they engage the public and advance their agenda.

**Glocalize** – Think and act both locally and globally; build connections with stakeholders, including communities, public agencies, civic organizations, and the professional community locally and across borders; examine the intersections between local and global challenges.

**Improvise** – Make use of what already exists, including courses, curriculum, programs, and other resources; utilize strengths and assets already in place in a program or a community, including existing connections and relationships; be tactical and creative with opportunities and circumstances.

**Problematize** – Question assumptions and

challenges facing an institution or a community; develop a deeper understanding of issues and take a critical stance; make issues of equity, justice, and resilience in a current program, curriculum, institution, or community the focus of education and actions.

**Authenticize** – Create opportunities for self-discoveries through experiential learning; develop and support long-lasting relationships for collaboration with community stakeholders; work with communities and stakeholders in the actual context with real issues.

**Entrepreneurize** – Provide students not only with technical skills but also entrepreneurial knowledge; develop partnerships with programs on campuses and organizations in the profession to offer courses and workshops; provide students with skills and opportunities to pursue alternative practices.

**(Re)organize** – Examine critically how education and professional practices in landscape architecture are organized; collaborate with the movement organizations and find critical intersections of our work; identify allies and build coalitions and greater capacity for the profession.

**Democratize** – Begin by reexamining the power structure within our educational institutions; fully engage students, faculty, and the professional community in program decision and implementation; ensure that all voices are included in courses, projects, and initiatives; build capacity in the community we work with.

As educational programs in landscape architecture vary in their focus, size, and organization, and as they respond often to different contexts and constituents, the proposals here are not meant to be one-size-fits-all. Instead, we ask each program and school to assess its own mission and goals

and develop appropriate strategies and actions together with students, faculty, and the professional community. Undertaking a system-wide change requires patience, strategies, and mobilization at multiple levels.

While the framework and suggested actions are specific to education, we envision that a strong intersection between education and profession is essential. In other words, while the focus of this study is on landscape architecture education, we do not see the actions as limited to the context of educational institutions. Rather, we see the need for a broader transformation to occur through critical intersections and collaboration between education, practice, and social engagement.



PREAMBLE:  
SOCIETY AND PLANET IN CRISES

We are living in a time of extraordinary change and uncertainty. Throughout the world, [extreme weather and climate events](#), such as storms and floods, have increased in recent decades. Out of the ten hottest years recorded in history, seven occurred in the last decade. The impact of sea-level rise, melting of ice caps and permafrost, loss of habitat and species extinction are just the initial signs of looming crises facing the planet and the society. By 2030, it has been estimated that 700 million people worldwide will be displaced by intense water scarcity. As we set down to write this report, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented new social and economic challenges for communities around the world.

Beyond the death toll and economic disruptions, the impact of the pandemic has also highlighted the persistent inequalities in our society with poorer racial minorities suffering higher death rates than those of the affluent class. Indeed, despite the hard-won progress made in recent history, structural barriers continue to exacerbate the inequity in society.<sup>1</sup> Besides the pandemic, the poorest populations of the world are also expected to be the most vulnerable under global climate calamities. In the face of social and political uncertainty, nationalist and authoritarian regimes are making a comeback, adding challenges to the already complex problems.

In our role as landscape architects, as a profession with the mission to “enhance, respect, and restore the life-sustaining integrity of the landscape” and to protect the interests of clients and the public,<sup>2</sup> we have a responsibility to take on the environmental, social, and political challenges before us. Already, there is growing interest among a new generation of students and faculty in socially engaged design responses to the urgent social and environmental challenges as evident in recent award-winning student projects and studio work.

This is what the students think about all the time these days. They are interested in how landscape architecture can deal with these issues.

Denise Hoffman Brandt, City College of New York

The **New Landscape Declaration** put forward by the Landscape Architecture Foundation (LAF), with a focus on social and ecological justice, resilience, and democracy is also indicative of this growing interest. A strong agenda of equity and justice has further been evident in the work of National Olmsted Scholars. The recent discussion led by the McHarg Center at Penn on the role of our profession in the Green New Deal suggests a proactive response to address issues of resilience and justice.

Given the growing interest and aspirations, however, is the current model of landscape architecture education providing students with the necessary skills and knowledge to confront the urgent issues of equity, justice, and climate resilience? Are the accredited programs doing an adequate job in preparing the next generation’s leaders to tackle these issues?The field of landscape architecture is not short of thought leaders and real-life cases that advance our practice toward social and environmental justice. But how can we translate these expertise, experiences, and lessons into models of education and pedagogy? How can we prepare students to become not only competent professionals but also proactive practitioners who are socially and politically engaged to produce transformative outcomes? How can we transform the profession and society starting with education?



CHOP BLM Street Mural, Seattle. Photo by Jeffrey Hou



**Students are coming in with an expectation that this is what they want to do and are trying to figure out what they can actually do as landscape architects.**

Stephanie Rolley, Kansas State University

This document represents the result of a project as part of the 2019-2020 [Landscape Architecture Foundation Fellowship for Innovation and Leadership](#). Titled “[Educating Design Activists in Landscape Architecture](#),” this project investigates how design activism, here defined as design for social change, can be best integrated into landscape architecture education. The investigation was a response to the [New Landscape Declaration](#) that calls on landscape architects to be “active designers, engaging in politics, policy, finance, community service, and more.”

Through workshops at a series of national conferences,<sup>3</sup> interviews with educational leaders and practitioners,<sup>4</sup> and a questionnaire that was distributed to schools and programs and through the Landscape Architecture Foundation e-newsletter, the study sought to identify the challenges, opportunities, and perspectives from leading educators, students, program administrators, and practitioners on the relationships between activist practices and design education.

Following a discussion of skill sets, challenges, opportunities, and existing models, the document presents a framework for actions and a list of propositions for landscape architecture education. The document is accompanied by a website that serves as a resource guide for those interested in learning more about existing cases and resources.

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1. It is projected that the world’s richest 1% will possess as much as [two-thirds of the world’s wealth](#) by 2030.  
2. [ASLA Code of Professional Ethics](#).  
3. Workshop sessions were organized for the 2019 CELA (Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture) Conference in Sacramento, CA, and the annual conferences of EDRA (Environmental Design Research Association) in Brooklyn, NY (2019) and Tempe, AZ (2020).  
4. Ten program leaders were interviewed, including (in alphabetical order by last name) Mark Boyer (Louisiana State University), Meg Calkins (North Carolina State University), Katya Crawford (University of New Mexico), Samuel Dennis (University of Wisconsin, Madison), Ron Henderson (Illinois Institute of Technology), Alison Hirsch (University of Southern California), Denise Hoffman Brandt (City College of New York), Joern Langhorst (University of Colorado, Denver), Stephanie Rolley (Kansas State University), and Robert Ryan (University of Massachusetts, Amherst). Six activists/practitioners were interviewed, including (in alphabetical order by last name) Leann Andrews (Traction), Billy Fleming (McHarg Center), Brice Maryman (MIG), Cary Moon, and Chelina Odbert (Kounkuey Design Initiative).

## 1. WHAT IS DESIGN ACTIVISM?

### ac·tiv·ism

The policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change<sup>1</sup>

Activism as a concept has long been associated with advocacy and agonistic actions to produce change. Those actions, including organizing and protests, have played an important role historically in making social and political advancements in our society. In the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement succeeded in ending legalized racial discrimination and segregation in the United States. In the 1960s and 1970s, the growing environmental movement in the United States led to landmark legislation such as the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act that are critical to the quality and protection of our environment today.

By linking design to activism, “design activism” considers design as a vehicle for activism. Rather than viewing design as a technical exercise, “design activism” or “design as activism” recognizes the potential and capacity of design as a tool for social and environmental progress. As a profession founded in a movement to remake the urban environment in the 19th Century, design activism is arguably in the DNA of landscape architecture. Since the very beginning, the practice of landscape architecture has long been an exercise of activism, as evident in its attempt to improve the livelihood of people through ideas and methods that transform the built environment.

As the profession grew and matured and as the once-novel or even revolutionary practice became normalized, the early activism has been subsumed by institutionalization and the establishment of professional codes and standards, to the extent that activism and the desire for transformative changes seem to go against the notion of professional. A comment left by a survey respondent as part of

this project was particularly revealing—“Activism should not be promoted or encouraged by taxpayer-funded institutions because it is divisive [...]”

The above comment suggests that activism is often viewed as biased and serving only one-sided interest, rather the welfare of the public. While activism and contestation can indeed be divisive, we disagree with this narrow notion of activism. Instead, we argue that activism and the actions to produce change can be done with the broad interests of the public in mind. We do recognize, however, that activism is a contested concept and requires further clarification and exploration, hence the development of this work.

In the face of the urgency of environmental and social challenges at the present moment, it is time for the profession to reflect on the mission and modalities of its practice through the lens of activism. It is also time for the accredited professional degree programs to re-examine their curriculum and pedagogy in the face of current challenges.

Let us ask ourselves: Are we doing enough as a profession to address the critical challenges of our time? What specific actions are needed beyond business as usual? Are we providing our students and graduates with the skills and knowledge needed to address the complex challenges? What tools and preparation are needed for them to become leaders of movements and progress?

In light of the current challenges, there is not a better time for us to reconnect with the premise of our profession. It is time for us to see beyond the limited and even biased notion of activism as divisive politics. Instead, we must recognize the power of design to bring about critical changes to protect the safety and welfare of diverse living communities on the planet. We must see design activism not simply as a rebranding of our work, but as a way to be true to what we do as landscape architects.



An online roundtable hosted by the McHarg Center of the University of Pennsylvania in 2017 provided one of the most insightful and pertinent discussions on design activism to date:

Kian Goh, a roundtable participant and a planning faculty at UCLA, reminds us that design activism is design that challenges power structures and expands “the agency of practice in the face of social and ecological exigencies.” Lizzie Yarina of the MIT Urban Risk Lab argues, “Design is political, and ignoring these larger facets makes us complicit in perpetuating uneven geographies and power structures.”

Artist and designer Kordae Henry sees design activism as a form of survival, “We hold the power to choose between design that harms and continues to divide us or design that creates spaces that will uplift, connect, and distribute power to those who have been marginalized.” On a similar note, Lucinda Sanders argues, “the designer must be willing to engage in these broader, and often unfamiliar, systemic failures to operate as an activist – design through activism.”

On the political and contentious nature of design, landscape architect Susanne Drake notes that “design of cities is a political circus, played out in multiple rings simultaneously.” She cautions, “the danger of uninformed activism is that projects will lack effectiveness or worse—do harm.” Similarly, landscape architect Joanna Karaman states, “truly engaging in design activism means more than just having the loudest voice in the crowd. The quieter, yet still powerful acts of uplifting new ideas, supporting existing community groups, and visioning potential scenarios in the built environment can have a lasting impact on people’s day-to-day lives.”

Finally, on design education, planning scholar Barbara Brown Wilson notes, “activism often requires skills not all designers are taught in school, such

as cultural competency, peace negotiation, community organizing, knowledge of other fields (e.g. ecology or economics), deep listening, and a desire to de-center one’s individual ideas toward a collaborative outcome.”

One of the earliest published references on design activism appeared in the inaugural issue (2005) of *Framework*, a publication of the College of Environmental Design at the University of California, Berkeley. In a leading article in the volume, Randolph T. Hester makes an important distinction between five types of “design postures,” ranging from the blissfully naïve—those who are “spatially talented and contextually ignorant,” to catalysts—“agents of change.”

He wrote, “Catalysts see design not only as a symbolic and utilitarian end but also a stimulus to bring about political transformation.”<sup>2</sup> For Hester, all design is design activism, “Every design action is a political act that concretizes power and authority.”<sup>3</sup> The more important question, he argues, is “design activism for whom?” or for whom is design activism serving.

**Every design action is a political act that concretizes power and authority.**

Randolph T. Hester, University of California, Berkeley.<sup>4</sup>

In a 1999 issue of *Places Journal* that revisits the practice of participatory design, Mark Francis proposes a proactive approach to professional practice, one in which professionals “use skills in risk-taking, negotiation and entrepreneurial enterprise, base their thoughts and actions on social and environmental values, employ advocacy as part of their approach [...] employ sound research and analysis, and are involved long-term [...] to

realize a vision.” What Francis has proposed is essentially the work of design activists or activist designers.

More recently, in her book *Toward an Urban Ecology*, Kate Orff notes that climate change requires us to imagine a different scale of action, “to scale up our work to effect larger behavioral modifications.” She further notes that this type of action is not usually commissioned by a specific client or through an RFQ process. “Rather, a pervasive, activist stance needs to be consciously brought to bear on all our endeavors to effect change.”

While we are making the case for activism through design, it’s important not to overlook the polemics and even fallacies of activism. Denise Hoffman Brandt from the City College of New York had this to say in our interview: “Activism suggests being outside of what is normal—It is oppositional.” It tends to be “more a reaction, rather than a contin-

uum,” she argues. Hoffman Brandt’s caution and critique are well taken. Rather than momentary disruptions, we must aim for sustaining changes.

In the online Design Activism Education Survey, we asked the respondents what “design activism” means to them. Among a range of options, “design for social change” received the most votes, followed by “socially engaged design practice,” “design in the public interest,” “proactive design practice,” and “design that disrupt the status quo.” “Just another ‘-ism’” received the least votes.

We also encouraged the respondents to provide their own definitions. Among the inputs we received, versions of “design for climate justice and climate resilience” were mentioned multiple times, so was the addition of “environmental/ecological dimension” to the listed definition that mentions only social change. A few others also put emphasis on serving the underserved/vulnerable populations.

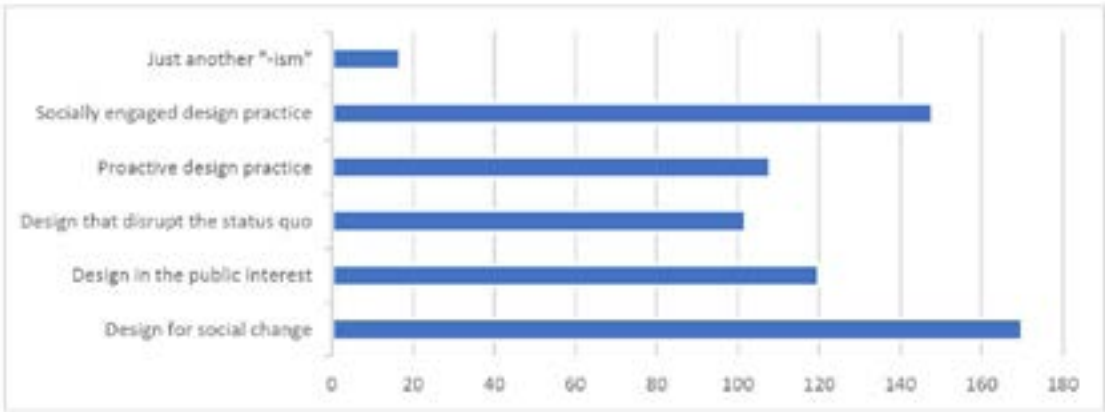


Figure 1. What does "design activism" mean to you? (n = 224)



In this document, we use design as a vehicle for social change as a working definition of design activism. By social change, we don't mean to exclude the environmental or ecological dimensions of design. Rather, we argue that social (including political) change is fundamental to how society approaches and safeguards the environment, including living systems. Furthermore, we see the engagement of the vulnerable and underserved as an important part of the social change, from a system the privileges the few to one that strives for justice and equity.

By having a working definition, it's not our intention to exclude other possible definitions or interpretations. Rather, the working definition is intended to provide a focus for this work and to articulate a position and a point of departure.

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1. Source: <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/activism>  
2. Randolph T. Hester, "Design Activism... For Whom?" Frameworks 1 (Spring 2005): 8-15.  
3. Hester, "Design Activism... For Whom?", 8-9.  
4. Hester, "Design Activism... For Whom?", 8-9.  
5. Mark Francis, "Proactive Practice: Visionary Thought and Participatory Action in Environmental Design," Places Journal 12, 2 (1999): 60-68.  
6. Kate Orff, Toward an Urban Ecology (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2016), 12.  
7. The respondents could choose multiple answers.

## 2. LOOKING BACKWARD TO MOVE FORWARD

### Roots in Activism

To envision the role of landscape architects as changemakers, one needs not to go far than to look at the origin of the profession in the United States. The typical narrative begins with the early pioneers of the profession serving not only as skilled practitioners but also movement leaders and advocates of ideas through prolific writings. Andrew Jackson Downing, for example, wrote the first book of its kind on landscape design in the United States and served as an editor of a horticultural journal and as a spokesperson for the parks movement.<sup>1</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. was a writer, former journalist, designer, and public administrator at a time when public park was still a novel concept.

The making of Central Park itself mirrored much of the contemporary open space activism. Without the call by Downing and William Cullen Bryant, a newspaper editor-poet, the city would not have acted in time to purchase the large tracts of land before development occurred.<sup>2</sup> Apart from the unfortunate displacement of the Seneca Village, a precursor to today's green gentrification, Central Park stands as a remarkable achievement that embodies the vision and ideals of the American Parks Movement. More than just a picturesque backdrop, projects like Central Park were envisioned to address broad health, social, and political concerns at the time and to serve the "great body of citizens."<sup>3</sup>

At the turn of the century, landscape architecture was among the few professions considered acceptable for women to enter. A network of women landscape architects, including Beatrix Jones Farrand, worked for both public and private clients to design home gardens and neighborhood parks.<sup>4</sup> There were other early pioneers as well. [David A. Williston](#) was the nation's first African-American landscape architect who received his degree from Cornell University in 1896 at a time when a large

part of the country was still under segregation. By becoming professionals, they overcame gender and racial biases and opened the paths for others to follow. As early pioneers, their work and actions alone embodied activism.

Activism was not the exclusive domain of pioneering professionals. Members of the public also helped shape the development of landscape architecture in the early era. Before the City Beautiful movement became associated with large-scale civic projects, the municipal art movement in the United States was led by local civic groups and activist women.<sup>5</sup> Before the movement became synonymous with architects such as Daniel Burnham and the tendency toward grandiosity, it has existed mostly as small-scale local efforts, promoted through thousands of civic improvement associations across the country.<sup>6</sup>

Other movements not led by landscape architects per se also played an important role in shaping the profession and built environments in the United States. Parallel to the American Parks Movement focusing on alleviating problems facing the cities, a wilderness preservation movement emerged to protect the wilderness landscapes as sanctuaries. The movement has led to the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872, Yosemite National Park in 1890, and the creation of the National Parks Service in 1916, creating a model of land management and protection that influenced the rest of the world.

These early developments—municipal parks and national parks—provided the foundation for the expansion of the profession under the New Deal program during the Great Depression. The profession officially founded only in 1899, became indispensable to the "reorder of the land" under the New Deal.<sup>7</sup> "From the state camps of the Civilian Conservation Corps, from the Division of Suburban Resettlement to the Tennessee Valley, the land-





scape architect was omnipresent,” writes Phoebe Cutler.<sup>8</sup> The work under the New Deal addressed two critical crises at the time: unemployment and land degradation due to abuse by farming and logging practices.<sup>9</sup>

The New Deal also provided the opportunity for early experiments in design with a strong social agenda. Garrett Eckbo’s work with the Farm Security Administration (FSA), where he held a position in San Francisco from 1939 to 1942, brought modern design to farmworker housing with a focus on landscape and site planning to produce “an indigenous and formally innovative lexicon for the migrant camps.”<sup>10</sup> The schemes incorporated private subsistence plots as well as parks, sports, and recreational facilities that complemented the communal buildings.<sup>11</sup>

## Emerging Practices

Fast-forward to the 1960s, faced with a new set of crises and challenges, including urban sprawl and the pollution of air and water, that recalled in part the conditions of industrial cities in the 19th Century, a new approach to landscape architecture was proposed by Ian McHarg and his contemporaries. McHarg’s “ecological methods” became influential in repositioning the profession based on the emerging understanding in ecological sciences. Concerned not with ornaments or form-based design, the method brought systems and processes into the language and repertoire of the profession and became the basis for the development of the Geographical Information System (GIS).

More than a typical academic or armchair scholar, McHarg pursued his vision for landscape architecture through public activities in addition to teaching, research, and practice. Specifically, he was a talk show host on CBS, *The House We Live*

In, in the early 1960s, a program that featured interviews with many scientists and luminaries. McHarg also served on public commissions and panels, including the White House Commission on Conservation and Natural Beauty in 1966.<sup>12</sup> The rise of the ecological method coincided with the growing American environmental movement in the 1960s, another instance in which our effort became more successful when it was aligned with larger movements in the society.

As McHarg’s ecological method opened a new front for the profession, there were also projects that set new paths for design and transformation of urban spaces in North America. In Seattle, landscape architect Rich Haag designed the Gas Works Park that retained parts of the industrial facilities for their “historic, aesthetic and utilitarian value,” and incorporated bio- and phytoremediation strategies into its 1971 [master plan](#). To convince the skeptical public and political leaders of the proposal, Haag organized a slideshow and gave one presentation after another to demonstrate the aesthetic beauty of the industrial ruins. The result was one of the most original and iconic works of design.

As a city, Seattle became a testing ground for new projects, including Gas Works Park, Discovery Park (designed by Dan Kiley), and Freeway Park (designed by Lawrence Halprin), that would not have been possible without an ambitious civic investment approved by Seattle voters in 1968. The Forward Thrust ballot initiatives provided funding for youth service centers, multipurpose stadiums, parks and recreation, and neighborhood improvements. Advocated by a group of civic leaders, the initiatives envisioned more open spaces, parks, and greater public waterfront access, to ameliorate urban sprawl.

Also in Seattle, Jones and Jones, a multidisciplinary firm started by Grant Jones, Johnpaul Jones, and Ilze Jones, became a pioneer in ecological design, design for wildlife, working with tribal communities, and large-scale bioregional plans, such as ILARIS the Puget Sound Plan. The firm also played an active role in the creation of the Mountain to Sound Greenway, a 1.5 million-acre landscape in the Pacific Northwest shaped by watershed boundaries and woven together by an extensive network of trails. Led by citizen activists, the plan was envisioned to halt urban sprawl from encroachment into natural land.

Activism in landscape architecture involves not just practitioners but also citizens. The practice of community design that emerged in the 1960s should also be recognized as a part of the long arc of activism in design. Influenced by the movement within architecture and urban planning, landscape architects also began to incorporate participatory design into their practices. Karl Linn was one of the first landscape architecture educators to work on small-scale improvements focusing on inner-city neighborhoods. Through what he called “urban barn-raising,” Linn engaged neighborhood residents, volunteer professionals, students, youth, and activists in design and building gathering spaces.<sup>13</sup>

With a growing number of landscape architecture programs around the country, education has played an important role in pushing boundaries in the profession. Since 1987, Anne Whiston Spirn’s [West Philadelphia Landscape Project](#) became a model for addressing issues of environmental justice and green infrastructure. Students at Penn and later at MIT have mapped the Mill Creek neighborhood, carried out action research, and worked with residents, engineers, and city staff to develop plans to address the issues faced by the communi-

ty built on a buried floodplain, including stormwater management. The students have taken what they learned to other parts of the city and beyond.

At the University of California, Berkeley, Randolph T. Hester, Jr. and Marcia McNally led teams of students in working on a range of projects involving citizens and residents during their career at Berkeley. In 1997, they took on a project to protect the wintering habitat of the critically endangered black-faced spoonbill on the Southern coast of Taiwan. Working with scientists, planners, and activists, they developed alternative economic development plans based on ecotourism and wildlife conservation.<sup>14</sup> In schools throughout North America, service-learning studios, extensions programs, and university-based community design centers provided opportunities for similar kinds of partnership and engagement.

## Design Activism Now

Today, a new generation of designers are pushing the boundaries and accepted norms of participatory design through activism. Rather than following the institutionalized procedures, they explore guerrilla tactics to test ideas and engage the public.<sup>15</sup> Instead of the typical public meetings, they explore fun and informal ways to engage the public, including interactive games.<sup>16</sup> Unlike the shallow forms or formality of participation, they engage in capacity building and facilitate community-driven placemaking to empower communities.<sup>17</sup>

Activism is not the exclusive domain of North American practitioners nor is it happening only in North America. In China, for instance, Turenscape founder Kongjian Yu has developed a distinct form of design activism by appealing directly to mayors and political leaders.<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere in East Asia, including Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, land-

scape architects worked with communities and citizens to build democratic capacity through direct engagement in planning, design, programming, and management of open spaces, ranging from neighborhood gathering spaces to large urban and regional parks.<sup>19</sup>

Internationally, initiatives in design activism have served as a platform for experiments in cross-cultural exchanges and collaboration between Global North and South. In Peru, faculty and students from the University of Washington, Seattle worked with residents and professionals to improve school ground, infrastructure, and the household environment in informal settlements to address issues of health, sanitation, and capacity-building.<sup>20</sup> In Nigeria, the Kounkuey Design Initiative (KDI) has worked in informal settlements and built a network of project sites as places for learning, mobilization, capacity-building, and a starting point for improvement of livelihood.<sup>21</sup>

Back in the United States, the advocacy for the Green New Deal presents an opportune moment for the profession of landscape architecture to re-engage with activism. In his *Places Journal* essay, Billy Fleming brings the arc of landscape architecture activism in full circle by noting that early success of the profession in the 19th Century was not just the work of landscape architects alone but also the work of civic organizations and social movements emerging at the time. He argues that, for the profession to have a true systemic impact, “we must rethink how landscape architecture engages with social and political movements.”<sup>22</sup>

**An Incomplete and Imperfect Account**

The brief account above on the history of the profession is by no means complete or exhaustive. It

also does not account to the full extent the work of individuals outside the profession who built and shaped the landscapes with their own hands, which in the United States, for instance, included communities in first nations, railroad workers, plantation farmers, and freed resident builders of [Black Towns](#).<sup>23</sup> In its incomplete form, nevertheless, the narratives here illustrate the many instances in which activism and design for social change constitute an important part of the field of landscape architecture.

As we explore the role of activism in design and how design can serve as a vehicle for social change, past achievements, and setbacks in landscape architecture serve as a source of inspiration and cautions. While we trace the premise of our endeavor, we must also recognize the many injustices that took place in history and to this day, including the displacement of indigenous and subaltern communities through the establishment of parks and green spaces, urban renewal projects, construction of freeways through inner-city neighborhoods, and other forms of evictions and erasure.

As society has evolved and as the profession becomes institutionalized, we must reexamine the assumptions of our practice, including those that govern our educational programs and pedagogy.

Let’s also recognize that while the profession might have been rooted in activism, it also has a long tradition of primarily serving the interests of the rich and powerful. These troubled pasts and continued barriers are reminders of our challenges as a profession and lessons for the future.

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### 3. BECOMING DESIGN ACTIVISTS

For landscape architects to (re)engage with the social and the political, what skills, knowledge, and perspectives are needed?

We posed this question to groups of landscape architecture educators and students gathered at the 2019 CELA conference in Sacramento, CA, and at EDRA's 50th annual conference in Brooklyn, New York, also in 2019. A similar question was also raised in our interviews with selected program administrators and practitioners around the country. Finally, in the Design Activism Education Survey, we asked the respondents to rank among a range of expertise and knowledge in meeting the critical challenges of our time. The following summarizes our findings.

#### Justice, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion

Understanding of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion is critical to the education of designers interested in activism and social change. The issues facing vulnerable and underserved populations require designers to challenge assumptions and normative practices. Knowing the history of bias and structural injustice in the society is at the core of this challenge, so is the need for humility, empathy, and development of cultural and intercultural sensibility in design, planning, and policy-making. In our focus to effect change, we must listen to voices of differences including those likely to be impacted. We must co-create with groups we serve and build capacity through engagement and design. To address issues of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion, we must also look into our own organizations and communities to address systemic biases and injustice.

#### Ethics of Activism

While activism can bring about the desired changes, we must also be fully aware of its own limitations and tendencies including a savior mentality and cultural dominance when designers fail to recognize the delicate role they play in the community they supposedly serve. Additionally, it's important to note that activism or political engagement can be a form of privilege, as not everyone can afford to take risks or accept additional burdens and responsibilities. As professionals who seek transformative outcomes through our work, we must also be mindful of the unintended harm that our work may produce. By leading a movement or advocate on behalf of others, we must also not take away the agency and subjectivity of those who are the primary stakeholders. It is critical that these ethical considerations become a part of the skills and knowledge in design activism.

#### Public Engagement

As design activism requires practitioners to step out of their professional comfort zone to engage with the public(s), it is important that they are well versed in the methods and ethics of public engagement. These include an understanding of participatory action research methods as a way to engage the public as active participants and not just as providers of input and information or just as an audience to seek approval from. To engage the public in a meaningful and effective way, one must develop an adequate understanding of the contemporary and historical contexts of a given project or issue. We must not assume that we have full knowledge of the issues and challenges. Engaged design professionals must develop a capacity for empathy and to see the issues from the perspectives of the community or population. The process also requires the ability to engage the public and the community in social learning to share, co-





create, and expand their knowledge and perspectives.

## (Inter)cultural Capacity

**We need to work with communities that are different from where students are coming from so that students can learn firsthand from these communities.**

Mark Boyer, Louisiana State University

To engage constituents who are culturally and socioeconomically diverse, it is critical for landscape architects to develop cultural and intercultural capacity in communication and representation and humility in the face of multiple worldviews and perspectives. As part of an intercultural capacity, [cultural competence](#) is the ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures.<sup>1</sup> It encompasses an awareness of one's own worldview, knowledge of different cultural practices, and skills for communication and interactions across cultures.<sup>2</sup> As designers we can develop intercultural capacity by collaborating with community stakeholders and partners. We can also learn directly from members of different cultures and work with intermediaries or ambassadors.

## Asset-based Approach

One of the fallacies of the conventional model of community service and technical assistance is the sole focus on the deficiencies or problems facing the community. To the contrary, [Asset-based Community Development \(ABCD\)](#) is a method of community development based on the strengths and potentials residing in a community. Rather than

weaknesses and challenges, it recognizes a community's assets and resources and tries to leverage them for success. The assets may include cultural knowledge and social capital, rather than material resources only. Developed by John L. McKnight and John P. Kretzmann at the [Institute for Policy Research](#) at Northwestern University, ABCD is a model of empowerment that recognizes the agency of community members and stakeholders.

## Organizing, Advocacy & Leadership

In order to engage more effectively in movements to effect change, landscape architects interested in design activism must hone their political skills and develop greater capacity in organizing, advocacy, and leadership. We must develop a better understanding of the political and legislative process to effect policy changes. Landscape architects must not shy away from tools of activism and advocacy to get things done. This includes grassroots mobilization, campaigning, petitioning, lobbying, writing op-ed articles, and participating in rallies, and engage those who are not at the table. Organizing and advocacy also involve sharing and communicating visions and ideas, persuading the public about alternatives as well as the impacts and consequences of proposed actions.

## Political Opportunities & Power Mapping

For activism to be effective and impactful, one must understand and work with political opportunities that are critical to policy changes. This requires an understanding of policy-making and planning processes and the actors that are involved in the arena. It requires knowledge of the organizational structure and power dynamic that resides in our political institutions. To be effective in the political process, we must understand where the pressure

points are and how to cultivate and leverage political support. We must develop our leadership capacity locally, nationally, and internationally, and not just within the profession but also in society. This means entering public services and even running for offices.

## Collaboration & Partnership

The kind of systemic changes necessary to address the critical challenges we face today is far too immense and complex for landscape architects to act on alone. To facilitate the kind of change we want to achieve, it is important to team up with actors and organizations with complementary expertise and capacity. We need the support of others to accomplish our shared goals. Collaborating and partnering with others provide opportunities to inform and enrich our perspectives and to build networks and coalitions that are necessary to achieve long-term goals. In the Design Activism Education Survey, "interdisciplinary collaboration" was ranked highest together with "participation design/public engagement" as areas of expertise to meet the critical challenges of our time. In terms of changes to be incorporated into education to support design activism, "collaboration with other disciplines" received the most votes.

## Communication & Storytelling

Communication came up as a prominent area of skills in our workshops at the CELA and EDRA conferences and in our interviews with the activists/practitioners. In today's media-rich environment, the capacity to communicate issues in compelling ways and to disseminate using the appropriate platform(s) has a great impact on the extent of attention and actions that follow. Many landscape architects and landscape architecture students today already have a strong command of visual communication, including mapping, photo-realistic

rendering, and data visualization. Building on such strength, practitioners, faculty, and students need to utilize the appropriate platforms, develop and implement effective messaging and storytelling, and work with the press and other allies to advance the issues.

## Co-Design/Co-create

Design activists are not just facilitators in the design and planning process, nor do they act solely as visionaries without the engagement of the public. Instead, to generate public support and to engage the public in meaningful and effective ways, we must develop the capacity to co-design and co-create with the public. To co-design is to open up the design process in creative ways, to share the tools and the role of designers with others, to develop a collective understanding of issues and problems, to leverage assets in the community, including its people, to engage in social learning that expands the shared knowledge of a given problem, to empower the public with the pleasure and responsibilities of design, and to arrive at innovative solutions that would not have emerged if one were to act alone.

## Multiple Leaderships

Leadership is one of the most fundamental aspects of activism. It takes leadership on the part of individuals and organizations to begin a conversation, get organized, envision solutions, and overcome obstacles and barriers that stand in the way of change. In activism, there are, however, different types of leadership. There are leaderships as manifested in team-building and through the ability to negotiate. There are leaders whose job is to empower those who have been historically marginalized and to build capacity. It takes leadership to see the larger pictures, to make connections that may not be apparent, to articulate



and communicate effectively the challenges and solutions at hand, and to call out injustice when they exist. The different forms of leadership require efforts by multiple individuals and organizations, contrary to the notion of a single, heroic individual.

## Co-Design/Co-create

**Landscape architecture is reasonably good at ecological theory, the theory of nature [...]. In contrast there is a fundamental lack of political theory.**

Billy Fleming, University of Pennsylvania

In order to address the root causes of injustice and the system in which it operates, we must know where it comes from historically and how it has sustained socially and institutionally. It is therefore important for landscape architects interested in design activism to be versed in the social and political history of societal struggles, including the history of race relations, settler colonialism, and forced occupations. Similarly, for professionals to be effective in the policy arena and in working with movement leaders and organizers, we need to have the vocabulary and conceptual frameworks informed by philosophical thoughts, environmental humanities, and social science theories. The responses to the Design Activism Education Survey included a few specific suggestions, such as racial history, intersections of environmental, racial, and climate justice, and design ethics.

## Entrepreneurship

To pursue alternative career paths outside the established sectors of private, public, and, to a less-

er extent, nonprofit practices, it is important that landscape architects interested in design activism are armed with entrepreneurial skills. New tools and platforms have emerged in recent times that enable social start-up and self-organized groups to pursue funding support. There are potentially new models of practices that can emerge from the new landscape of financial tools and organizational structures that are distinct from traditional forms of private practice and public work. They offer potentials for landscape architecture practices to break away from the predominant model of a service industry and move toward models that are driven more strongly by social and environmental agenda.

## Digital Democracy

With advances in technology and telecommunication in particular, the variety of digital tools are transforming the way communities and the society are organized, how communication is supported, and how data are collected and informing design, planning, and policy decisions. As such, understanding and harnessing these digital tools have become indispensable to design activists in the digital era. As digital tools are becoming a more inseparable part of our institutions and everyday life, it is even more important that we protect the democracy of our society in the digital age by using these tools. However, as many communities may not have adequate access to the Internet, for instance, addressing the digital divide is a challenge that design activists must also address.

## Lifelong & Social Learning

Given the complexity of challenges facing the society and the planet as well as the evolving nature of these challenges, our data bank of knowledge as landscape architects can never be sufficient. It is important that we engage in continued learning and acquisition of new knowledge in order to be

effective in addressing a given set of issues and challenges. As such, developing skills and capacity for lifelong learning is critical for design activists. Furthermore, learning can be a social process that connects communities of professionals from different disciplines and with other sectors of society. We can learn from the communities as well as experts from other disciplines. By learning from others, we also develop empathy and humility that are critical to our practice.

## Narrative & Aesthetic

Design activists are also designers. Design is a vehicle that cultivates meanings and values while conveying beauty and poetry. When connected with cultural meanings and narratives, design expressions can be powerful, persuasive, and transforming. In her influential article from 2008, “Sustaining Beauty,” landscape scholar Beth Meyer argues for the role of aesthetic environmental experiences, such as beauty, in the discourse on environmental sustainability.<sup>3</sup> The work of landscape architect and scholar Kongjian Yu is exemplary in this regard. His metaphor of Big Feet weaves together the narrative and aesthetic of the peasant landscapes (a counterpoint to high design in the Chinese tradition) and the ecological performances of nature-based systems.

## Assessment & Evaluation

For activism to be successful and sustainable in the long run, one must also develop the ability to critically assess and evaluate the outcomes of an action or a project as well as the process in which it unfolds. From time to time, we must reflect on the efficacy and impact of our deeds. Are we producing the intended outcomes? Are there unintended consequences? Whose interests are being served? Are the stakeholders engaged in a meaningful way? Do the benefits outweigh the costs? Are we mak-

ing progress toward the long-term goals? Because our work is often emergent and unprecedented, as we take risks and make bold moves, we must also step back from time to time to assess and evaluate what we do and make corrections and adjustments as we move forward.

## Moving Forward: Skills and Knowledge to Engage in Design Activism

While some of the skills and knowledge outlined above may not appear to be central to the core of landscape architecture education, one may argue that much of what’s discussed here is already, or has the possibility to be, embedded in the landscape architecture curriculum. In particular, communication, history, theory, and humanities, and narrative and aesthetics are a common focus in almost all programs. The practices of public engagement and co-design and the emphasis of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion are also gaining recognition sometimes under university mandates. This suggests that there is already a foundation in many programs for design activism to be introduced to the curriculum.

Still, it is also important to recognize that, while new content or focus need to be introduced, the core skillsets of landscape architects are still highly relevant. This is one of the common feedback in our interviews with activists/practitioners. In other words, the focus on activism and design as social change does not necessarily mean a complete dismantling of the core substance of landscape architecture education. Specifically, in our interviews with activists and practitioners, systems thinking and spatial knowledge were identified as invaluable in addressing how social justice issues are manifested in the built environment.

One practitioner mentioned how methods and models of participatory design introduced in a studio she took became the foundation of her work today. Other highlighted skills include working in teams, listening to multiple voices, communicating visually and verbally, dealing with ambiguity, “getting used to being uncomfortable” [in design reviews], and “being asked to imagine what does not yet exist.” These experiences are highly relevant to addressing the wicked problems facing the society and planet. Design activism, in fact, presents an arena in which core landscape architecture skills and knowledge can be put to greater use.

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1. Source: <http://makeitourbusiness.ca/blog/what-does-it-mean-be-culturally-competent>  
2. Ibid.  
3. Elizabeth K. Meyer, “Sustaining Beauty. The Performance of Appearance: A Manifesto in Three Parts,” *Journal of Landscape Architecture* 3, No.1 (2008): 6-23.



## 4. CHALLENGES NOW

If activism is indeed in the DNA of landscape architecture, what are the barriers and challenges for integrating design activism into landscape architecture education? This was another question posed to our audiences at the CELA and EDRA conferences and the program administrators and activists/practitioners that we interviewed. Here is a summary of our findings.

### Activism?

**There is a common skepticism against activism that it's not associated with good design.**

Robert Ryan, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Despite the role of activism in the history of the profession, activism is often viewed in opposition to professional practice as commonly understood. In contrast to practice, activism is often considered as biased or serving a particular interest whereas professional practice is often believed to operate on a neutral ground. The misconceptions that apply to not only activism but also professional practice present a major barrier for the acceptance of activism as a legitimate mode of practice and a focus in education. Activism can indeed be one-sided and can serve the interest of the public as well as the few. Similarly, the professional practice can also knowingly and unknowingly do harm to society and the environment. These negative connotations aside, there is also not a strong consensus on what activism in design entails. Overcoming these misconceptions is one of the intentions of this project.

### Crowded Curriculum?

In interviews with educators around the United States, many identified crowded curricula as a

major barrier for integrating design activism into design education. To meet the standards of professional accreditation, landscape architecture curricula are packed with many required courses, covering a wide range of subjects from history and theory to planting and grading. They present a particular challenge at the undergraduate level where there are additional university requirements. The need to teach a growing list of digital tools, including fabrication, demands additional space in the already crowded curriculum. As one academic administrator said, "fitting it all in is the biggest challenge." For others, however, the crowded curriculum serves more as an excuse for maintaining the status quo or favoring foundational design skills at the expense of other materials.

### Overstretched System

Besides possible crowded curricula, both faculty and students are also faced with crowded commitments and limited time which can present a barrier for pursuing community-based projects or engagement outside the classroom. As one program administrator noted, due to budget cuts, "there is an increasing need for every faculty to have a full teaching load." Many tenure-track faculty are already conscious of time commitment due to the tenure and promotion clock. When community engagement and public service are not recognized in the tenure and promotion process, it becomes an even stronger barrier for engagement. For students, with high tuition and living costs especially in large metropolitan areas, many must take on part-time employment that also limits their time and availability outside the classroom. Coupled with the need to pay back student loans, job security becomes a primary concern following graduation, which limits their ability to explore other career opportunities.





## Faculty Tenure & Promotion

As aforementioned, the lack of recognition for public service and community-engaged work can present a barrier for tenure-track faculty in research universities where the criteria for promotion and tenure are primarily based on traditional research outputs such as competitive grants and peer-reviewed publications. In some programs, faculty are specifically told not to take on community-focused projects before tenure as they are seen as competing with traditional research activities. As such, many faculty have shied away from or have been advised to not take on community-based projects prior to getting tenure, and choose instead to focus on projects that lead to quicker research outcomes. Even for those who are initially interested in community-engaged work, by the time when tenure is granted, their research agendas may be entrenched in the traditional research model.

## Timing & Commitment

Even for programs with a stronger focus on teaching, community-engaged courses often take more time to prepare and coordinate with community and agency partners. Building longer-term relationships also require a commitment beyond the classroom and one's typical work schedule. As rewarding as it can be, such additional commitments present a barrier especially for junior faculty and those with family commitments. Even when community-university partnerships are in place, the impact or outcomes from a project can still take a longer time to realize, particularly as it involves capacity building or long-term engagement. In working with community partners, the academic calendar presents yet another challenge as community processes don't often align with the fixed academic schedule and thus require additional efforts by faculty and in some cases students.

## Studio & Community Dynamic

The studio power dynamic was brought up in our session at the 2019 CELA conference as a barrier for incorporating activism in design education. Specifically, our session participants pointed to the traditional studio model in which the instructor dictates the parameters and expectations of studio projects with little room for critical thinking. Service-learning studios have their own issues and challenges as well. For instance, students may not be adequately prepared to enter a community and develop a working relationship with community stakeholders. In other instances, they may confront long-standing conflicts within a community or between different stakeholders. Without adequate preparation and guidance, the service-learning courses may end up causing more harm than good, with unfulfilled promises, false expectations, and/or further entrenchment of existing issues and challenges.

## Institutional Barriers

The way educational institutions are structured and supported today can present yet another challenge. In recent decades, public higher educational institutions in the United States have experienced a steady and sometimes drastic decline in funding support from state governments. For private institutions not tied to state funding, enrollment and costs present other concerns. Lacking sufficient funding, it's not surprising that, in the Design Activism Education Survey, "budget and resource" was identified as the top key challenge in implementing changes to programs and curriculum. Even if resources are available, the decision to invest often rests solely with program and institution leaders. In educational institutions governed by a top-down hierarchy, different priorities under changing leadership can also be disruptive. Furthermore, the rise of activity-based budgeting at many universities

may pit one program against another in competition for student enrollment which works against cross-disciplinary collaboration.

## Capacity to Teach

**The culture of educators has to change. They have to be more open and concerned.**

Mark Boyer, Louisiana State University

Even with institutional support through funding, teaching assignment, and outreach coordination, faculty members must be interested and prepared in taking on projects or initiatives related to activism. Lack of appropriate faculty expertise was brought up in our interviews with program administrators as another barrier. In other words, even if program leaders are supportive and students are interested, there may not be adequate faculty expertise or instructional capacity to deliver the content. One program director mentioned, "for some [...] faculty, even if they have the best intentions, they may not be up to date with current theories or the kind of critical thinking necessary to address contemporary issues." Another program leader pointed to faculty continuity as another problem especially for small programs, or programs with high turn-over of instructors.

## Limitations of a Service Industry

Are we doing enough in landscape architecture education or profession to address challenges such as climate change, social justice, and disparities in society? This was the first question we asked each of the activists/practitioners interviewed for this project. As expected, the answer from everyone was a resounding "no." Asked what they think the

barriers are, one practitioner highlighted the nature of our profession as a service-based industry, "Our traditional role is to solve problems for our clients, not setting the agenda." Landscape architecture, as historically practiced, is indeed a service industry, which brings values to the society, and it will be unrealistic for the industry to transform overnight. However, for landscape architecture to have a broader and more critical impact in the society, the predominant practice model does need to be examined as it influences how the profession is defined, how professionals are licensed, and how professional programs are accredited.

## Lack of Alternative Pathways

With the profession structured primarily as a service industry, its ability to engage in social change is necessarily limited. In the Design Activism Education Survey, "underdeveloped models of alternative practices" was ranked among the top key challenges, behind only "budget and resource" and "crowded curriculum." The lack of alternative practice models and career paths is indeed a barrier especially as students graduate from schools and enter the workforce. Lacking other options, saddled by debts, and faced with licensing requirements, most students choose to enter the private sector. The preparation to enter the private sector set the students on a path with particular interests and focus. As one program leader commented, "Students tend to look to professional work as examples. There is little focus on social justice there." Another program leader suggested, "We need to change or expand the practice model we have currently [...] and even create a new profession if necessary."



## 5. OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD

**The good news is that there are so many things to do.**

Ron Henderson, IIT

The scale and complexity of challenges facing the society and planet today are immense. But these challenges also present opportunities for change. We asked a group of program leaders and practitioners around the United States and participants at the 2019 CELA conference about opportunities specific to integrating design activism into landscape architecture education. The following summarizes their insights.

### Student Interest!

**It's off the chart! This is all they want to do.**

Joern Langhorst, University of Colorado, Denver

Though not universally evident across all schools and regions, design activism is enjoying a high level of student interest across the United States at the moment. In our interviews with program leaders around the country, we were told that students generally are highly concerned with issues of climate change, social justice, and disparities in society. One program leader noted, "this is what the students think about all the time these days. They are interested in how landscape architecture can deal with these issues." In the Design Activism Education Survey, "Lack of student interest" was ranked lowest among the key challenges in implementing changes in the curriculum, reinforcing our interview findings. Student interest is indeed an important asset for curricular changes. They also have the capacity to generate their projects and initiatives. Their creativity, energy, and agency are a force for change.

### Political Tidal Wave

The recent movements including the advocacy for the Green New Deal, the climate action movement, Black Lives Matter, and many more reflect the important social, political, and environmental issues of our time. They also represent opportunities for public attention and mobilizing that the profession can benefit from if it is able to engage with these issues. These movements bring up important questions concerning racial and social equity that confront professional practice. There is not a more critical moment for the profession to engage the public in critical dialogues and for educational institutions to reexamine how the degree programs and curriculum have addressed these issues and challenges and how engagements with these issues can contribute to the evolution of courses and pedagogy.

### University Missions

With high tuition and the prevailing neoliberal climate, public institutions in higher education are increasingly scrutinized for their public service and contributions. Universities find themselves having to demonstrate their values to state legislatures and the public. Even private universities, especially those located in urban contexts, now look to community engagement as a way to be good neighbors and address improvement and economic development. These efforts provide an opportunity for design programs to demonstrate their unique ability to support university missions and goals. The recent push by many universities to receive the [Carnegie Foundation's Classification for Community Engagement](#) represents another opportunity. Some programs have already been recognized by their institutions. At Kansas State University, for instance, the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional and Community Planning was recognized as among the top three units in the university



Design as Protest 2017, University of Washington. Photo by Jeffrey Hou



with a strong focus on community engagement. Such recognition is especially important for landscape architecture programs of modest size to gain visibility in large campuses.

## Public Impact Research

“Public impact research” and “broader impacts” are terms increasingly being used to describe socially-beneficial research outcomes. Public impact research is an increasing focus among many universities, especially public and land-grant institutions. The aim is to be more purposeful in carrying out publicly-beneficial research, engaging non-university stakeholders, communicating the results to different publics, and creating institutional capacity for this type of research and engagement. Public impact research is being promoted by a number of national organizations and agencies such as the [Association of Public & Land-Grant Institutions](#) and the [National Alliance for Broader Impacts](#), as well as the [National Science Foundation](#) which uses “broader impacts” as one of the main criteria for reviewing federally-funded grants.

## Public Scholarship

Public scholarship goes by different names but represents the scholarship of discovery and knowledge production, teaching, and learning, that is focused on issues of public concern. Many universities and colleges now have campus-wide units dedicated to supporting faculty and students by facilitating collaborative activities based on mutually-beneficial and reciprocal relationships with non-university constituents. Moreover, there is a national movement to deepen knowledge, share best practices, and to share resources and tools. For example, [Imagining America](#) is a national consortium that “brings together scholars, artists, designers, humanists, and organizers to imagine, study, and enact a more just and liberatory ‘America’ and world.”

More broadly, the [Engaged Scholarship Consortium](#) aims “to build strong university-community partnerships anchored in the rigor of scholarship, and designed to help build community capacity.”

## Community-University Partnership

As public institutions find the need to demonstrate their contributions in society and value for the public, community-university partnership serves as an important vehicle for mutually beneficial collaboration and exchanges between universities and community partners through research, teaching, and service. In many universities, community-university partnership has a long history in disciplines such as social work, law, and medicine as part of their mission and pedagogy. These programs provide opportunities for faculty and students with learning and translational research opportunities. In addition to the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement, University Social Responsibility (USR) is another growing movement that recognizes the role of universities in society. These mechanisms can be leveraged to bring more recognition to the work of design activism in landscape architecture programs.

## Collaboration & Cooperation

For schools lacking resources and teaching expertise, collaboration, and cooperation with outside organizations, including community and nonprofit groups, provide a way for students to be exposed to critical challenges and engagement with local communities. For local organizations, the involvement of and work produced by students can offer valuable support; in return, students can learn from their participation. The collaboration addresses both the constraints faced by university programs and the local organizations. For schools located in large metropolitan areas, there are typically many

organizations working on a wide variety of issues and challenges. In smaller population centers without as many community or civic organizations, programs can still work directly with municipalities and agencies. At the University of Wisconsin, Madison, for instance, students work with a local group focusing on homelessness and learn directly about the challenges they face.

## Funding Opportunities

For schools lacking in resources including funding, engagement in activism, leadership, and community-university partnership may offer opportunities for outside grants to support specific projects that benefit both the university and the community. The Department of Landscape Architecture at the Louisiana State University, for instance, uses a grant to bring students from underrepresented communities to tour sites in New Orleans and learn about the profession. At the University of Washington, Seattle, the Department of Landscape Architecture has a long history of partnering with community and civic organizations through projects funded by Neighborhood Matching Fund grants from the City. Examples of grants include the Community Outreach Partnerships Centers grants offered through the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and those from ArtPlace America, Kellogg, Kresge, Rockefeller, and Surdna foundations.

## Advances in Allied Professions

The high level of interest in design activism is not limited to landscape architecture. In Architecture, in particular, there has been a resurgence of interest in socially responsible design as evident in the work of Architecture for Humanity, Design Corps, and the Public Interest Design movement. A long list of publications provides the resources and tools for developing competency and capacity in design activism. These include Design for the 99%,

Pro Bono, Good Deeds, Good Design, Expanding Architecture, Public Interest Design Practice Guidebook, and Public Interest Design Education Guidebook. [Wisdom from the Field: Public Interest Design Practice](#), a document produced from the 2011 Latrobe Research Prize, is another excellent resource. Rather than having to reinvent the wheels, we can build on this body of knowledge and experiences.

## Cross-disciplinary Collaboration

In the face of the complex social and environmental challenges today, interdisciplinary collaboration is increasingly recognized as key to developing innovative responses. Landscape architecture is already a field that encompasses many different specializations and expertise. But there is still much more that educational programs can do in terms of reaching out and initiating collaboration with fields including health, environmental and forest sciences, law, social work, gender studies, and ethnic studies. As many university grants these days require interdisciplinary teams, collaboration becomes even more critical for programs to access funding. For programs that are already affiliated with planning or other disciplines, they can take advantage of shared resources including courses and faculty expertise.

## Design Thinking

**What design schools teach and the kind of design thinking is valuable and necessary for addressing today's challenges.**

Cary Moon, People's Waterfront Coalition

Similar to interdisciplinary collaboration, design thinking has also emerged in recent times as a way to solve complex problems. In the book *Design Thinking: A Guide to Creative Problem Solving for Everyone*, Professor Emeritus Andrew Pressman of the University of New Mexico describes design thinking as “a powerful process that facilitates understanding and framing of problems, enables creative solutions, and may provide fresh perspectives on our physical and social landscapes.”<sup>1</sup> Outside the traditional design fields, design thinking has been recognized and increasingly applied in business, engineering, and general education. As a profession with design at its core, the rise of design thinking presents an opportunity for landscape architecture to provide leadership in bringing design thinking to complex and multi-scalar environmental and social challenges.

## Social Design

Social design has been gaining popularity in the fields of industrial design and human-centered design. As a concept and practice, it emerged from the concerns for the designer's role in society and the role of design in facilitating social change. It looks beyond the market-orientation of conventional design practice. In recent years, a number of new programs have been established in the United States with a focus on social design. Maryland Institute College of Art is one of the first schools to offer a [Master of Arts in Social Design](#). It defines Social design as “a creative practice dedicated to understanding social problems and supporting positive social change.”<sup>2</sup> Faced with common challenges and concerns, the built environment disciplines can learn a great deal from their counterparts in other design disciplines in the area of social design. There are also opportunities for greater collaboration among the disciplines.

## Transferability of Skills

One important comment shared by our participants at the CELA conference was that the skills intended for design activism are highly transferrable or applicable to professional practice. The same skills that can contribute to effective design activism, including communication, public speaking, research, listening, critical and synthetic thinking, dealing with ambiguity, and working with community are also the kind of skills that are highly desirable in professional practice.<sup>3</sup> Particularly, the skills can be highly important for projects involving public engagement and negotiations. The fact that these skills are transferable makes a strong argument for them to be integrated or strengthened in accredited programs. They reinforce the notion that there is an inherent capacity and agency in design to facilitate social change.

## Public Awareness & Outreach

As a profession with a relatively small membership and historically overshadowed by other built environment disciplines, landscape architecture is still poorly understood by the general public. Through design activism, the profession and the educational programs can help the public understand better about the field of landscape architecture and its contributions in addressing many important social and environmental issues. In other words, by actively engaging in these issues and by playing a stronger leadership role in the society, we can help amplify not only the issues at stake but also the public recognition and understanding of our profession. As many schools now face the challenge of enrollment, design activism could also serve as a tool to attract a new generation of landscape architects.

## Studio Pedagogy

The existing curriculum and education model in landscape architecture already provide opportunities for integrating design activism into its curriculum. One of the defining features of design education is studio pedagogy. With its project-based focus and hands-on approach, design studios are an ideal environment to learn about design activism. Already, service-learning or community-based studios have become a common feature in many design programs. Studio projects address a wide variety of spatial and temporal scales, ranging from an entire regional watershed to urban districts and neighborhoods. Through studios, students developed skills and expertise in design/build, working with multiple mediums and scales, and hone an understanding of working with community partners and stakeholders. To integrate design activism into an existing curriculum, one of the most effective and expedient approaches is to simply introduce it in the studio sequence.

## Program Leaderships

In schools around the United States, a new generation of faculty have begun to take on leadership roles in programs, departments, and even schools and colleges. Many have been working with faculty and the professional community to transform courses and curriculum and developing initiatives of design activism. In some programs that used to get push-back from the top, things have changed under new school or college leaderships. Although some may not identify with or explicitly characterize their focus as design activism, many of these efforts do share the same goals as outlined in this document. Leadership at multiple levels can go a long way in implementing changes. By pursuing and allocating resources, including recruiting instructors to teach specific courses, they strengthen the capacity of the programs. By supporting and encouraging faculty to integrate design activism

into the courses and curriculum and to pursue innovation, they foster an environment in which new thinking and actions can emerge.

## All Design is Activism

**I strongly believe that all practitioners need to be engaged in design activism, not just a small group of design activists.**

[Leann Andrews, Traction](#)

As stated in the beginning, activism is arguably in the DNA of landscape architecture as we take actions to shape and protect the environment and society. As such, it is important to recognize that all forms of design can be an expression of activism in the way they lead or facilitate changes in society. By recognizing the practice of design as a form of activism, we also recognize that the opportunities to engage in activism reside in all aspects of design practice. Activism can happen in the quiet and even routine part of our work as we seek to implement large-scale changes or undertake incremental steps toward developing longer-term solutions. In the context of design education, we can embed these critical lenses into all the courses that students take, ranging from grading to professional practice. In fact, the more we address activism in an integral way, the less activism is seen as a specialized practice or actions reserved only for the “radical designers.” The more activism is integrated into education and practice, the greater the impacts we can have on producing the desirable changes in society.



Knowledge Frontiers

The problem for the profession [...] is that these pressures are shaping territories where landscape architecture has very little capacity.

Richard Weller, University of Pennsylvania<sup>4</sup>

As stated in the beginning, activism Actions to re-define or broaden the profession needs to come from somewhere. As landscape architecture practice is still strongly connected to the market place which favors the status quo, schools and other emerging practices can be a catalyst in leading the kind of changes that need to happen. By working with innovative practitioners as well as institutional and community partners, the academic programs can be an incubator of ideas and techniques that can find their way into practice. By producing the future generations of practitioners armed with new skills and knowledge, landscape architecture programs can help reshape and reinvigorate the profession. Schools have been playing the role of catalysts and leaders. The Bauhaus School, despite its short lifespan (1919-1933), played an important role in the Modernist movement in art, architecture, and design in the early 20th Century. Ian McHarg’s ecological methods at Penn serves as another, more recent example.

1. Andrew Pressman, Design Thinking: A Guide to Creative Problem Solving for Everyone (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), XVII.  
2. Source: <https://www.mica.edu/research/center-for-social-design/>  
3. Interview with Brice Maryman (December 18, 2019)  
4. Richard Weller, “Our Time?” The New Landscape Declaration: A Call to Action for the Twenty-First Century, The Landscape Architecture Foundation, ed. (Los Angeles: Rare Bird Books, 2017), 9.



## 6. MODELS & MOMENTUM

Though not universally available or practiced, models and programs that support learning for design as activism do exist already. Some have actually been around for decades, or are now the focus of recent initiatives in higher education. With examples sourced primarily from members of our working group and the book *Public Interest Design Educational Guidebook* (2018), the following serves as snapshots of what these existing models are and summarizes how they can contribute to design activism education.

### Community Design Centers

In the heyday of community design movement in the 1960s, university-based community design centers became a model for community engagement that filled a void where typical professional services failed to reach the communities in need.

Throughout the United States today, there are still more than 60 community design centers, including university-based centers, full-service planning and design practices, and non-profit organizations.<sup>1</sup> Many of these centers were set up in city planning and architecture programs, such as the [Pratt Center for Community Development](#) (founded in 1963) and more recently the Center for Public Interest Design in the School of Architecture at the Portland State University. There are also those set up to address particular challenges or support specific populations. For instance, the [Small Center for Collaborative Design](#) at Tulane University was founded in 2005 after Hurricane Katrina. The [Detroit Collaborative Design Center](#) at the University of Detroit Mercy was founded in 1994 to work with the community and philanthropic organizations to rebuild the city. The [Design and Planning Assistance Center](#) at the University of New Mexico was established to deliver design and planning services to low-income communities in the state.

Centers with close associations with landscape architecture programs or with a focus on landscape-scale projects do also exist, such as the [Hamer Center for Community Design](#) at Penn State University and the [University of Arkansas Community Design Center](#) with a particular focus on rural development. These centers often function on external grants and gifts and are financially independent or semi-dependent from the universities. By engaging in real-life projects with community and civic partners, they provide opportunities for students and faculty to develop experiences and long-term collaboration with external partners. By sustaining these relationships through funded projects, the centers fill an important void in a typical teaching schedule organized around academic terms that don't often respond to the nature of the social and political process at the community or municipal level. They serve as a vehicle that supports the educational and public mission of universities.

### Community-University Partnership

Besides having university-based community design centers, there are other ways through which collaboration with community partners can be established to provide students and faculty with opportunities to put their skills and knowledge to use and learn directly from the communities. Founded in 1987, the [East St. Louis Action Research Project \(ESLARP\)](#) has been a well-respected initiative led by students, faculty, and staff, first at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and now at the Southern Illinois University. ESLARP facilitates service projects in support of the underserved communities in East St. Louis. Starting with technical assistance that eventually led to an emphasis on local organizational capacity building for high-poverty communities, the partnership has supported projects that benefitted the communities and also





the development of community planning methods for professionals.

While many community-university partnerships, such as ESLARP, tend to focus on a specific community or location over an extended period of time, there are also other models of collaboration. [Sustainable City Year](#) is a program at the University of Oregon that invites communities throughout Oregon to apply for a year-long partnership with the university that enables students and faculty to focus a year of academic coursework and research with the community. The University of Washington began a similar program called [Living City Year](#) in 2016, inspired by the Oregon program. Aside from programs that connect one university to one or multiple communities, there are models that enable multiple universities to work together. Founded in 1986 and active through the 1990s, the [University-Oakland Metropolitan Forum](#) was a partnership of five colleges and universities with communities in Oakland, California that supported community-building programs in economic development, education, and neighborhood revitalization. These programs provide invaluable resources for the underserved communities as well as opportunities for students and faculty to develop and apply their skills and knowledge to real-life issues.

## Fellowships & Internships

Besides programs that facilitate collaboration and partnership at an institutional level, fellowships and internships serve as a mechanism that enables individual faculty and students to develop their own projects and partnerships. Founded in 2000, the [Enterprise Rose Fellowship](#) is one of the best-known fellowship programs nationally in design leadership. Offered by Enterprise Community Partners, a national nonprofit focusing on affordable housing development, the program provides two-year positions for emerging architecture designers or socially-engaged arts and cultural practitioners

to work with hosting local community development organizations on projects that result in sustainable and affordable communities. The fellowship is open to designers with an accredited degree in architecture or landscape architecture.

Within universities, the [Center for Public Interest Design](#) at the Portland State University offers fellowships to interested students to participate in a public interest design project outside the classroom under the guidance of a faculty member. Through such an arrangement, the fellowship also provides support for faculty involvement. Since 2014, more than forty student fellows have been accepted into the program who in turn worked on a variety of projects through the Center.<sup>2</sup> With support from Cummings Foundation and MASS Design Group, the [Ada Louise Huxtable Fellowship](#) in civic engagement and service-learning enables student fellows at the Boston Architectural College (BAC) to work as interns at the MASS Design Group and gain experiences in project delivery.<sup>3</sup>

In landscape architecture, the [LAF Fellowship for Innovation and Leadership](#) was established in 2017 to “foster transformational leadership capacity and support innovation to advance the field of landscape architecture.” Each year, a group of mid-career and senior-level fellowships are awarded based on their proposed projects that “demonstrate the potential to bring about impactful change to the environment and humanity and have the capacity to grow the leadership potential of landscape architecture.” Each cohort also includes the National Olmsted Scholars who are recent graduates from accredited degree programs. Programs like these provide opportunities for students to gain experience and confidence in social service and leadership. For programs designed for recent graduates or emerging practitioners, they provide a stepping stone and opportunities for graduating students to pursue their passion and interest outside the conventional career tracks.

## Service-Learning

Service-learning is a recognized teaching and learning process that integrates community service with instruction and reflection.<sup>4</sup> In landscape architecture, the service-learning curriculum, including studios, has served as an important vehicle for design programs to work with community organizations and public agencies. By working directly with community stakeholders and public clients, students gain different perspectives in terms of how problems are perceived and defined. They develop an understanding of and skills in co-creation, negotiation, and collaboration. In return, the students can offer fresh perspectives, social and technical support, and a source of energy and passion. In a studio setting, service-learning also provides opportunities for critical reflections on design methods and professional practice that have traditionally been based on expert knowledge.

At Cornell University, the [Rust to Green \(R2G\) Capstone Studio](#) focuses on catalyzing community-driven placemaking in upstate New York cities.<sup>5</sup> In 2013, the studio produced a study that identifies creative placemaking as a strategy for driving the physical, social, and economic transformation of the district. In 2015, the studio worked with the Oneida Square neighborhood in Utica, New York, to co-create a flower festival. At the University of New Mexico, the Landscape Architecture program offers an Indigenous Design Studio, not only to engage the local indigenous communities but also to attract diversity into their program.<sup>6</sup> The studio has partnered with the [Indigenous Design and Planning Institute](#) under the [Design and Planning Assistance Center](#) on its projects. The Institute was founded to inform and support education in indigenous design and planning.

At the University of Kansas, [Dotte Agency](#) is a multi-disciplinary design collaborative with a focus on improving public health. It collaborates with a

variety of groups, including housing and health organizations, community development corporations, foundations, and different units on campus, on projects ranging from walkability audits to mobile grocers. Focusing on improving food access and physical activity in underserved communities, the projects bring together students and faculty in architecture, design, business, behavioral science, public health, and pharmacy. The collaborative was awarded the Public Scholarship Award by the International Association for Research on Service Learning and Community Engagement in 2019.

## Field Schools & Programs

Taking a step beyond typical service-learning activities, field programs include studio courses and other instructional activities that take place in a local community where students live and work for an extended period of time. Through the extended stay, students and faculty are fully immersed in the local setting, working with the local stakeholders. The experience enables them to gain insights and cultural perspectives that would not be possible otherwise. In a field studio, students have to adapt to the local setting, learn about local customs and sometimes language, and work directly with local stakeholders. Unlike typical study abroad programs that may or may not entail extensive interactions with the local communities, the main focus of the field studios is to engage the local actors and processes.

**We have a new generation of people, students who are craving for the kind of education.**

Leann Andrew, Traction

At the University of Washington, Seattle, the [Informal Urban Communities Initiative \(IUCI\)](#) brought students to work on a series of projects in an informal settlement in Lima, Peru. Working with partners in Global Health typically first through a remote studio in the Winter Quarter and an on-site program in the Summer Quarter, the studio projects have ranged from house gardens to fog water farms to address the needs for clean water, sanitation, neighborhood improvement, and community capacity. Started in Lima, the initiative has since carried out similar projects in Iquitos, Peru, and locations in Cambodia and Nepal, using the same vehicle and pedagogy of field studios. The studios have provided opportunities for students to interact and learn from the local communities.

Also at the University of Washington but housed in the Department of Architecture, the [StoreFront Studio](#) serves as another model in providing opportunities for students with extensive fieldwork experiences. The studio, conducted each year, works with small communities in the state of Washington focusing on the revitalization of main streets. The [BLC Field School](#) is a project of the Building-Landscape-Culture Collaborative Project at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee and Madison. The field school takes students into local neighborhoods to collect and explore stories of places and placemaking. It provides students with an immersive experience in documenting the built environment and cultural landscapes and learning how to write history “from the ground up.”

## Student Initiatives

Apart from opportunities available through the university, students’ own initiatives can also play an important role in learning about activism, leadership, and community engagement. At the University of Oregon, [DesignBridge](#) was a student-organized community design/build initiative that provided design service to community clients and

local nonprofits. With the participation of students from architecture and landscape architecture, the program took on a range of projects including activation of urban vacant spaces, a farm shed, a bike shelter, and a mobile tool trailer for people experiencing homelessness. The program filled an important void in the curriculum and provided opportunities for students from different disciplines to work together with community and nonprofit clients.

Students’ initiatives can sometimes morph into longer-term projects after graduation. One of the nation’s oldest and longest-running community design nonprofits, [Environmental Works](#), was founded initially as a community design center by architecture students at the University of Washington in 1970. For 50 years, EW has worked with communities in the State of Washington on designing affordable housing and community facilities through both fee-for-service projects and no-cost service. The organization was recently joined by Barker Landscape Architects to become a multidisciplinary operation.

There are many recent examples of successful practices that initially emerged as initiatives by students or recent graduates. They include [Rebar](#) (San Francisco), [MASS Design Group](#) (Boston), [Kounkuey Design Initiative](#) (Los Angeles), [Interboro Partners](#) (New York and Detroit), and [Assemble](#) (London), an award-winning, multidisciplinary collective across the fields of art, architecture, and design. These successful examples demonstrate the possibility for emerging groups to go beyond the status quo in creating new forms of practice.

## University Extensions

For many public land-grant universities in the United States, [cooperative extensions](#) have long served as an important vehicle linking universities with local communities. The Cooperative Extension

System has been specifically designed to make research-based knowledge accessible to communities. In many states, these programs focus on agriculture and food, home and family, environment, community economic development, and youth.<sup>7</sup> Historically, each county in all 50 states had a local extension office. Currently, there are still 2,900 extension offices across the country. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, for instance, the [UW Extension Community Design Team](#) brings planning and design professionals to communities and provide them with resources to make decisions about their future.

**We need to redefine our purpose to serve communities, especially local land-grant universities, with a mission to serve people.**

Samuel Dennis, Jr., University of Wisconsin, Madison

At West Virginia University, the [WVU Extension Service](#) offers educational programs and technical assistance to communities to improve their social and economic well-being. The [Community Engagement Lab](#) in particular provides services in design charrettes, workshops, mapping, and surveys that support design and planning at regional, community, and site scales. At the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, the culture of design activism and community engagement in the department comes in part from its collaboration with [the UMass Amherst Design Center](#).<sup>8</sup> The Center supports a wide range of planning and urban design projects and research focused on addressing the challenges facing cities and towns in Massachusetts and beyond.

Recognized as serving the mandated mission of land-grant universities, the extension programs can be leveraged to provide students and faculty with opportunities for public service and community engagement. Many of these programs already have a long history of working with local communities. While the existing extension programs tend to have a strong focus and orientation on technical assistance, some have already developed a focus on empowerment and community capacity building. As not every land grant university has such operation or service currently, there are opportunities for more initiatives to emerge.

## Charrettes & Competitions

Charrettes and competitions have been a long-standing practice in the design profession and are used commonly in educational contexts. Innovative, short-term, and often requiring less longer-term investment, charrettes and competitions can be an effective way to experiment with an emerging topic and mobilize participation by students, faculty, and even professionals.

The events can also raise public awareness and discussion. In recent years, prominent competitions such as [Rebuild by Design](#) and [Resilience by Design](#) have encouraged the profession to explore issues of climate resilience and disaster preparedness. Despite their shortcomings in terms of effecting policy change,<sup>9</sup> these competitions did generate interest and attention within the schools and the professional community.

Besides generating ideas and attention, charrettes and competitions can also be used to build capacity, relationships, and potential partnerships among the stakeholders. [Open Space Seattle 2100](#) was one such project that produced sustaining results with a profound political and physical impact on the city. Through a city-wide design charrette held in 2006 with 23 teams led by local professionals



and landscape architecture students and faculty at the University of Washington, the project brought together community groups, civic organizers, activists, and professionals to produce a 100-year vision for open space in Seattle. The guiding principles were endorsed by the City Council. The process helped form a network of grassroots support that translated into the passage of parks and green space levy in 2008 with funding support for green infrastructure.

Also in Seattle, a series of workshops and charrettes influenced the current redevelopment of its downtown waterfront. In 2003, the Allied Arts of Seattle, a long-time civic/municipal arts organization, organized a [Waterfront Design Collaborative](#) to envision the future of the Seattle Central Waterfront following the demolition of the Alaskan Way Viaduct. With the participation of seven teams of professionals and students, the process spurred the City to organize a citywide charrette open to all citizens in the following years. 22 teams of citizens, students, and professionals came up with a wide range of proposals with the key themes forming the basis for the waterfront redesign. Both Open Space Seattle 2100 and the City-sponsored waterfront charrettes provided opportunities for students and faculty involvement and contributed to substantive outcomes on the ground.

#### Workshops & Events

Aside from large-scale competitions or charrettes, smaller-scale workshops and other events also allow students to engage in activism sometimes by organizing those events themselves. [Design as Protest \(DAP\)](#), for instance, was a nationwide action held on January 20th, 2017 to bring together activists, designers, and community organizers to explore how design can address issues of injustice in society. Around the United States, [12 gatherings](#) were organized. In Seattle, the DAP event was organized by a group of landscape architecture

students at the University of Washington. Over 200 students and professionals across different disciplines signed up to form groups that addressed issues ranging from affordable housing to fair policing.

Recurring events are a great model for student engagement. The [HOPES Conference](#) is an annual event inaugurated in 1994 and organized independently by a student group at the University of Oregon. Through panel discussions, workshops, exhibitions, and excursions, the conference brings together students, faculty, community members, and visiting scholars across different disciplines to explore the relationship between ecology and various design disciplines.<sup>10</sup> Events such as DAP and HOPES provide students with opportunities to engage in interdisciplinary collaboration, develop experiences in event organizing, and participate in collective learning in key issues and challenges.

For schools that operate on a semester schedule, weeklong workshops during the semester provide relief from the regular studios and allow students to engage in an intensive investigation of specific issues. At the [University of Southern California](#), the Landscape Architecture program initiated an annual, one-week workshop after the mid-term reviews. Students from all years would participate in teams of six to seven to carry out applied research working with community stakeholders. Similarly, using [Design Sprint](#) as a model, the Design Week is a weeklong (4 days) program held every other year at [North Carolina State University](#) that involves all levels of students in a project or a series of projects with outside guest instructors. The focus in 2019, for example, was to apply rapid creativity to climate change challenges.

### Program Partnerships

Aside from the typical community-university partnerships, the collaboration between different insti-

tutions and even units with the same university can also result in the desired synergy and open up new opportunities. In Japan, the Haruhiko GOTO Laboratory at Waseda University has been a pioneering force in community design in the country. In 2015, the lab teamed up with Nara Medical University to combine expertise in community design, historical conservation, and medical care for elders to revive a historical district in the ancient city of Nara. Named [Planning Institute in Medicine-based Town](#), the project presents an integrated approach to address issues of aging, the decline of historic neighborhoods, and community development.

At Iowa State University, the [Environmental Justice in Prisons Project](#) is a partnership between the College of Design and the Iowa Correctional Institute for Women (ICIW). The project began in 2010 with a plan to develop the 30-acre site based on principles of humane and therapeutic landscape design that improves environmental health and resilience. Led by Associate Professor Julie Stevens, students at Iowa State constructed multipurpose outdoor classrooms and restorative space for staff and officers. They also planted trees and native prairie flowers and grasses. The project enabled the students to examine their own personal ethics when working with diverse populations, especially those incarcerated.<sup>11</sup> The project won an [ASLA student award for excellence in community service](#) in 2015.

The [Landscape Education for Democracy \(LED\)](#) project is a partnership between five European landscape architecture faculties and the LE:NOTRE Institute for promoting awareness and empowering young design and planning professionals to become more active in shaping democratic change. Started in 2016, the project has offered online seminars that are free and open to students at any institution as well as the general public. The LED course 2020 includes 13 online course sessions available to students at any institution. Themes in-

clude: Democratic landscape transformation, democratic landscape analysis, collaborative visioning and goal setting, collaborative design, evaluation and future agenda setting.

### Program Transformation

In most schools around the country, mechanisms such as charrettes, workshops, events, and students initiatives are ways to complement existing curricula in providing opportunities for students to engage in activism and gain important experiences outside the classrooms. These short-terms mechanisms are particularly useful when institutional or curricular changes often take a long process to materialize. However, it is also possible that a degree program can be reorganized or redirected to support student engagement in activism and addressing critical social and environmental challenges.

At [Penn State University](#), the strategic planning process in the Department of Landscape Architecture has led to a focus on social and environmental justice, with the department's mission framed as "great work grounded in a commitment to environmental and social good." At the [University of Washington](#), Seattle, a strategic plan developed in 2000 identified urban ecological design as the strategic focus for the department. The implementation of the plan involved all aspects of the program operation including curricular changes, selection of studio focus, faculty recruitment, and development of research initiatives. Building on the strength of the program in community engagement and social justice focus, the department further incorporates design activism as one of its five focal areas in an update to the strategic plan in 2015.<sup>12</sup>

At the [Illinois Institute of Technology](#), design activism was not a tradition for the Landscape Architecture + Urbanism program. In fact, the school had a checkered history with the neighborhood in Chica-

go's Southside. However, building on an improved relationship with the neighborhood and working with its faculty and professional community, the program recently undertook a strategic shift to focus on the public realm, including working with the local community. The modest size of the program and coherence of the faculty allowed the program to restructure its curriculum and develop specific studio focus and pedagogical approach based on the strategic move.<sup>13</sup> The shift is already paying dividends—with Jazz Fence, the program's first community-university partnership project in a long time, winning an [ASLA student award](#) in 2018.

At the [City College of New York](#), although the landscape architecture program does not set its focus on design activism per se, it has also restructured its curriculum, including history, theory, technical classes, and studios, to address critical contemporary challenges. Taking advantage of its location and resources in New York City, the program collaborates with the staff of the NYC Urban Field Station to organize field trips for its urban ecology course, in which students get to hear directly from scientists and citizens. The Bio-Design Studio addresses urban agriculture and stormwater, using bio-design as a concept to introduce students to scientific knowledge beyond the comfort zone of design.<sup>14</sup>

The feasibility of program transformation relies significantly on both the support of the faculty and program leadership. For some programs, external factors including support from the university may also play an important role. But even if the stars may not always align right away or the resources for implementation may not be in place, some steps can always happen first, such as a strategic plan, improved relationship with communities, or experiments with course design and content, as evident in the examples above.

## Certificate Programs

Certificate programs including those at the graduate level and even outside academic programs can provide additional paths for students to pursue their interest in design activism and acquire specific skills and expertise. At Portland State University, the Center for Public Interest Design offers [Graduate Certificate in Public Interest Design](#) to both graduate students and professionals. The program consists of 18 credit hours of course options pulled from multiple disciplines at the university, including architecture, business, environmental science and management, public affairs, and public studies and planning. This includes a minimum of 4 credit hours of fieldwork that provide students with opportunities for actions and engagement within a community or through a practicum at a firm or organization.

The College of Design at North Carolina State University also offers a [Public Interest Design Certificate](#) program. The program is open to students, professionals, and even the public with related experience of education. Unlike the Portland State University program, the coursework for the NC State programs draws more heavily from architecture and landscape architecture, including studio courses, reflecting the strength and resources of the College. The faculty members include those from architecture, landscape architecture, art + design, and industrial and graphic design.

Run by Design Corps and hosted by universities around the United States, [Public Interest Design Institute \(PIDI\)](#) is a training program open to practitioners as well as students. Developed based on the [SEED \(Social, Economic, and Environmental Design\)](#) methodology. Successful participants earn certification as a SEED professional. Practicing professionals in architecture and landscape architecture also earn Continued Education Units or Professional Development Hours. The program has

been hosted by programs around the country at different times during a year. The local host selects from a list of speakers who are leading practitioners in public interest design. Since 2011, the institute has been held in more than twenty states in the United States.

## New (Degree) Programs?

Are new degree programs in design activism viable or desirable? Given the declining enrollment in many professional design programs already, new degree programs may be perceived as competing with the existing programs. On the other hand, the declining enrollment in traditional programs may precisely provide the motivation to think more creatively about bringing more students into the field through new feeder programs or allow students to pursue a specialization or advanced learning at the graduate level. This is an area that requires fresh and robust investigations.

Some schools have already taken steps to explore new directions. At Parsons School of Design, the [MS in Design and Urban Ecologies](#) is a relatively recent program that combines urban planning, policy, urban design, activism, and community practice. Similar to a design program, the program is studio-based, complemented by a series of required coursework in history, theory, and methods, culminating in a thesis project. The faculty members included those in existing programs including urban policy and health, urban studies, architecture, urban planning, and community development. The location in New York City allows the program to access the city as a laboratory for learning.

In recent years, placemaking has emerged as a focus of academic research and practice as well as new programs. The Pratt Institute in New York City offers a [MS degree in Urban Placemaking and Management](#) under the School of Architecture. The 40-credit program focuses on applied research

through studios, theses, capstones, demonstration projects, research initiatives, partnerships, and public programs. The program offers three areas of focus: (1) community-based design, (2) parks, open space, and green infrastructure, and (3) transportation and main street management. Arizona State University has also been working on programs focusing on creative placemaking, including the [Studio for Creativity, Place and Equitable Communities](#), funded by the Kresge Foundation and Art-Place America.

From time to time, initiatives may emerge to start a landscape architecture program from scratch. Those moments provide opportunities to experiment with fresh ideas.

Founded in 2004, [Department of Landscape Architecture at Chung Yuan University](#), Taiwan is one such example. With a strong emphasis on community engagement, community design is introduced in the first year of the four-year bachelor program in the early years. Ecologies and plants are taught not in the classroom but in the field in tribal communities. In the last year of the program, students were required to spend a semester abroad in designated locations in Asia, Europe, North America, and more recently Australia. The innovation of the program has been reflected in the strength of the student work and its impact on the communities it has worked with.

## Models, Momentum & Multiple Pathways

As the above discussion and examples indicate, there is already a wide variety of program models and mechanisms that support the integration of design activism into landscape architecture education. Although not all models are explicit about activism per se, they embody features of design activism, including community engagement,



advocacy, partnership, and leadership development. It is important to note that the wide variety of programs and models does not necessarily suggest that these approaches are universally accepted or supported. Many of the programs and initiatives thrive largely and sometimes solely with the commitment of individual faculty, students, and community partners. Although some of these models are gaining greater institutional recognition, such as community engagement and community-university partnerships, many of them still require greater support and investments from the institutions they belong to. Whether they are currently supported or not, long-term care and support are necessary for the program and initiatives to sustain over time. Besides, as not every program has adopted these models or mechanisms, there is potential to more programs and initiatives to be developed, to build on the momentum of this work.

The wide variety of models and mechanisms, as illustrated here, suggest that there are multiple pathways to better integrate design activism into landscape architecture education. Depending on the socio-economic condition of the region, the institutional context, the resources at hand, and the expertise of faculty and staff, some models may be more suitable or applicable than others. Lastly, it is important to note that although the models and examples included present a spectrum of approaches, they do not represent all the possibilities. Like other subjects in education, models of design activism education require constant innovations and critical self-reflection to stay relevant.

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6. Interview with Katya Crawford (December 5, 2019).
7. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cooperative\\_State\\_Research,\\_Education,\\_and\\_Extension\\_Service](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cooperative_State_Research,_Education,_and_Extension_Service)
8. Interview with Robert Ryan (November 4, 2019).
9. See a critique of Rebuild by Design by Billy Fleming: <https://placesjournal.org/article/design-and-the-green-new-deal/>
10. Source: <https://hopes.uoregon.edu/about-us/>
11. Julie Stevens, "Reflecting Through Razor Wire: The Environmental Justice in Prisons Project," Public Interest Design Education Guidebook: Curricula, Strategies, and SEED Academic Case Studies, eds. Lisa M. Abendroth and Bryan Bell (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 220-225.
12. The principal author for this report served as the department chair at UW from 2009 to 2017 and as the Graduate Program Coordinator from 2005 to 2009.
13. Interview with Ron Henderson (November 15, 2019).
14. Interview with Denise Hoffman Brandt (December 11, 2019).



## 7. FRAMEWORK FOR ACTIONS

**It's not a question of whether to do it nor not, but how to do what we do, [...], and learning how to do it better.**

Joern Langhorst, University of Colorado, Denver

### Politicize

**Every design action is a political act.**

Randolph T. Hester, University of California, Berkeley<sup>1</sup>

To embrace and position design as activism in landscape architecture education, we propose the following framework of actions based on the challenges and opportunities identified in this document. While the framework and suggested actions are specific to education, we envision that a strong intersection between education and profession is also essential. In other words, while the focus of this study is on landscape architecture education, we do not see the actions as limited to the context of educational institutions only. Rather, we see the need for a broader transformation to occur through such intersections.

As educational programs in landscape architecture vary in their focus, size, and organization, and as they respond often to different contexts and constituents, the proposals here are not meant to be one-size-fits-all. Instead, we ask each program and school to reassess its own mission and goals and develop appropriate strategies and actions together with students, faculty, and the professional community. Undertaking systemic changes requires patience, strategies, and mobilization at multiple levels. We envision these changes to occur locally, regionally, nationally, and transnationally, starting from the bottom, top, and sideways, through both acupunctural pressures as well as layered approaches. The change we envision requires creativity, innovation, and sustained efforts by faculty, students, administrators, and professional allies.

The social and environmental challenges facing our society and the planet today are in essence political, in the sense that they reflect exercises of power and struggles. To be effective in meeting these challenges, landscape architects need to be engaged with the political—the process in which different forces and struggles converge in the public realm. We must understand better the language and systems of power. We need to have the ability and capacity to engage in the political process to effect change. To politicize is not to align necessarily with partisan interests and viewpoints. It's not “politicizing” as conventionally or commonly understood. Rather, to politicize is to accept the responsibility of professionals as engaged citizens and as members of a democracy. To be effective participants in a democracy, we must acquire the skills in communicating, mobilizing, and advocating for the public (demos).

To politicize is also to understand that the built environment has always been an ongoing product of social, economic, and political processes. The work that we do as professionals and the materials that we teach and learn in school are shaped by systems and history of social movements as well as oppression and colonialization. In the book, *Design for the Real World*, published more than thirty years ago, designer and educator Victor Papanek argues, “The main trouble with design schools seems to be that they teach too much design and not enough about the ecological, social, economic, and political environment in which design takes place.”<sup>2</sup> Although Papanek was addressing more





specifically the field of industrial design, the same criticism could be applied to landscape architecture, not just 30 years ago, but also today. There

is much work to be done to engage with the “real world” we live in.

Sample Actions

- Approach history and theory of landscape architecture with a political lens.
- Integrate politics and political processes into community engagement methods.
- Consider political processes and political actions in studio projects.
- Engage in planning and policy debates at local, regional, national, and international levels.

Hybridize

We must go beyond landscape architecture practice in order to broach this critical environmental cross-roads.

Martha Schwartz, Martha Schwartz Partners<sup>3</sup>

The scale and complexity of the social and environmental challenges today require landscape architecture to build knowledge and capacity beyond the traditional core of the profession. One of the advantages of higher education is that we reside in institutions with other areas of expertise, including arts, environmental sciences, ethnic studies, geography, gender studies, health, human-centered design, law, planning, social work, etc. There are abundant opportunities to explore collaboration in research, teaching, and service that can mutually benefit students, faculty, the professional com-

munity, and the public if we are willing to invest in building the connections and taking the initiatives. By connecting and working with other disciplines, there are also opportunities to reflect critically on how we operate as a field. For instance, we can learn from the methods that the other fields use to generate, disseminate, and apply knowledge. We can also observe how they test ideas and verify results. We can draw from the way they engage the public and advance their agenda. Through these interactions, we can learn about our strengths and limitations and find ways to advance our profession. Conversely, by hybridizing, we can also make others aware of landscape architecture and what we can bring to the table. Rather than taking on the challenges on our own, hybridizing allows us to join forces with others.

There are different ways in which hybridization can occur. In programs that are housed together with planning programs, for instance, students already can benefit from the availability of courses and the company of cohorts often with a strong social justice focus and sensibility. At the graduate level, students can develop specializations, participate

in can benefit from the availability of courses and the company of cohorts often with a strong social justice focus and sensibility. At the graduate level, students can develop specializations, participate in joint projects, or even pursue concurrent degrees. At the undergraduate level, we can encourage students to pursue minors in other fields to broaden their perspectives and acquire additional knowledge and skills. At the program level, in addition to developing relationships with other units, steps must also be taken to reduce barriers including tenure and promotion criteria and process.

At the program level and as a profession, we must also hybridize our ranks by recruiting more diverse students and faculty into education. We must reach out to schools, communities, and students that are historically underrepresented in our profession. Only by bringing those from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds into the profession can we begin to have the capability of understanding and addressing issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion in the society.

Sample Actions

- Develop joint degree programs and interdisciplinary opportunities, including joint courses and studios.
- Recruit students and faculty with diverse professional and disciplinary backgrounds.
- Reduce barriers for interdisciplinary collaboration, including course requirements, faculty tenure and promotion criteria, etc.
- Recruit diverse students and faculty particularly those from underserved and underrepresented communities.

Glocalize

Just like landscapes and ecosystems, today's social and environmental challenges are also interconnected across scales. To be effective in meeting these interconnected challenges, we must think and act both locally and globally. Starting with the local, one thing that educational programs can do immediately is to build connections with local stakeholders, including communities, public agencies, and civic organizations, not to mention the local professional community. These connections are important for developing a service-learning

curriculum and providing students and faculty with opportunities to develop working relationships and gain insights into the issues and challenges facing the local communities. These insights allow students and faculty to understand how issues facing the planet and the global society are manifested locally and how we can begin to undertake actions in communities and places where we live and work, particularly the vulnerable communities.

**Our call or declaration must be global because much of the environmental impact and urban growth is happening in the developing world.**

Mario Schjetnan, Grupo de Diseño Urbano/GDU<sup>4</sup>

Developing local ties needs not to be done at the expense of global connections. In fact, by working both locally and globally with partners and com-

Sample Actions

- Develop connections and partnerships with community organizations, professional groups, and public sector agencies both locally and globally.
- Develop service-learning studios to address issues faced by communities and agencies.
- Develop capacity in supporting and sustaining long-term partnerships.
- Work with on-campus units or organizations that support partnerships and collaboration.

Improvise

**I think the biggest opportunities are in studios—the biggest part of our program.**

Mark Boyer, Louisiana State University

With fiscal uncertainty or declining financial support (and now with the impact of COVID-19), most landscape architecture programs in the United States are likely not in a position to grow rapidly.

munities abroad, landscape architecture programs can explore the interconnectivity of global and local issues, broaden the horizon for students and faculty, and prepare students to become global leaders and citizens. As demographic compositions diversify in communities across the globe, institutions are increasingly required to address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Cultivating the local and global connections and exploring curricular and pedagogical opportunities can also help build the cultural and intercultural capacity for the next generation of landscape architects.

As such, the most effective way to move forward with the agenda of integrating design activism into design education is to make use of what already exists. For instance, studios present an excellent opportunity to integrate design activism into a curriculum. Given the common problems of crowded curriculum and systems that are already overstretched, using a design studio to introduce and embed design activism can be done with the least cost and disruption to a curriculum. The project-based approach and the significant stretch of time assigned to design studios also makes it an appropriate venue. Similarly, contents related to design activism can also be layered or inserted into existing courses whenever it's appropriate.

Aside from the coursework, a program can also build on an existing lecture series to introduce new themes and substance focusing on critical issues of our time. It can offer workshops/charrettes on an annual or biennial basis providing opportunities to engage not just students and faculty but also the professional community and members of the public. Summer programs provide yet another opportunity to utilize existing resources, in this case the availability of space and time during the summer.

Improvising, or working with what you have, also means utilizing strengths and assets that are already in place in a program or a community. These may include existing community-university partnership programs on campus, community-based organizations that one can develop partnerships with, and city agencies that can use resources and support from university programs.

Sample Actions

- Undertake an audit of the existing programs and curriculum to identify opportunities for introducing design activism.
- Consider using studios and studio projects as the platform to introduce and integrate design activism into the curriculum.
- Leverage existing strengths and resources, including courses, lecture series, summer programs, and connections with on-campus and outside organizations.

Problematize

To improvise with existing resources and strengths, one doesn't need to go far than to look at an existing program, curriculum, university, and the nearby city or communities. There is arguably no better way to address issues of equity, justice, and resilience than to look at what's immediately around us. Starting with the courses, what if we take a social justice lens to re-examine the history of our profession? Rather than following the typical narrative in the literature, what if we revisit it from the perspectives of the subaltern groups, including the indigenous communities and marginalized groups whose lands were expropriated to make ways for some of the most iconic works of our profession? What if we take on the disparities that exist already in our

communities, such as access to fresh food and green spaces? What if we look at how university campuses are addressing issues of sustainability and resilience?

To problematize our assumptions and existing systems is also to develop a deeper understanding of issues and take a critical stance that is in essence the source of activism. There is an abundance of issues that we can take on at our doorsteps if we are able to problematize them and make them the focus of actions. These actions are in turn provide the opportunities through which design activism can be introduced and integrated into the curriculum. Starting in one's own programs, institutions, and communities also presents opportunities to be engaged and to connect theories and concepts to



realities. Beyond one’s own immediate surroundings, problematizing the societal institutions and challenges facing the planet is also a critical step toward developing holistic and innovative solutions.

One must develop appropriate solutions by first asking the right questions.

Sample Actions

- Revisit existing courses, course materials, and curriculum with a critical lens and identify issues and materials relevant to design activism.
- Re-examine issues facing one’s own programs, institutions, and communities and identify issues and problems as a starting point for actions.
- Challenge assumptions and norms of actions when it comes to social and environmental challenges.

Authenticize

Design activism is best learned and understood in actions. An authentic experience including, but not limited to, meeting and working together with community members, tabling or speaking in a rally, and staying in a community, can go a long way in instilling a sense of purpose, empathy, and understanding by being immersed. Rather than indoctrinating students or simply delivering content and expecting the students to accept and digest on their own, it’s often more powerful to provide opportunities for self-discoveries through experiential learning. Providing opportunities for actions and experiences is thus a critical component of design activism education.

Authenticize, or creating an authentic experience for students, involves working with people in the actual context with real issues. The reality is the best material for students to learn about the complexity of issues and challenges as well as the opportunities and pathways for solutions. Creating opportunities for experiential learning, therefore, needs to be integrated into landscape architecture education, either through service-learning studios and field classrooms or other innovative mechanisms. Long-term investment of time and commitment is needed to ensure an authentic and long-lasting relationship for collaboration. The collaboration can only be as authentic as the relationships that enable the collaboration to occur in the first place.

Sample Actions

- Focus on providing opportunities for experiential learning through collaboration with community stakeholders and working in the field.
- Use a project-based approach to courses and curriculum, focusing on hands-on activities and engagement.
- Encourage and support student initiatives in design activism rather than providing prescriptive programs.

Entrepreneurize

For alternative practices to be viable and successful in the market economy or the competitive non-profit ecosystem, landscape architecture education needs to provide students not only with technical knowledge but also entrepreneurial skills. Even in the public sector, understanding of funding and fund management is critical to program effectiveness and success. Again, one advantage of higher education institutions is their proximity and access to a variety of resources and expertise, including programs that support businesses, entrepreneurship, nonprofit management, and grant writing. Programs can develop partnerships with their counterparts on campuses that offer appropriate courses and workshops and can become partners in potential initiatives.

Having the additional skills in entrepreneurship can

open the door for graduates to pursue alternative forms of practice, the lack of which has been identified as a barrier to design activism. Stronger entrepreneurial skills can also help existing practices to become more successful financially by developing new business models and revenue streams. With greater financial resilience, firms will have more ability to pursue projects and initiatives with greater social impacts and environmental contributions. The entrepreneurial skills can also potentially translate into a stronger and more creative way of governing public assets and resources and for the profession to become more capable of supporting the revitalization of local communities that struggle in today's economy.

Lastly, *entrepreneurizing* also needs to happen at the scale of the profession, not just individual practitioners or firms. We can begin to do so in education.

Sample Actions

- Partner with other programs on campus that provide training in business, entrepreneurship, and nonprofit management.
- Work with the professional community to identify and leverage resources for training in entrepreneurship.
- Support student and faculty involvement in community entrepreneurship initiatives which in turn provide learning opportunities.

(Re)organize

How do we match the scale of operation with the scale of problems?

Brice Maryman, IMIG

To take on the scale and complexity of the critical challenges today, we must “scale up” our practice by collaborating with other professions, by pursuing different models of practice, and through

different ways of organizing. Landscape architects are far from being alone in addressing the critical changes facing the society and the planet. To say the least, our capacity is modest compared to the number of people and organizations that are already mobilized to fight the systems that produce climate change and social and environmental injustice. Take the American Environmental Movement as an example, it is a movement with a collective membership of millions of people, a sophisticated web of organizations, and providing job opportunities for many professional organizers and staff,

engaged in a wide variety of issues ranging from wildlife conservation to toxic waste.

Rather than re-inventing the wheel, we can collaborate with these movement organizations and find critical intersections of our work. Instead of producing new skills and knowledge from scratch, we can learn from these organizations and the work they have done successfully already. Beyond learning from and participating in the work that other movement organizations are doing, pursuing these intersections also means finding allies and building coalitions and capacity for the profession. Rather than training the students on our own, we can collaborate with others in developing practicum and internship programs to build skills and knowledge in organizing and advocacy. By joining coalitions

of movements and organizations, we can better identify opportunities for the field to contribute and assert our presence and influence. By working with others, we also make the work of landscape architects more visible to a broader audience. Working with others is certainly a way to begin. But at some point, we also need to reflect critically on the way our profession and educational programs are organized. Are the profession and the education system organized in a way that addresses the scale and complexity of the challenges at hand? What are the alternatives? Can we emulate the success of other movements and disciplines? Where can we have the largest impact? What is missing from our practice model? These are some of the questions that we need to address as a profession as we move forward.

Sample Actions

- Develop collaborative relationships with movement organizations that provide learning opportunities for students, faculty, and professionals.
- Partner with movement organizations on internship and practicum programs for students to acquire skills and knowledge in organizing.
- Engage in critical reflections on how the profession of landscape architecture is organized and whether the way we are organized is meeting the challenges of our time.

Democratize

To take on the power structure in society, we must also reexamine the power structure within our educational institutions. This includes how decisions are made, how resources are allocated, whom we are accountable to, and even how educational institutions are funded. Starting with developing strategies to make our programs more responsive to the critical challenges of our time, we must make sure that students, faculty, and even the professional community are fully engaged in the process of deliberation and implementation. Without their input and support, the strategies would risk being misinformed or lacking the ability to sustain.

In partnering with communities outside the university, we must also ensure that all voices are included in the process and that we do not end up sustaining the structure of injustice through our work. More than just design assistance, our involvement must help build capacity in the community we work with. In developing solutions for projects, we must ensure that they address equity, diversity, and inclusion at different scales, from local to global. As a profession and as educational institutions responsible for training future generations of professionals, we must hold ourselves to the same set of values and principles that our work is intended to embody.

Sample Actions

- Match our actions with our values.
- Re-examine the system of hierarchy within education and the profession.
- Develop mechanisms to include all voices in the program and curriculum deliberations and decisions.
- Build capacity in communities we work with and not just providing solutions.

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## 8. ENDING BY BEGINNING: OTHER PROPOSITIONS

**In the past, some faculty would say that all designers are [inherently] activists. Now there is a realization that we do need to take a more activist approach.**

Stephanie Rolley, Kansas State University

Working on this project has been a journey for many of us as a working group. Not only did we travel to meet in different cities in the United States for conferences, but many of us have also devoted our entire career to design activism and issues of equity, justice, and resilience in the built environment. The project gave us a chance to put our thoughts together, first at the conferences, and then in this very document. The project does not end here. Rather, this is only a beginning. By completing the document, the real work is just about to start. In the spirit of beginning, we conclude with a few thoughts on what we can take on right away as individual educators, program leaders, and members of the profession.

### Leading by Doing

**Seeing faculty and program engaged in the important issues makes a difference for students. It allows them to model behaviors and expectations.**

Brice Maryman, MIG

To show students how to be leaders, we need to be leaders ourselves. We, as faculty, program leaders, and professionals need to be engaged with

issues that matter to our communities and society. We must take a stance on issues that we can contribute to as professionals and as engaged citizens. We must look at the critical challenges facing the planet and society as teachable moments for our students and the public. By taking on these issues ourselves, we also become more aware of their complexity and the necessity to go beyond the normative approaches enshrined in the profession. We become reflexive and educated about possible responses and solutions.

As programs and courses take on issues that matter to local communities and society, opportunities can arise for collaboration and partnerships with those including community organizers, agency staff, elected officials, and professionals. These interactions also provide teachable opportunities for empathy, negotiation, and co-creation. As we become better at these processes ourselves, we will be more able to engage our students in navigating the complexity of change. Furthermore, we will become more capable of identifying future directions for the profession, including education. By getting our hands dirty, so to speak, we set an example for our students and create a supportive environment for engagement.

### Design (Activist) Thinking

One of the ways we can begin to introduce changes in our programs and curricula, including studio projects and course content, is to engage in a kind of design activist thinking. Similar to the concept of design thinking, “design activist thinking” applies the lens of an activist to explore solutions to a complex problem. To engage in design activist thinking is to apply a social justice lens to examine the issues at hand, for example, and to develop appropriate responses that may involve more than simply design interventions in a conventional sense. To address climate change issues as a design activist,





for example, one needs to examine both the root causes of climate change and adaptive strategies to changing conditions of the environment.

By thinking as activists, we explore solutions and approaches beyond the conventional repertoire of technical design and planning. We look at social, economic, political, and legal strategies as well as physical and spatial inventions. We work with allies and form coalitions and partnerships. We engage with community stakeholders to co-create and develop capacity. We build on assets that already exist in place, whether in a community or an organization. We develop both short-term responses as well as long-term strategies. We prepare in advance and find political opportunities to make progress on our agenda. As design activists, we must leverage the power of design to effect change. We ask what if's rather than settling for excuses or inactions. In a true fashion as activists, we do not take no for an answer.

## Building a Heterogeneous Profession

**There are few first-generation college graduates in the profession. But in the movement world, it's people with these backgrounds leading the push.**

Billy Fleming, University of Pennsylvania.

To develop greater capacity in equity, diversity, and inclusion in landscape architecture education, one simple and effective way is to do a better job in recruiting and providing opportunities for students from underrepresented communities to enroll in our programs. We must reach out to schools, commu-

nities, and students that are historically underrepresented in our profession. Only by bringing those from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds into the profession can we begin to have the capability of understanding and addressing issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion in society. Programs can work with local schools and alumni in outreach activities, as well as offering youth programs for students of all ages to learn about landscape architecture.

But recruitment is not enough. We must also make our programs relevant to students from diverse backgrounds and particularly underserved communities. In addition, outreach and recruitment apply to the faculty rank as well. We can begin by providing more teaching opportunities to those who come from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, the students we recruit in the first place. We can extend the invitation also to those in the practice. As students and faculty from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds are often the ones who are deeply concerned about the issues and challenges of injustice, outreach and recruitment of these prospective students and faculty present an effective way to bring change to the profession and the society.

## Beyond Schools & Programs: Toward an Ecosystem for Design Activism

While actions at the program and university levels are required, leadership and support at the national level are also critical to the innovation and changes needed in landscape architecture education. There are many ways that national organizations such as ASLA, LAF, CELA, and Landscape Architecture Accreditation Board (LAAB) can do to support the actions described in this document. For ASLA, the Committee on Education (COE) can provide the leadership in setting the agenda. The ASLA award

programs can create an award category, or embed into existing ones, recognition for students, faculty, and educational programs with outstanding achievements and leadership in addressing the critical challenge of our time.

For CELA, as an organization with the mission to serve landscape architecture education and led by educators, it can provide a forum for exchange and collaboration in teaching methods and program innovation. CELA can also proactively develop guidelines for tenure and promotion that recognize socially engaged teaching and research. For LAAB that sets the accreditation standard for landscape architecture degree programs, it can reexamine the current standards to make room for engaged teaching and learning. Currently, community and client engagement is listed only under “communication and documentation” rather than “design process and methodology.”<sup>1</sup> This narrow view of engagement must change.

To provide even more coordination and leadership, there is a need for a supporting infrastructure at national and regional levels. Particularly, as an infrastructure or a network of organizations, it can serve to mobilize resources and funding to support initiatives at local, regional, and national levels. It can fundraise for resources and function as a forum or platform for sharing teaching resources and tools for engagement. It can actively work with other movement organizations to develop long-term initiatives and act on immediate issues. As an organization, it can speak on the critical challenges facing the planet and the society and add an activist voice for the profession.

## “Imagine and Invent What Has Yet to Exist”

Asked about what specific skills and knowledge in landscape architecture are relevant to activism,

Seattle activist and former Mayoral candidate Cary Moon responded: “*being asked to imagine what does not exist.*” Imagining and inventing what does not yet exist is indeed one of the most powerful skills we have as a profession as we address issues and challenges in a site, a neighborhood, a watershed, or a network of landscapes. We must bring those skills and mindset to addressing the challenges facing our own education and profession. In the face of the scale and complexity of challenges facing humanity and the planet, we need to explore methods and models that may not exist yet in the current model of education and professional practice.

**We need a new narrative for what landscape architects do...**

Barbara Deutsch, Landscape Architecture Foundation<sup>2</sup>

Looking back more than a century ago, the profession of landscape architecture was able to emerge, grow, and make great strides because we made something that did not exist at the time. Throughout the last century, the profession continued to evolve, each time creating something new and innovative. They include new types of parks and open space, new methods for planning and design, and a new understanding of the built environment and ecological processes. To invent something new, we must also revisit and examine the past fallacies and mistakes, including the legacies of displacement and injustice. Inventing something will also require collaboration and working across social, political, and disciplinary borders. It's important to recognize that those inventions in the past would not have been possible without the contribution of many others both within and outside the profession.



The issues facing the planet and society today present a new set of challenges and opportunities. They signal a call to actions for the profession to again invent something that has yet to exist. It's our responsibility now to rise to the call.

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1. The New Landscape Declaration, 202.  
2. [Accreditation Standards, First-Professional Programs in Landscape Architecture. March 2016.](#)

