



## **Oberlander Prize Forum V: RE:SEARCH**

The Cultural Landscape Foundation  
28–30 October 2026

### **Abstracts**

**WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 28**

#### ***Keynote Address***

**Mario Schjetnan, FASLA**

**Founder, GDU, Mexico City, Mexico, and 2025 Oberlander Prize Laureate**

**LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE AS CULTURE**

Landscape architecture deals with natural factors, variables, and diverse ecosystems. But also with the artificial: the distinct layers of interventions upon a territory, context, and site through time. Therefore, it deals with history. And thirdly, it is essentially a humanistic profession that serves communities and people.

The scientific, but also the infrastructural, the historical and the mythological; the symbolic and the practical or programmatic. Landscape architecture is a problem solving profession with the great potential to provide identity, pride, connection, equality, justice, beauty, and joy. Therefore, it is essentially cultural.

In 1947 the Spanish architect, historian, and polymath Fernando Chueca Goytia published his famous book *Invariantes de la Arquitectura Española*, establishing the concept of “invariants” or “constants” as profound and lasting “identity traits” in Spanish architecture. It is the foundation of a “Cultural Continuity,” with immutable traits deeply rooted in its own history, geography, and temperament.

It is a layered cultural heritage. Chueca Goytia explains that “Spanish Architecture is the result of Constant fusion between diverse traditions: the Islamic heritage, and western influence of mediterranean cultures.”

Over many years of landscape, urbanism, and architectural practice, Mr. Schjetnan has found that Goytia’s concepts are extremely relevant as a research basis to establish key elements of what Mr. Schjetnan calls “the NATURE of the project”; that is, the synthesis or essence of the many factors, conditions, and programs. The basis that drives the POIESIS of the project, with *poiesis* defined as the “creative process which would bring something new to existence.”

Furthermore, Hispanic America, and specifically Mexico, was conquered by Spaniards between 1519–1521. For three hundred years there was a thorough colonization in every aspect of life; from religion and language to city building and architecture, education, and so on. However, the Spaniards encountered a sophisticated native culture, a strong and deep religious and mythical theology; sophisticated architecture and city building; and a deep knowledge of botany, agriculture, and the arts which pervaded, sometimes overtly, sometimes surreptitiously. This has in many ways created the syncretism and fusions of Mexican culture, producing numerous “invariants,” following Goytia. One can even extend Goytia’s theory not only to architecture, landscape, and cities, but to aspects of agriculture, or anthropological or anthropological invariants of behavior in public or private spaces.

The presentation will include how the investigation of invariants has influenced the creation and basic decisions, gestures, and elements that have informed our work. Establishing cultural continuities, stories, and references with meaning and belonging.

**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 29**

***Opening Keynote: Reclaiming and Redefining our Relationship Between Research and Design through a Cultural Systems Lens***

***Panel I: RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE | Re: Discover, Re: Appraise and Re: Acknowledge***

**Moderator: Professor Elizabeth K. Meyer, FASLA**

**UVA School of Architecture Inaugural Director, UVA Morven Sustainability Lab**

The widespread insertion of research into design education is a relatively recent phenomena in the United States, dating back to the late 1990s.

Much of the design research, and accompanying research methods, that emerged in the 21st century have adopted the evidence-based quantitative and qualitative methods of the natural sciences and social sciences. This research vein is understandable in that it afforded acceptance of landscape architecture within the advanced research culture of the Agricultural Schools and Schools of Natural Resources that are home to many American landscape architecture programs.

Research that discovers and translates social and cultural histories related to a site into the design process is not as easily accommodated. The National Park Service's guidelines for Cultural Landscape Reports (CLR) have been characterized as attempting this. In doing so, CLRs often result in factual, chronological histories devoid of the *thick description* necessary to honor the multivalent and contested narratives many communities deserve and their sites warrant. In brief, a Cultural Landscape Report's authoritative format has failed designers who seek co-curation and co-creation over authority and sole expertise.

Trying to align research into the cultural aspects of landscape with calls for evidence-based research methods is out of synch with broader social challenges that have changed private practice. Many landscape architects eschew a top-down design process model and are opting for ways that allow marginalized community members to have meaningful participation that acknowledges their roles as knowledge keepers, co-creators, and curators of place. These practitioners are altering the practice of landscape architecture in varied ways. They are questioning the scientific research method's assumption of problem-solving and rational analytical methods with more open-ended, exploratory, and mixed-research methods. They are expanding the nature of evidence and the very location and form of the archive by embracing oral traditions, network analysis, and thick descriptions. They do not relegate research to a discrete component of the design process but have inserted it throughout.

Over the past decade, many firms have embraced co-authoring, acknowledging that ecosystems have been shaped by cultural practices, recognizing that future ecological processes are informed by current and former everyday spatial practices, and allowing curiosity and care to slowly build trust that opens up unexpected paths of inquiry and exploration. Our three speakers are developing such new methods and new approaches to integrating research into the design process. One is a respected and innovative academic. Two are practitioners with firms known for design excellence where the next generation is experimenting through the integration of research into the design process. From their experiences, we seek to enrich our collective appreciation of the innovations occurring within the process of design, how research is woven into and across the many phases of design, and who is included as a knowledge expert and research collaborator within the process.

**Kofi Boone, FASLA**

**Joseph D. Moore Distinguished Professor and University Faculty Scholar at North Carolina State University**

*Co-Authoring Cultural Landscape Futures*

Cultural landscape research and pedagogy sometimes prioritize transactional data collection over sustained relational engagement. Landscape architecture design studios frequently treat marginalized communities as passive sources of information rather than co-authors of their own spatial histories. To move beyond this, Mr. Boone proposes centering "Biocultural Futures"—a framework that bridges cultural competency with ecological mandates. By reframing localized community stewardship as integral to ecological health, culture-focused researchers are enabled to engage with ecological concerns and allow ecology-focused practitioners to better integrate cultural narratives, ultimately expanding the field of interest for both.

This presentation argues for a fundamental paradigm shift: moving from extractive, monument-centric practices toward reciprocal, catalytic partnerships that center cultural humility and radical trust-building. As both a researcher and educator, Mr. Boone contends that the future of the field depends on re-evaluating our ethical and pedagogical structures. This requires moving beyond traditional public input models to treat trust as the foundational infrastructure of project design.

Drawing on his work in co-authoring documentation, Mr. Boone demonstrate how to integrate these competencies into design studios. This involves restructuring curricula to cultural competency, ethics, and values, and extending engagement timelines to prioritize process over product. Ultimately, this presentation shares opportunities for a more equitable discipline—one where the research process itself acts in near term service to increased community agency, and where pedagogy prepares students to engage with the life worlds, diverse narratives, and invisible layers of memory that shape our cultural landscapes.

**Jennifer Lauer**

**Project Designer and Cultural Landscape Historian, Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects**

This presentation examines how cultural landscape-based design practice is expanding conventional historic preservation methodologies by treating living systems, community memory, and oral history as evidence alongside archival records and physical remains. It illustrates through Nelson Byrd Woltz's approach to cultural landscapes, that the predominant reliance on archives is inherently biased, and that significance and integrity cannot be defined solely through traditional categorization or even historic design intent. Utilizing real-world examples, the presentation suggests the role of landscape architect / researcher-as-facilitator within sensitive contexts—helping to bring forth and draw out layered narratives through dialogue with communities, research, walking, and engagement with the land.

This presentation ultimately asks how landscape architects can reveal buried truths, synthesize existing knowledge, and expose meaning within layered landscapes as a starting place before the design process even starts. In so doing, the firm's practice proposes a broader, more inclusive framework for historic preservation and design that values intangible heritage, builds trust around sensitive histories, and equips practitioners with stronger research and listening skills at a time when humanities-based approaches are being uniquely challenged within landscape architectural pedagogy and practice.

**Lydia Gikas Cook**  
**Senior Associate, Reed Hilderbrand**  
*Finding Closeness*

‘Research’ traditionally starts with a question—a hypothesis that will be proven or disproven through an articulated series of steps within a controlled environment. The researcher is removed and separated from the subject—a facilitator, not an actor. And when complete, it produces an answer to that question.

As designers, our works are never finished. Our subjects are complex, nuanced, and often impossible to isolate. Historical and cultural narratives and their significance are not inherently measurable. These qualities suggest that a different approach to research is required. One that is sometimes messy, often indeterminate, and always directly entangled with the designer.

Beginning with a search for questions, rather than answers, opens an opportunity for the designer to follow clues that lead to new threads of inquiry. The inherent possibility in uncovering ‘unknown unknowns’ lends itself to a process that is active, continuous, and flexible. This way of working does not suggest an aimless exercise or an absence of rigor, but rather a thoughtful, deliberate search to develop intimate knowledge of a place and people—imbued with curiosity and fueled by passion and care.

A reliance on the typical tools of documentary period plans and archival source material alone can limit our full understanding of a site. Instead, it is strengthened as our knowledge of place and people becomes further textured with clues, memories, and markers. As our vocabulary grows, so does our ability to reveal histories and relationships that may not be immediately evident, bringing new dimensions to our work. It is through this deeply personal journey of investigation and knowledge building that our connection with a place and trust with its communities are ultimately earned.

This presentation will weave together explorations of two exemplar sites: Boston’s Franklin Park and Louisiana’s Live Oak, which required the synthesis of layered histories to elevate overlooked memories and voices, uncover obscured elements of the sites’ pasts, and develop interwoven historical, cultural, and design narratives. Distinctive tools were developed as part of the process—both for the designer to aid in reading the landscape, and for the community to represent and communicate complexity and enable advocacy for the protection of a place that is dear to them. This practice of reframing suggests new lenses for how we define legacy and significance and questions from whom and what we derive meaning, ultimately shifting how we shape and manage change.

### ***Plenary Provocation I: Table Setting for DESIGN PROPOSITIONS***

**Anne Whiston Spirn, FASLA, FCELA**  
**Cecil and Ida Green Distinguished Professor of Landscape Architecture and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)**

To study landscape as ground for design demands multiple methods of research. First and foremost, it requires visual thinking. To see is the root of idea, linguistically and literally: the word “idea” comes from the Greek *idein*, to see. Vision refers not only to sight itself, but also to a vivid mental concept and an ability to conceive of “something not actually present to the eye,” to envision. “Image,” from the Latin *imago*, is the root of imagination. Visual thinking comes into play in the archives, in fieldwork, photography, mapping, participant observation, and action research, all methods of discovery that

inspire idea and imagination. To advance visual thinking in research for landscape design is imperative for both academic and professional practice.

### ***Plenary Provocation II: REALIZING THE WORK***

**Walter J. Hood**

**Creative Director and Founder, Hood Design Studio, and Professor Emeritus of Landscape Architecture & Environmental Planning and Urban Design at the University of California, Berkeley**  
*Joy + Pain – Audacious Acts in Underdeveloped Landscapes*

American landscapes are never neutral. They carry overlapping histories of belonging and exclusion, prosperity and underdevelopment, official narratives and community memory. Beginning with Toni Morrison's account of "Doctor Street" in *Song of Solomon*, this lecture examines how communities reinterpret and reclaim landscapes whose official meanings deny or obscure their presence. Such places are hybrid landscapes—not simply mixtures of cultural traditions, but spaces in which conflicting social meanings coexist.

The lecture explores the hybrid American landscape through the concepts of double consciousness, double logic, and double semiotics. Drawing from W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Frederick Law Olmsted, and contemporary landscape theory, it considers how parks, streets, walls, highways, monuments, and neighborhoods can appear open and democratic while simultaneously reinforcing racial separation, hierarchy, and erasure.

These ideas are connected to several contemporary projects that engage histories of displacement, cultural memory, and spatial exclusion. First, the transformation of San Juan Hill into Lincoln Center, where the displacement of African American, Afro-Caribbean, and Puerto Rican communities produced lasting spatial divisions between elite cultural institutions and adjacent public housing. The lecture will also consider Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing Park in Jacksonville's historic LaVilla neighborhood, which reclaims a landscape shaped by displacement and erasure, honoring James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson while creating a civic space where the community's cultural history can support new gatherings, celebrations, and collective memories. And lastly, in Miami's historic Overtown neighborhood, the transformation of Ninth Street will be discussed as an example of how public space can draw upon cultural history to reconnect communities, strengthen local identity, and support gathering, performance, and everyday life.

By removing defensive barriers, restoring connections to the surrounding neighborhood, and introducing commemorative, civic, and ecological spaces, the project proposes a more hybrid public landscape. The lecture asks how design can reveal suppressed histories, challenge inherited systems of exclusion, and create spaces where differences become visible, shared, and generative.

### ***Panel II: GROUNDING RESEARCH | Re: Design, Re: New, and Re: Activate***

**Moderator: Eric Kramer, FASLA**

**Principal, Reed Hilderbrand**

*Curiosity begets research.*

*Research builds knowledge.*

*And knowledge empowers design to change the world.*

If design is a process of editing our environment—what to keep and what to remove, what to play down and what to emphasize—then all designers are historians, actively shaping the way we and future generations understand the past. This role imparts a responsibility for designers to learn the tools of the historian and to recognize that, while cultural research is often considered an instrument of preservation, it is actually a powerful tool for facilitating realignment and transformation. The question is: what direction will we take?

From the relocation and reconstruction of Roberto Burle Marx's Cascade Garden at Longwood Gardens to a visitor experience and interpretation plan for the Alamo in San Antonio, Texas, Reed Hilderbrand has seen the promise and the risk of taking an active role in interpreting and re-representing the past. Inspired and informed by these experiences, we strive to ask harder questions about why and how we read history, analyze cultural narratives, and interrogate the truth. This panel engages three leading practices in a conversation about the why and the how of research-based design and design-based research—where research grounds design and design is a mode of continued research. We will interrogate how research becomes a mode of activism, one that bridges the personal and the political.

The personal: The way designers gain knowledge—the kind that is accrued over a lifetime and the kind that is gathered through specific investigations for each project—is deeply personal and heavily influenced by the cultures we inhabit. How do we come to know places? How do we interpret places and communities that are not our own without appropriating knowledge? How do we balance the values we hold dear and a healthy skepticism of assumption, making room for revelation and for transformation?

The political: What do we do with the knowledge we gain through research? Do we use it to reinforce patterns of place and memory? Do we uncover and reveal conditions that have been lost or intentionally erased? Do we resist dominant forces in ways that open opportunities for alternative narratives and communities to hold space? And how do we avoid the trap of the perceived objectivity of research, never letting the position of the author go unnoticed?

If scientific research is about bringing singular replicable answers to complex questions, the research we do is about visualizing the complexity of the world in which we work in order to find a place to act. To step into this stew of ideas and influences, the work of the landscape architect engages the poetic as much as the mechanical, the expressive as much as the documentary.

**Nina Chase, PLA, ASLA, and Chris Merritt, PLA, ASLA**  
**Founding Principals, Merritt Chase**

*Unlike Anywhere Else: Landscape Research Through Local Practice*

In 1999, on the Allegheny River in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, author David McCullough issued a call to his fellow Pittsburghers: "...don't make it like other places, because Pittsburgh was never, ever like other places...preserve a sense that this story is unlike anything else..."

Landscape architects Nina Chase and Chris Merritt, Founding Principals of Merritt Chase, will echo McCullough's place-based call by examining the role of research throughout their design process and its importance in preserving, protecting, and elevating the landscapes of their home region: Middle America. Based in Pittsburgh and Indianapolis, respectively, Nina and Chris will reflect on how research supports their commitment to designing places through dedicated time, local relationships, and storytelling.

For Merritt Chase, research is both a method of design and a way of committing to being a regionally focused practice. Research is how the studio uncovers the identity of a landscape and community, revealing the stories, relationships, and layered histories that give a place meaning. This work may include archival research, but it also happens through field visits, design iteration, local relationships, and time spent in the landscape itself. A commitment to place extends beyond the duration of a project, recognizing that living landscapes grow, evolve, and change. In this sense, managing a landscape, returning to it, and learning from it over time become forms of research. Ultimately, research is not separate from design; it is the process behind good design.

Project examples will include a former farmstead in Indianapolis, a downtown riverfront park in Cleveland, the iconic Miller Garden in Columbus, Indiana, a temporary park in the heart of downtown Indianapolis, and Pittsburgh's Point State Park. Together, these projects demonstrate how research can help ensure that public spaces remain deeply rooted in place—and unlike anywhere else.

**Ross Altheimer, PLA, FAAR, and Maura Rockcastle, PLA**  
**Principals and Co-Founders, TEN x TEN**

*Counter-Practice: Design Research as Resistance*

The idea of counter-practice offers a framework for advancing landscape research by exposing silenced histories and taking deliberate action through design. Drawing on concepts of counter-memory, counter-mapping, and counter-landscapes, TEN x TEN positions design research as a critical tool to challenge dominant ways of knowing, expand possibilities for action, and reframe established narratives of place. Through four projects—Historic Fort Snelling at Bdote, the Philando Castile Community Peace Garden, the Louise B. Miller Pathways and Gardens Memorial, and the exhibition *Human Tolls: Building a Public History of a Community Divided by I-35W*—this presentation will examine how research and design methodologies reconcile erased histories, elevate community knowledge, and interrogate inherited systems of value.

In these projects, research informs design not by creating new forms, but by establishing frameworks that acknowledge and expose multiple histories and invert present conditions. Rooted in traditions of activist practice, Foucault's concept of counter-memory, and Roberto Burle Marx's assertion that landscape-making is both an ethical and an aesthetic act, this presentation considers how design research itself functions as a form of resistance. Counter-practice offers a mode of interrogating design opportunities that synthesize objective and subjective inquiry, strengthen relationships between communities and place, and reconsider how landscape significance is defined and by whom.

TEN X TEN believes that design research is most powerful when it operates as a counter-act: questioning accepted truths, broadening participation in knowledge production, and creating conditions for more equitable, culturally resonant, and inclusive futures.

**Marc Hallé, MLA, B. Civ.Eng., FCSLA, OALA, AALA**  
**Co-President and Partner, CCxA**

*The G Spot*

The guiding light of CCxA's landscape practice radiates from the values of the Garden. These values are not necessarily about plants; rather they are principles of desire communicated through the physical

and chemical language of bodies. This is a place where pleasure and desire are not dissolute pursuits. They may just be what propels the vital momentum to sprout and grow, bloom and fruit.

Desire is at the heart of the practice founded by Claude Cormier. It is anchored in an approach that considers the difference between what we want and what we think we want. The visceral intelligence of the body is so much at the heart of this approach—understanding that thoughts could not exist without feelings, and feelings would not exist without the body. This visceral approach seeks to uncover the cosmic triangulation of desire as a common denominator in the public experience.

There is an abundance of qualitative and quantitative research that informs how objects, systems, and spatial arrangements can optimize the well-being and connection between people and their surroundings. In the pursuit of perfect understanding, however, what has happened to the ‘leap of faith’? Here, the garden can teach about the limits of rational speculation. What compels the gardener to trim one branch over another, or trellis this tendril here instead of that one there? This is where gardener becomes artist, with a toolbox of research methods shared by other creatives to gather useful insights for crafting stories, songs, paintings, cinema, dance, or landscape. This is also where the eyes behind the microscope need to be calibrated through a cultivation of subjectivity. We are the same species as the subjects of our research, sharing a narrow and consistent biochemical spectrum of environmental response. How does a tuned intuition and informed judgment become an essential tool of investigation to curate an infinity of inputs and contradictions into a plausible narrative?

The marketing of desire perceived as a French birthright helped leverage Claude’s ‘je ne sais quoi’ as a trojan horse that could surprisingly transform cortisol into dopamine, fear of the unknown into excitement for possibilities. This is something learned from the experimental garden, the origin of CCxA’s practice. How can the alchemy of the garden, where fictions are transformed into reality, bring relief to an overthinking mind by making place to connect with the language of the body? The garden has always been a place of speculation.