



## Oberlander Prize Forum II: Landscape Activism

The Cultural Landscape Foundation

28 October 2022

### Abstracts

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Jane Edmonds

Founding Partner, Jane's Way

#### *Keynote Address*

Lifetime Civil Rights icon and activist Jane C. Edmonds cites Boston educator, community organizer, and activist Mel King as one who set the paradigm for place-based activism, perhaps most notably in his iconic 1968 Tent City, erected in Boston's Copley Square to pressure the City to provide housing, access, and opportunity otherwise denied to its Black and Brown citizens. His vision of utilizing space to draw attention to and correct spatial inequities and harms remains a beacon for landscape activists in our current moment.

Building on this and other cases, Jane will physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually ground and convene the group in the deep structure of authentic allyship for the work at hand: imagining, designing, and building landscape as activist practice. Her mantra "Power of the We" will reverberate as she shares histories, ideas, and stories that conjure the joyous possibility and power of collective action for collective good, even in the face of the worst kinds of harm.

Tracing a lineage of landscape activism through the key figures of Frederick Law Olmsted, Cornelia Oberlander, and the inaugural Oberlander Prize recipient, Julie Bargmann, Jane will argue that a defining shared characteristic is their extraordinary attention to the impacts of contexts upon design, and their insistence that landscape design can—must!—contribute to mitigating them. For Olmsted, "the times" included slavery, westward expansion, urban development. Remarkably, he significantly contributed to abolishing the former while making the latter more equitable, accessible, and humane. Cornelia Oberlander's legacy reminds us that "the longing for nature is built into our genes," surely the rationale for ensuring access to green spaces for all people (BIPOC are currently three times more likely to live in a "nature-deprived space" and 70% of low-income communities lack access to green space). Oberlander spent her career not only designing memorable places and landmarks, but also insisting that landscape design take up the challenge of scientifically informed approaches to climate change in method and form. And Julie Bargmann's vision of first seeing and seeing the value in spaces marked wasted, toxic, contaminated, unusable mirrors the current imperative to overcome wasted old hierarchies in order to recognize, value, and address in our design thinking and practice every human, every group, especially those who have been marginalized within our longtime status quo.

Jane will describe the evolution in landscape activism from those earlier, targeted justice claims to our current—far more expansive—mandate: to mobilize landscape design for the purpose of activating a sense of equity and belonging, connected to place and place-making, for all people. This mandate requires both courageous review of Landscape Architecture's history as a field, and critical attention to the violent yet oft-denied intersection of environmental and racial injustice in our physical spaces of habitation. It means facing with courage and conviction that which we are afraid to face, that which we try to deny, lest the inevitable return of the repressed—already well underway environmentally and

socially—annihilate our collective futures. The example of Live Oak, a former plantation purchased by Trahan Architects for the purpose of restoration and transformation into a site of Truth, Witness, Justice, perfectly illustrates an ethical embrace of this mandate.

### **Panel 1: Design as Activism**

#### **Chelina Odbert**

CEO and Founding Principal, Kounkuey Design Initiative

This presentation explores the ways in which landscape architecture has a critical but often overlooked role in shaping inclusion, justice, and equity across the public realm.

Because it engages in the intersections of environmental and urban systems, the discipline of landscape architecture is well equipped to address inequity, injustice, and challenges to inclusivity. The practice of landscape architecture, however, is not. Relying on an outdated framework that pairs a paying client with a licensed design professional, the prevailing business model works within a system that perpetuates injustice by responding to those priorities set forth by those with access to capital.

At Kounkuey Design Initiative, we practice differently. Rather than responding to briefs, we identify challenges—particularly those that lie at the intersection of climate change and social equity—and we assemble the teams and processes to plan, design, and deliver projects. At the very center of this model are the community members who become substantive and sustained collaborators throughout the process.

The discussion will include a consideration of several flagship initiatives, including the Kibera Public Space Project (an ongoing 15-year endeavor that has introduced and expanded public space access throughout an informal settlement in Nairobi) and the Eastern Coachella Valley Initiative (an ongoing 10-year project that has equitably introduced public space, housing, transportation, and environmental remediation in a region of California that has long been overlooked by the design and planning professions).

#### **Maura Rockcastle, ASLA**

Principal and Co-Founder, TEN x TEN

#### *SIGHT / SITE*

As the field of landscape architecture evolves to combat the issues of our time - climate change and just futures - **how** we practice matters. Through design research, experimental methods of design process and ideation, and provocative questioning, TEN x TEN challenges the normative environment of professional practice through process-oriented ways of working, engaging, and *seeing* landscape. Our agency as landscape architects to address the issues of our time is grounded in part by our ability to challenge the critical foundation of the design process itself and to practice modes of discovery as a generative act.

Processes of exploration that reveal a tension between what we thought we knew (about a place, the context, the politics, the past, the truth) and what might be discovered, create potential for innovation and imagination. Exploration for the purpose of discovery offers time and space to create a feedback

loop between us and a place; between future potential and the conditions of the site itself. Committing to an unfixed and open-ended process of discovery requires that we choose to practice observing, documenting, and translating as a critical *way of seeing*. The act of exploring, ground truthing and observing helps us continue to see landscape as a cultural and dynamic medium; to understand what it does and how it works.

The very premise of our work as designers and planners is entangled in capitalism and colonialism; systems of oppression that are woven deep within the fabric of the places, the communities, and civic structures from which we practice. Through running a transparent, values-driven, and process-oriented practice inspired by horizontality and the power of many voices, TEN x TEN strives towards a model of practice that thrives on trust, abundance, and generosity.

We are motivated by optimism that design can help support and propel positive change by leveraging landscape as a medium through which communities can heal. Looking around ourselves, especially over the last few years, we are surrounded by micro and macro movements demanding radical change. What are some of the important questions we should be asking as landscape practices working in this time?

Where is the power?

How do we continue to adapt?

What does our motivation for change look like and how is it challenging the design field?

### **Sierra Bainbridge, RLA**

Senior Principal and Managing Director, MASS Design Group

I first learned about the process of accompaniment from my late mentor Dr. Paul Farmer, which in his words meant “I’ll go with you and support you on your journey wherever it leads. I’ll keep you company and share your fate for a while. And by “a while,” I don’t mean a little while. Accompaniment is much more often about sticking with a task until it’s deemed completed by the person or people being accompanied, rather than by the accompagnateur.” Dr. Farmer’s approach is an activist practice and is how I continue to aspire to guide our work as an office.

This understanding of accompaniment centers the process on the needs of our partners, as opposed to the demands of a typical project schedule. We start early and we stay a long time. Our nonprofit structure helps us to fill in the gaps where contracts aren’t built to cover work that falls outside the typical contract. Accompaniment also requires proximity. It is most effective when we can show up and stay close. Often this means we take on multiple projects within a community or in a geography that might move the needle and begin to make measurable structural change whether shifting an economy, influencing healthcare policy, creating an entire ecosystem around design decisions that keeps future people and all species in mind, or making a memorial that marks our process of reconciliation nationally.

This way of working has helped me to, at the very least, focus on minimizing harm, and at best, create the potential for healing through design. For our practice right now, most of our projects are about truth telling. In the work of the memorials Lab in particular, landscape is our ally. The landscape is our most honest and unrelenting keeper of our mutual histories, whether logged in seasons, generations, or millenia. Without learning to read these embedded histories, they remain hidden, keeping sometimes revelatory, and sometimes terrible secrets. If we begin to observe and uncover these histories whether geologic, ecologic, or human, we can use this record to hold ourselves accountable to our shared future.

When we combine accompaniment of a community to support their truth telling, landscape design has the opportunity to be a healing tool.

## **Panel 2: New Knowledge Creators, NGOs, Entrepreneurs**

### **Naomi Davis**

Founder/President of BIG! Blacks in Green™

I learned the hard way to embrace Creation: from a life of **duty** weeding and watering in my mother's gorgeous New York City gardens...decades later in a tiny Carolina country town where loneliness drove me into the woods for **solace** which I'd accidentally and always find...and decades later again when my memory circled me back to the wild childhood **wisdom** that originally drove me into the woods ~ for joy and wonder at the secret residents of streams, stones, and stands of trees.

I am Naomi Davis, and I come from 'white gloves and mud' – the proud granddaughter of Mississippi sharecroppers who like 7 million others voted with their feet and moved 'upsouth' for freedom and economic opportunity. Granny and Grandpa were master farmers: everything they ate, they grew; everything they wore, they made. Pappa was known for his starched blue white shirts, Granny for her gloves. They lived 13 miles as the crow flies from where Emmett Till was murdered, in Minter City, the tiny burg where one of his killers was later found hiding.

Today I live at the intersection of environment, economy, and equity, in a "sustainable square mile" where neighbors are reinventing the conservation lifestyle – "the beautiful life" – as taught to me by my mom and dad, who gave birth to me the day before Emmett died, in this new place where I have settled to live, work, and age in place – the West Woodlawn Botanic Garden, Village Farm & Arboretum -- where Emmett's childhood home is the epicenter of our work in Black community economic development.

Today G-O-D, or **Garden Oriented Development** is the outcome of the wandering which pulled me from my roots to this unnatural other country, where blighted spaces are good enough for descendants of The Great Migration.

I founded BIG! Blacks in Green™ here on the south side of Chicago, at the southernmost tip of the Blackbelt of the Black Metropolis of Bronzeville USA, in the paradoxically emerging Obama Presidential District. BIG™ was born to redeploy that duty and solace and wisdom of my childhood love of land...to harness the new green economy in my neighborhood...to reinvent the bygone "communeconomy" of my childhood era here in the Age of Climate Crisis...to use it all to restore our place in this world.

Our green infrastructure programs cultivate commercial corridors, family properties, open spaces, green careers and enterprises, and the natural capital that quietly blesses us every day all around us. We imagine and implement gardens of all kinds – backyard and bioswales, church and school, community and commercial, indoor and outdoor. We foster an enthusiasm and skill in neighbors for growing food independence and neighborhood beauty; to create jobs and related businesses, and to manage ever-increasing stormwater and other challenges of the climate crisis on our ecosystems. We will be America's first square-mile, neighborhood-based horticultural touring and teaching Botanic Garden and certified Arboretum.

Through G-O-D we draw down inspiration from our African American traditions of land stewardship inherited by this Great Migration neighborhood. We are making famous a place where neighbors are critical activists, and we look forward to the fruition of our walk-to-work, walk-to-shop, walk-to-learn, walk-to-play village, blazing with blooms and cooled by canopy where all are drawn to the common enjoyment of forgiveness, cooperation, and justice!

**Lee Pivnik**

Founder, Institute of Queer Ecology

Queer Ecology is a theoretical framework that applies queer theory to environmental concerns, ecological constructs, and our relationships with nature. Queerness and ecology together make visible the interconnected, entangled conditions of life on earth and honour the strange, multispecies amalgamation we live in community with. Guided by this framework, the Institute of Queer Ecology (IQECO) was founded in Providence, Rhode Island (US) in 2017, and has since grown into an online distributed platform that produces interdisciplinary programming, workshops, and artworks.

This lecture will focus on IQECO's recent digital work, "H.O.R.I.Z.O.N. (Habitat One: Regenerative Interactive Zone of Nurture)" —a downloadable, participatory, networked artwork taking the form of a social simulation game inspired by the ethos of intentional communities and queer communes. The project emerged from a collaborative investigation of three principle questions. What does queer geography look like in relation to the countryside? What could a *digital commune* look like? How do you translate the experience of queer communes —the experience of being closer to each other, and closer to nature— to an audience that's indoors and home-alone, separated by screens? Answering those questions required a deep dive into the design and history of rural communities that are designed by and for LGBTQIA+ identifying people. We'll discuss two such case studies —Lavender Hill (NY), and Salmon Creek Farm (CA)— that inspired the functionality of *H.O.R.I.Z.O.N.*, as well as a general overview of the Institute of Queer Ecology, and how queer theory can encourage mutualistic design.

**Robin Little Wing Sigo and Dakota Keene;**

"Indigenous-Centered Perspectives in Landscape Architecture"

In a prerecorded presentation, Robin Little Wing Sigo and Dakota Keene will discuss concepts of landscape in the context of living culture; place-based interpretation and programming; activism; and the radical act of building trust. Robin and Dakota have worked together on projects including the House of Awakened Culture expansion project and the ongoing Suquamish Village Vision on Suquamish Ancestral Lands along the shores of the Salish Sea in the Pacific Northwest. Intersections between sacred landscapes, art, and anti-racism will be explored in conversation and filmed on-location.

**Panel 3: Reshaping Practice**

**Marc Miller, ASLA**

President, Black Landscape Architects Network

*BlackLAN- Building a Network for the Future*

The Black Landscape Architects Network (BlackLAN) organization stands on the shoulders of the many Black landscape architects who strove for broader representation of Black professionals in the 1970's through to the present. In 2010 at a gathering of Black Landscape architecture students and professionals at Howard University to discuss the state of the profession for Black Landscape topics such as increasing Black student representation and retention, support for Black designers, and issues of bias in the workplace. This summit sparked the establishment of the BlackLAN LinkedIn social media platform in 2012. In 2020 the organization officially became a nonprofit organization, shortly after the murder of George Floyd.

BlackLAN works with the ASLA and other allied organizations to build productive joint initiatives that benefit Black students and professionals. Supported by the three pillars of the strategic plan, the organization focuses on:

- supporting the education of black landscape architecture students,
- building a community of black landscape architects,
- and increasing the impact of Black Landscape Architects through service and other outward-looking activities.

Since the formulation of the network in 2012, BlackLAN has grown to over 200 members internationally. This presentation will focus on how we are presently looking forward, while recognizing the past.

### **April De Simone**

Designing For Democracy

#### *The Spatial Practice of Democracy*

Architecture inscribes human value to space and place. A sense of worth, connection, and identity is defined through an interface with our spatial, psychological, and social surroundings. Upon a closer examination, architecture and the culture that has inculcated it exposes fractured processes, reinforcing undemocratic values which are revealed in numerous social and spatial complexities found in the built environment. Through an interrogation of the invisible relationship between architecture and the manifestations of systemic conditions bearing inequity, we can guide an evaluation of how systems of architecture not only spatialize inequity, but the spatialization itself becomes a spectacle of othering. Within this contextualized approach, we can develop new pedagogies, processes, and forms of practice centered on spatializing more equitable, humane, and just stewardship of the built environment. Systemic challenges today, like inequities in health, housing, education, income, and justice are far from separate issues. These challenges are rooted in deep and entangled social and spatial complexities perpetuated by legacies of dehumanization and inequity manifested in practices like Eugenics, policies like Redlining, urban renewal, restrictive deeds, and uneven investments. The disparate impact of past to present experiences continue to inform and shape how each of us experiences the built environment. Gone unanswered are fundamental questions interrogating social and spatial dynamics: how did we get here, and what does that mean for where we are going? This is especially relevant as our current moment yet again provokes thought, questions, and dialogue around the ways our policies, practices, and investments not only accentuate divisions and systemic inequities but impede the full potential of democracy. This session engages participants in the co-generation of knowledge, critical insights, and frameworks centered on advancing spatial healing, equity, and justice. Through an exploration of historical and current contextualization and themed frameworks like systems thinking and the

determinants of health, participants engage in a transdisciplinary understanding of the interconnectedness of the built and planned environment shaping and challenging daily life.

**Danielle Toronyi**

Research Development and Knowledge Manager, OLIN

**Max Dickson**

Landscape Designer, OLIN

*PrideScapes + Design for Neurodivergence: Emergent Research Initiatives at OLIN*

Join Max and Danielle in conversation, as they discuss finding community at OLIN and how the supportive framework of OLIN Labs facilitated their emergent research projects, *PrideScapes and Design for Neurodivergence*.

Danielle will discuss discovering others at OLIN also working to improve access and inclusion of disabled people in public life. The *Revisiting Universal Design* initiative identifies commonalities and differences in access needs across disabled communities, and invites designers to trust disabled people as experts in their lived experience.

*Design for Neurodivergences* Danielle's emergent research into Neurodivergent ways of hearing and sensing the city. The sonic landscape is often cacophonous, complex, and unpredictable – sometimes inaccessible to Neurodivergent people who struggle to integrate and perceive sound. Danielle will share her mixed-methods research proposal that includes embodied ethnographic collaboration between researchers and participants. Exciting outcomes have included advising on the ASLA's Universal Design Guide.

This experience pursuing emergent research helped Danielle advocate for Max's interest in LGBTQ+ landscapes, histories, and memorials to be supported through *PrideScapes*.

Visibility, research and discussion of LGBTQ+ spaces and people within the field of landscape architecture has largely been missing from the profession's dominant narratives. Recognizing the crucial importance of telling these missing stories, Max launched *PrideScapes* in 2021. This research and advocacy initiative seeks to expand understanding of LGBTQ+ landscapes, histories, and futures while creating space within the profession for LGBTQ+ landscape designers and architects to advocate, share work, and support one another. To date, the initiative has engaged professionals both locally and nationally.

In this panel, Max and Danielle will focus on discovering common ground through a shared intersectional social-justice commitment and ways to build and support community with fellow designers. Through authentic collaboration Max and Danielle continue to advocate for their community members who are often powerless in shaping public space.