

Onward – Landscape Architecture Leaders Contemplate the Year Ahead

Live webinar 01/14/21 at 3pm ET

Conversation Summary

Off the heels of a year unlike any other, panelists offered thoughts on the state of design practice and education, pressing issues, emerging opportunities, and the evolving nature of what landscape architects do and how they do it. Summary* of their conversation below:

Key takeaways from 2020...

Sierra Bainbridge: The surfacing of divisions within the US has been difficult, but design can be a powerful tool for peace and reconciliation. Landscape, in particular, can create space to make things that have been hidden more visible, especially in commemoration, memorialization, and storytelling.

Alexa Bush: The role of public space (parks, streets, etc.) in general health has become clear for broader audiences. Much of the vulnerability people have felt during the pandemic has a lot to do with the built environment in terms of transit, outdoor space to recreate, etc. How does public space relate to the health and social infrastructure that we're hoping to rebuild as a country?

Po Chen: This is an opportunity to confront and reassess US values. In that context, the outdoor environment has never been more vital to keeping us connected, happy, healthy, and inspiring hope. The physical world has changed dramatically. This has created opportunities for the profession to merge the work, home, community, and self domains in a radical way.

Diane Jones Allen: As devastating as events of 2020 were, they've catapulted the profession into action and demonstrated the intersection between economic, social, cultural, and environmental factors. To be effective we have to tackle them all simultaneously and not work in silos within the profession.

On lessons learned...

Alexa Bush: What does more equitable development look like? It's easy to think about inequity in terms of policy (segregation, banking, zoning) but the results of practices that may have been addressed on paper still live on in the built environment. It's up to landscape architects and other professionals who touch the built environment to address lack of access, where we choose to invest, and quality of design for all citizens.

Diane Jones Allen: Academia has become a lot more flexible and agile, and we should take that forward – not just in teaching and delivery but also pedagogy and content. Let students have more of a say in shaping all aspects of their education. That lesson carries over into practice as well.

Po Chen: In lieu of traditional office spaces and cubicles, remote work has made it possible to reach wider audiences and interface with clients and customers in a more meaningful way. When we go back to offices, we'll go back in a different way with new opportunities to think differently.

Sierra Bainbridge: Virtual areas can be isolating in some sense, but can also be very intimate and open up conversations that can or have been traditionally more difficult in public groups or larger arenas. We're finding new ways to build trust and learn from one another even in this environment.

On changes ahead for the discipline...

Diane Jones Allen: Awareness from the public realm, the policy and development, and government communities. There's been a misconception about what landscape architects do for some time. With growing awareness from other industries, landscape architects can really step up to the challenge.

Sierra Bainbridge: Outdoor space around schools have transformed from simply a landscape that skirts a building to something that's being utilized to the fullest. There are things you can do outside much better than inside, and being forced to do so has underlined that relationship for more people and demonstrated the capabilities of landscape.

Po Chen: There's still a lot of stratification in the profession, from design to construction to engineering to maintenance. As projects become more complex, integrating all those elements will make us a stronger profession. Especially as we work towards diversity, equity, and inclusion, reaching larger numbers of people in the profession presents the ability to create a real cultural shift.

Alexa Bush: This panel demonstrates that there are many ways to practice. I would love to see people take the urgency of this moment to approach the practice in a more expansive way that gives us a different seat at the table to tackle things like the impact of climate change, issues of equity, and the role of design in this.

Cause for hope...

Sierra Bainbridge: The pandemic has shown that if we perceive a threat tangibly, we can change very quickly and fix the problems we've created. These times provide a real soft spot for policy change and give us pause to consider how we might actually do things differently

Po Chen: Invention is born out of chaos. 2020 cracked the egg, and 2021 will be when we figure out what to do with it. Future generations will design in a way that takes the full lifecycle into account.

Alexa Bush: We can't fix centuries-long challenges until we bring them out into the open. The conversations happening now are doing that and I'm excited to build something new rather than go back to the way things were before.

Diane Jones Allen: Landscape architecture gives me hope. It has to potential to address economic, social, and environmental injustices and produce a more sustainable model of being.

**Panelist responses are summarized and paraphrased by LAF staff for informational purposes only. The text herein should not be directly attributed to any speaker. Please review video footage for exact quotes and an additional audience Q+A session.*