

Putting People at the Center: Reframing Landscape Architecture for Maximum Impact

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**FRAME
WORKS**

In partnership with: American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), Council of Landscape Architectural Registration Boards (CLARB), Landscape Architecture Foundation (LAF), Landscape Architectural Accreditation Board (LAAB), and the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture (CELA).

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Introduction

Landscape architecture has cross-cutting benefits for society. Good design of outdoor spaces promotes positive physical and mental health, fosters civic interaction and brings together communities, helps us achieve environmental sustainability and adapt to climate change, and benefits communities economically by enhancing commercial activity and lowering costs. Yet (a) landscape architects are frequently excluded from key projects or brought in only at the end for ornamental purposes, (b) several states have introduced or passed legislation to end licensure requirements, (c) university programs in landscape architecture are being cut or threatened, and (d) many of the programs that remain are having difficulty attracting students.¹

These problems, and the general devaluing of the profession that they reflect, stem from fundamental misunderstandings of landscape architecture among members of the public, including those serving on state legislatures. The unfortunate reality is that most people are largely unfamiliar with landscape architecture. And when people guess about what landscape architects do, the term “landscape” leads them to assume that the profession involves ornamental design with plants and object placement, rather than recognizing that it requires cross-disciplinary expertise in environmental and social sciences, engineering, art, and design.

To build public understanding of the profession and its value, we need a public conversation that brings into view what landscape architects do, how they do it, and why this matters for all of us. In this brief, we outline a specific framing strategy—a way of talking about landscape architecture—that can help people recognize its importance. By focusing on the **big idea** that “landscape architecture engages and benefits people,” communicators can overcome the core misunderstandings people have about landscape architecture, build better understanding of what the profession entails, and help people see the importance of supporting the profession and placing landscape architects at the center of projects that involve outdoor spaces.

This framing strategy is the result of a two-year deep-dive research project undertaken in partnership with major organizations in the field: American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), Council of Landscape Architectural Registration Boards (CLARB), Landscape Architecture Foundation (LAF), Landscape Architectural Accreditation Board (LAAB), and the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture (CELA). In this brief, we detail the overarching strategy—or big idea—described above and provide a set of specific recommendations for communicators to implement it in their work. The brief builds upon an earlier report exploring the public’s existing understanding of landscape architecture,² and is accompanied by a supplement that summarizes the research methods used in the project and describes the evidence behind each of the recommendations presented in this brief.

The Big Idea: Landscape Architecture Is Critical Work by People, For People

The public generally struggles to understand who landscape architects are and what they do. Confused about the name of the discipline, they often assume that it refers to fancy landscapers or gardeners. This makes it difficult for most people to see that professionals in the discipline can contribute to society in essential ways due to their cross-cutting expertise and skills.

Landscape architects tend to talk about their profession in one of two ways: They either rely on the principles of design to explain what they do, or they emphasize the benefits to the environment to explain impact. Our research indicates that both of these approaches will fail to achieve their goals among members of the US public. Focusing on design to explain what landscape architects do can lead to more misunderstanding than clarity, because most people are unsure or unaware of what design entails in practice. As for communications that put the spotlight on the environmental benefits of landscape architecture, they tend to be less effective than communications focusing on landscape architecture’s benefits to people.

This is why communicators need to shift the conversation about landscape architecture from *design for the environment to people working to benefit people*. This means effecting two key framing shifts in future communications:

1. ***From design to people with skills:*** Help people understand what landscape architecture is by helping people understand the profile of the people involved—the skills they have and the work they do. Don’t rely on the abstract concept of *design*, but rather spotlight the people doing the work and the skills they possess.
2. ***From benefits to the environment to benefits to people and the environment:*** Help audiences see that landscape architecture benefits people and communities first; segue into benefits to the environment after.

Taken together, these framing shifts have proven highly effective in building understanding for who landscape architects are, what they do, and how they contribute to society.

Below, we outline specific recommendations that communicators can follow to put this big idea—that *landscape architecture is work by people, for people*—into practice. These recommendations explain what it means to place people front and center in discussions of landscape architecture by leveraging people’s mental images of architects and architecture—a discipline that’s more familiar for many, appealing to the value of *community cohesion*, and carefully choosing examples and images. Each of the following recommendations includes one or two illustrative examples of how it can be used.

The Coronavirus Pandemic Has Not Fundamentally Shifted Thinking Around Landscape Architecture

While the pandemic does not seem to have changed people’s dominant views and beliefs about landscape architecture, design, and the great outdoors, lockdowns and safety measures have shed a new light on public spaces for many.

People’s fundamental beliefs about landscape architecture and related issues have stayed fairly stable over time. The public still thinks of design of outdoor spaces mainly in terms of convenience—they assume that the primary goal of outdoor spaces is ease of use. They still mainly understand this design as the selection of tangible features and visible objects, like trees, plants, benches, or playgrounds. They still often assume that landscape architects are creative professionals whose primary purpose is to design visually appealing, unique landscapes. Finally, the public still firmly believes that nature and humans exist in opposition to one another—they see nature as anything that has not been made by humans, like plants, animals, deserts, and forests.

But lockdowns and safety measures have led many people to see public spaces and landscape architects’ role in shaping them in a new light. As access to indoor spaces became limited and people had to increasingly rely on outdoor public spaces in the spring of 2020, it often became easier for interview participants to see the importance of landscape architects now and especially in the future.

On the other hand, a year into the pandemic—by the summer of 2021—as outdoor spaces were embraced as safer than indoor spaces and a primary way to socialize, we also saw more discussions in focus groups of privately owned outdoor spaces that revolved around consumption (e.g., outdoor seating at restaurant patios, Disneyland, and golf

courses). This thinking has the potential to cue unproductive thinking about ease of use, aesthetics, and object placement, because privately owned spaces are often focused on being visually appealing, useful, and well curated spaces.

Key Takeaways for the Field:

1. This framing strategy will have longevity, because the fundamentals of public thinking around landscape architecture have not changed on a deeper level. It still addresses the core unproductive mindsets that are cued when people think of landscape architecture, design, and the outdoors.
2. The pandemic has had mixed effects on thinking about landscape architecture: There is a need to be strategic to leverage the opening it has provided for the public to see the importance of outdoor spaces while avoiding consumerist thinking around privately owned spaces.

Recommendation #1: Lead with how landscape architecture benefits people.

What to do

Make people the central protagonists in the story of landscape architecture. Explain how landscape architecture directly benefits people and the communities in which they live. Identify the many ways in which landscape architects improve and enrich people's lives. Talk about how:

1. Outdoor spaces designed by landscape architects support people's physical and mental health and wellbeing because they have been intentionally created to foster social connections and encourage movement.
2. When neighborhoods have outdoor spaces that make it easy to get together, community ties get stronger and people become more engaged in civic life and politics.
3. Spaces that have been created with a variety of different needs in mind are typically more accessible for specific populations, like children or individuals with disabilities, which helps them directly and makes communities more inclusive.

Focus on the benefits to quality of life and community ties rather than on economic benefits, which are less compelling to people and less effective in convincing them of the importance of landscape architecture.

When touching on environmental benefits, lead with their impact on human beings. For example, when talking about climate change, foreground benefits like flood protection and reducing extreme heat to ensure that people can see tangible benefits for themselves and their communities. Absent these direct connections, climate will likely bring to mind polar bears and icebergs, and talk of “environmental benefits” will seem abstract and removed from lived experience.

How to do it

Lead with benefits to humans to maximize the impact of your communications on members of the public. Whenever needed, follow up with environmental benefits (see below for more details on “How to bring the environment into the conversation”).

Explain how landscape architects’ involvement in the creation of a space directly benefits people in a variety of ways, to prevent people from assuming that the benefits come naturally from the outdoors rather than the thinking and expertise that goes into creating outdoor spaces. For example, when talking about the mental health benefits that come from spending time in a public park or national forest, talk about the role of landscape architects in sustaining natural resources on the site and making it safer and accessible to more people, in addition to referencing opportunities for movement and the natural role of greenery in lowering stress levels.³

What this looks like

Instead of...

Landscape architects are uniquely positioned to help combat climate change. We select recyclable and renewable materials in our projects, and we make sure the plants that are chosen for a space are native to an area. From reducing air pollution in cities to protecting endangered species in wildlife sanctuaries, our work creates spaces that benefit the environment.

Try...

Landscape architects are uniquely positioned to design outdoor spaces that promote your health and wellbeing—and the health and wellbeing of the environment. For example, we design urban spaces that bring more trees to cities. This improves air quality for residents while also helping to combat climate change. Making outdoor spaces usable, sustainable, and safe is our expertise.

Why this works

Foregrounding how landscape architecture benefits people increases the relevance of landscape architecture in the eyes of the public and, consequently, helps the public see landscape architects as essential for society. This strategy is more effective than other frames that describe landscape architecture as benefiting the environment or as bringing people and the environment closer together.

By focusing on how landscape architecture benefits people, we paint a broader picture for people and help them see why the discipline is relevant to them and their own needs. We explicitly connect the dots for people between landscape architecture, outdoor spaces, *and* humans, instead of mainly focusing on the first link in the chain when we lead with environmental benefits.

By digging into the many ways in which landscape architecture benefits humans, we also make the discipline more tangible and more visible for people. By default, people often fail to see the myriad ways in which design affects their everyday lives and experiences, which makes it hard for them to see the relevance of landscape architecture for themselves and for society. By connecting the dots for people, this strategy helps them see that more aspects of outdoor spaces are *designed* than they initially realized, from spaces intentionally created to facilitate public gatherings to spaces that are built with a variety of human needs and abilities in mind.

Benefits to quality of life and community cohesion are likely more compelling than economic benefits because they are easier to understand. People can readily imagine themselves in spaces that generate a sense of wellbeing or that bring people together, while the ways in which outdoor spaces facilitate commercial enterprise or tourism or affect property values are harder to understand, at least on a community or societal scale.

How to bring the environment into the conversation:

It is possible to put the spotlight on the many ways in which landscape architecture supports and improves people's lives while still talking about how the profession also benefits the environment. What matters is not *whether* environmental benefits are mentioned, but *when* and *how*.

Research on psychological biases and heuristics shows that humans tend to remember the first piece of information they encounter better than information presented later on.⁴ Leading with landscape architecture's benefits to humans ensures that the puzzle piece that is missing from most people's default views, and that makes the discipline more tangible, is also the one that will stick with audiences the most.

This builds on findings from existing public health and environmental research, which have shown that people are more likely to support environmentally beneficial programs or policies when they see the benefit to themselves first.⁵ For example, support for renewable energy increases when people are shown how it improves local air quality, which directly impacts the people who breathe this air. In this project, we found that focusing on benefits to humans first helps communicators achieve a broader range of goals than leading with benefits to the environment.

Recommendation #2: Appeal to the value of community cohesion to reinforce the value of the field for people and communities.

What to do

Another way to place people front and center in the story of landscape architecture is to emphasize that outdoor spaces created by landscape architects help bring communities together. Leverage the value that people place on strong, tight-knit communities to help people see the societal importance of landscape architecture.

How to do it

Acknowledge that community cohesion is something we all care about. Then explain how landscape architecture is essential to building strong communities by foregrounding how accessible and inclusive spaces strengthen communities.

Provide specifics as to how outdoor spaces designed by landscape architects benefit communities. For example, describe how well-designed public spaces bring communities together: When they are intentionally designed to be accessible to all community members, everyone can participate in an outdoor space, no matter age, ability, or income. Or provide examples at smaller scales—the ways in which a school campus, an apartment roof deck, or a dog park foster community at the most local of levels.

What this looks like

Instead of...

Our communities are better places to live when outdoor spaces are pleasant and functional. That's why landscape architects work to create spaces like parks and bike lanes that everyone can use. We design spaces that are accessible to people of all ages, incomes, and abilities to make sure everyone can appreciate the outdoors, relax, exercise, and spend time together. When landscape architects are involved in the creation of public spaces, we make it easier for us to enjoy the outdoor world around us.

Try...

Our communities are stronger when we have ample opportunities to live, work, and play together. That's why landscape architects work to create outdoor spaces like parks and city squares that provide everyone the opportunity to connect and interact with their community. We listen to the needs of community members and ensure that every voice is heard. Then we use our expertise to design public spaces that are accessible to people of all ages, incomes, and abilities. When landscape architects are involved in the creation of public spaces, we help bring communities together.

Why it works

By leveraging the value people place on community cohesion and explaining *how* landscape architects can help build stronger communities, we widen the lens beyond benefits to individuals but still offer a tangible perspective for the public. This makes it easier for people to see why the discipline is relevant for society and why landscape architects should be involved in as many outdoor space projects as possible.

The valued ideal of community cohesion can also help people see that landscape architects can have significant impact on how inclusive and equitable a society is. This idea is particularly effective when paired with an explanation of how landscape architects intentionally consult with entire communities when developing plans to make sure everyone's voices are heard and address a variety of community needs through design.

What is an explanatory metaphor?

Explanatory metaphors are a way for the human brain to grasp complexity and abstraction by leveraging something familiar, concrete, or tangible. Take, for example, the metaphor *the ocean is the heart of the climate*. The metaphor helps people understand the role of the ocean in the climate system by comparing it to something more familiar—the heart’s role in the body. The comparison makes it easy for people to recognize both the centrality of the ocean within the climate and its role in *circulating* air and heat within the climate system, just as a heart pumps blood through the body.

In the same way, the *Building Architecture* metaphor recommended below *creates* connections between landscape architecture and building architecture to leverage the mental image and experience people already have of architects, and it fosters better understanding of what landscape architecture entails as a result. In our research, we found that the *Building Architecture* metaphor enables people to better understand landscape architecture, which they have little information about, by drawing on the more familiar domain of building architecture.

Recommendation #3: Leverage what people know about building architecture to build a better understanding of what landscape architecture entails.

What to do

Use the metaphor of *Building Architecture* to explain what the discipline of landscape architecture actually entails and dismiss the misperception that landscape architects are just “fancy gardeners.” Cue the public’s mental image of blueprints to build understanding of what the process of design consists of.

The *Building Architecture* metaphor helps to center people in the story of landscape architecture by leveraging the public’s existing knowledge and experience of how building architecture helps improve and support lives. It also provides an accessible, effective way to shed light on the process of design and helps people see the complexity of the work that landscape architects do.

Use the *Blueprints* metaphor—an extension of the *Building Architects* metaphor—to explain what landscape architects do. For example: “Just as the blueprints drawn by architects contain instructions for every element of a building, blueprints drawn by landscape architects include instructions for every part of an outdoor space.” While physical blueprints may no longer be used in the industry, the public is familiar with them, can easily visualize what they are, and intuitively understands why they are used.

How to do it

Use phrases like “just as,” “in the same way,” or “much like,” or explicitly mention “metaphor” or “analogy” to signal that you are using a *metaphor*. This will clarify for people that you are comparing two distinct professions, leveraging the one that is more familiar for the public to build understanding of the one that is lesser known. For example: “Landscape architects make decisions about every element in the outdoor space, from the layout of different areas to the materials used in the design, *much like* architects do when designing a building.”

Focus on the skills, training, and expertise of architecture when using the *Building Architecture* metaphor to help the public see that landscape architecture also requires skills, training, and expertise. This will be particularly beneficial to address the issue of deregulation of the profession, to get landscape architecture included as a STEM discipline, and to attract students to study landscape architecture.

Incorporate the *Blueprints* metaphor into the *Building Architecture* metaphor to show how, for example, blueprints drawn by landscape architects include instructions for every part of an outdoor space, just like blueprints drawn by building architects contain instructions for every element of a building.

Adapt your message to your audience and your context. This metaphor is designed to build *public* understanding of what landscape architecture entails, because the public knows more about architecture than landscape architecture. However, when communicating to building architects or other related experts in grants or work proposals, avoid using this metaphor so as not to blur distinctions between the disciplines.

What it looks like

Instead of...

Many people hear “landscape architecture” and think of landscaping, but landscape architecture is more than that. It requires years of training and a diverse set of skills to become a landscape architect. Landscape architects are experts in designing spaces that meet community needs and promote public health and safety. They must be well versed in many subjects, from design principles to construction techniques and from art to the natural sciences. We regulate other highly skilled technical professions—and we should continue to regulate landscape architecture.

Try...

Landscape architects use their expertise to design outdoor spaces that meet the needs of communities in much the same way that building architects design buildings that work well for the people who use them. Just as building architects draw blueprints for homes, offices, and stores, landscape architects draw blueprints that include instructions for every part of an outdoor space—from the layout of different areas to the materials used in the design. And just as building architecture must be regulated to make sure buildings are safe for their occupants, land

Why it works

While landscape architecture is not well understood among the public, building architecture is generally understood by people. This strategy leverages what people know about building architecture to help them understand what they don’t know about landscape architecture. Our research found that the metaphor of *Building Architecture* helps the public increase their understanding of the beneficial impacts of landscape architecture (e.g., on safety, the economy, community needs, biodiversity, systems design, climate) as well as the perceived importance of landscape architects, because they understand the benefits of hiring architects to build new buildings.

Importantly, the metaphor of *Building Architecture* helps people see the types of expertise required in landscape architecture. People already see that building architects receive rigorous training and must be licensed to build buildings. They are thus able to apply the same logic to the field of landscape architecture, which lets them see that the discipline requires strong skills and expertise, and it reduces the prominence of the image of the “fancy gardener.” As people are aware that without the expertise of a building architect, buildings would crumble and

lives would be lost, the metaphor also helps them see how necessary it is to involve landscape architects in the design and creation of all types of outdoor spaces. As one interview participant explained, one “wouldn’t build a building without an architect, so there is a need to hire a landscape architect for outdoor areas too.”

Contrary to what might have been expected, members of the public are able to work with the metaphor of *Building Architecture* as a metaphor, without confusing the two professions being compared. Because the two professions share the word “architecture,” directly comparing them leads people to reason that there are two distinct types of architects with similar relevance and similar levels of expertise and skills.

Similar to the *Building Architecture* metaphor, the Blueprints metaphor increased understanding of the required expertise and technical skills of landscape architects, as well as the perceived relevance of the discipline. Specifically, this version of the metaphor leverages people’s mental representation of blueprints—a tangible, concrete representation of the more nebulous concept of design—to help them better understand what the process of design entails for landscape architects. Cueing the mental image of blueprints led interview participants to think about how landscape architects use “high-level mathematical skills” because they use blueprints to create “infrastructure” in order to develop land properly.

The *Blueprints* metaphor also helps the public take a more holistic view of how landscape architects work, tapping into the systems-based approach of the profession. People reason that blueprints not only require a lot of planning, but they also present an overarching view of a site that means more than the sum of its parts, rather than just a series of isolated objects that need to be placed somewhere. When people think about the image of blueprints, they focus not only on the physical plan, but also on all the people involved in creating a space so that the final result is cohesive. In interviews, this led participants to talk about landscape architects as “high-level directors” who work well with others (city planners, architects, engineers) “to make sure everything works well together.”

As the *Building Architecture* metaphor and its more specific Blueprint version both cue productive thinking around expertise and relevance of landscape architecture, they work as a powerful combo to argue for the importance of regulating landscape architecture, especially given the current threat of deregulation by state legislatures.

The *Blueprint* metaphor can help people see that landscape architecture contributes to building a more equitable society.

The *Blueprint* metaphor helps people see the role landscape architects can play in creating an equitable, holistic vision for the whole community. Once people take a high-level view of a site, considering it as a whole and all the professionals involved in its creation, it becomes easier for them to imagine how entire communities can be engaged in the work and benefit from it as well. The *Blueprint* metaphor enables a holistic view of community spaces across different economic statuses, a vantage point that enabled interview participants to see that landscape architects can use creative ideas to bring all neighborhood spaces up to the similar standards of access and quality.

By highlighting the potential of landscape architects to drive equity initiatives across entire communities, the *Blueprint* metaphor also prevented participants from assuming that landscape architects only ever carry out the policies and decisions of other people, lacked independence or influence in their work, and were nothing more than “the blunt tool of bureaucracy” or “the middleman” between funders and the community.

Recommendation #4: Weave different examples and images into every communication to get the public to better understand that landscape architects connect people to their surroundings.

What to do

Examples and images help the public better understand who landscape architects are and what they do: They help concretize the work of landscape architects, and they also stretch existing understandings of landscape architecture. Specifically, they help show how landscape architects connect people to their surroundings, including the environment, the built environment, and the larger systems at play.

Use systems examples that show interconnected networks to emphasize what landscape architects do to connect humans, nature, and built environments beyond the familiar images of parks and playgrounds. Even quick mentions of outdoor networks designed by landscape architects—like bike lane networks and wildlife crossings—are memorable to the public and lead to them to see landscape architecture as an important field.

Use large-scale images (often, but not always, at a bird's-eye view) of interconnected systems to help people see that landscape architects foster connections and inclusivity. This includes images with bike trails and paths that bring cities and nature closer together and encourage social connections between humans.

Strike a balance between images that center on people, nature, public spaces, and systems—don't just focus on one element. For example, avoid placing too much focus on places (versus systems). While it's important to include people in images to cue thinking about landscape architecture's benefits for humans, it is still important to ensure people are situated in a variety of contexts (especially systems and nature). Be wary of too many prototypical and place-based images, especially ones that portray more consumptive and exclusive spaces, so as to avoid the type of unproductive thinking around privately owned spaces that seems to be increasing as a result of the pandemic.

Why it works

Using examples of interconnected networks increases people's understanding of landscape architecture. Systems examples like bike lane networks and wildlife crossings were very memorable for interview participants: Even in short form, they often stuck with them. These network examples effectively helped to expand people's view of landscape architecture beyond prototypical parks and plazas, as a *big picture* discipline that is valuable and relevant to society at a large scale. They also help people stay away from unproductive beliefs about design as object placement, and landscape architecture as focused solely on aesthetics.

Large-scale images that highlight interconnected systems help the public see how cities and nature are intertwined. They also put humans front and center in people's view of landscape architecture in two ways. First, they help break down the public's default belief that nature and humans are always in opposition to one another. Second, these images create a sense of inclusivity where spaces designed by landscape architects *allow the entire community to participate*. Images that depict integrated green spaces and shared spaces or bike paths that can be used by people who don't have a car or cannot afford the bus make outdoor spaces feel more accessible and affordable for the public. Showing a diverse range of people doing different activities can help reinforce the ways in which well-designed outdoor spaces bring the broader community together.

Striking a balance between images that center on humans, nature, networks, and places is important because it reinforces the view that nature and people can come together in a variety of ways, as long as outdoor spaces are created intentionally. As a result, using a range of different images in future communications will strengthen the case for the importance of landscape architects designing outdoor spaces. Images need to show enough variety to indicate that landscape architects have had a hand in designing an outdoor space but not be so overly designed and people-focused that the public is turned off by the consumptive, crowded nature of the image.

Endnotes

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About FrameWorks

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