

## How Designers Think

Garden and Landscape Studies/ Mellon Initiative in Urban Landscape Studies  
Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection  
Annual Colloquium  
November 3, 2017  
The Oak Room, Fellowship House  
1700 Wisconsin Avenue, Washington, DC

### Abstracts

**Gina Ford**, Sasaki, Watertown

“Shifting Scales and Expanding Boundaries; Resilience in the 21st Century City”

Cities across the United States, in an effort to maintain competitiveness and address broader economic, ecological or social issues along with the constantly shifting challenges of climate change, are investing in innovative planning and design. In her lecture, Ford will discuss projects at a range of scales where landscape is leading this transformation as a powerful urban catalyst.

To create a new landscape of connectivity and engagement at the site scale, her work on the Chicago Riverwalk embraces and celebrates the river’s annual flood dynamics. To help a city recover from a devastating flood event, her work in Cedar Rapids helped establish a decades-long resiliency planning framework. To address issues of land loss and flood risk in the Mississippi River Delta, Ford’s work on the Changing Course Competition coupled investigation of the growing environmental crisis with understanding of the region’s unique cultural and social networks.

Central to Ford’s discussion of these case studies will be the question of boundary. How do we, as designers, think about the scale of the problem defined against the limitations of specific geopolitical project boundaries? What are effective strategies – at a variety of scales - to address the severe problems of environmental change, perception and risk?

**Aki Omi**, office ma, San Francisco

“Passion to Portfolio”

Design is my passion and the process is extremely personal for me, as such my lecture will be candid and personal. office ma is not only a firm I own and run, but it is where my passion for creating memorable and beautiful places take shape, where I push myself every day to evolve, and a platform for creativity and innovation.

My employment history represents contrasting chapters of my design training and growth, beginning with an art-focused practice inspired by environmental phenomena and processes, moving to one that took a strong position on landscape urbanism, then to an interdisciplinary mega-firm, and finally crafting my own practice. Our work is focused primarily in Asia, partly by accident of timing and partly by design. My cultural heritage and early life experiences are somewhat unique and reflect an independent spirit at a young age, moving from Japan to the US on my own at 16. Being of two cultures helps me tackle working in places that I may not fully understand, to interpret culture and emphasize it even in ways that may not be possible from the inside. We have 10+ years of experience working in China and have witnessed some major shifts there: in the sophistication level of our clients, an emphasis on quality of idea and execution, an awareness of environmental and social issues, and most importantly for us, an evolution toward a next generation of designers and design thinking beyond the “name brands” that dominated the market earlier this century.

I will use three projects and project stories to illustrate my design process and how we position ourselves in China. Quarry Park in Hangzhou Liangzhu Cultural Village turned a neglected stone quarry site into a productive park that helps to fill in gaps (social, economic and cultural) between new residences in nearby communities and local farms. Our work at Beijing Flower Expo 2019 explores innovative solutions for storm water management and answers to current sponge city policy in China. Lastly, the Forest Mixed Use Development in Changsha provides new perspective on landscape in private developments where it is often designed as commodity for real estate transactions.

**Sara Zewde**, Gustafson, Guthrie, Nichol, Seattle

“Ecologies of Memory”

Over the last two decades, landscape architecture has increasingly devoted its intellectual energy to questions of ecology. This development has proved productive for the field, opening new theoretical terrain and tools, broadening the scales of operation, and introducing a systems-based approach to work. This movement, however, has also left key aspects of landscape architecture under-theorized and un-innovated as it tends towards a grand narrative of ecological determinism. Landscape architects have proved eager to adopt the language of the field of ecology, while overlooking a central tenant of design: people.

The shortcomings of the current discourse in landscape architecture has become clearer as designers make the case for applying the ecological paradigm to the sacred ground of the city — ground that is deeply tied to complex cultural memory. The city, in its very formation, is a system of sites of trauma, of torture, as well as joy, triumph, and self-determination.

This presentation proposes an expansion of the scales, systems, and theories of ecology in landscape architecture, towards the interpretation of cultural ecologies. “Ecologies of Memory” deconstructs the cultural assumptions that constrict landscape architectural discourse in the context of today’s social and political urban tensions and proposes a methodology for advancing the underlying attributes in ecology’s systems of relationality. The re-positioning of bell hooks’ “aesthetics of being” and Henri LeFevre’s “representational space” offers social and cultural readings of ecological space, generating design departures for landscape architecture.

“Ecologies of Memory” includes the discussion of recent design work in Rio de Janeiro, Houston, and New York City to illuminate the potential of this methodology — and of landscape architecture broadly— to expand the way we practice in an age of increasing climatic, social, and political shifts.

**Jose Castillo**, a911, Mexico City

“The Normal and the Marginal”

The discussion on how designers address problems internal to their own discipline (site, program, composition, etc...) and those external to design (the social, the economic, the political, the logistical) has been a relevant topic for some time now. Within our own practice at a911, which combines research, academic, and professional work, we are always keen on addressing the way that autonomy and interdisciplinarity are negotiated on an everyday basis. Similar to George Canguilhem’s ideas on the Normal & the Pathological, we like to understand our practice as porous and sensible to what happens on the margins of the profession.

This presentation will address two interconnected issues, through projects where we have been involved in the past few years; on the one hand the question of Food and the City, where the lens of design is used as a means to understand how the food supply chain transforms landscapes, cities and spaces. Second, the question of the urban and the territorial, understood as work where notions of scale, natural, social and infrastructural systems, and political economy come into play. By presenting our ideas, research and design on these issues, we hope to open a discussion on how the normative aspects of design are (re)informed by the marginal.

**Michelle Delk**, Snøhetta, New York

“Beautiful Function - The Willamette Falls Riverwalk”

Everywhere there is landscape; it connects everything and everyone. In this discussion, Michelle Delk will share her interest in exploring how we connect and interact with each other through the places we inhabit. As designers, we are tasked with the responsibility of responding to a vast array of significant issues and challenges within our communities and natural environment. Motivated to enhance both beauty and function through design, Michelle will reflect how Snøhetta’s transdisciplinary approach, along with her personal explorations, have shaped her perspective as a designer and leader within an international practice.

By delving into the firm’s recent engagement leading the design of the Willamette Falls Riverwalk in Oregon, she will offer her perspective about interacting with existing landscapes while transforming and bringing forth vitality in the built environment. In this example, Snøhetta explores a post-industrial landscape inspired by a vision to both reveal the beauty and history already embodied in this place and to advance the interplay between architecture and landscape. She will share how cultivating these relationships offers a design approach that respects the existing landscape while revealing the many stories

and forces embedded in the physical and historical layers of the site. Ultimately, the design of the Riverwalk manifests through many means; imaginative reuse and protection of existing elements, removal of key obstructions, and strategic additions. Together these means reveal an approach that encourages generosity, offers inspiration, and embodies rational functionality within the constructed environment, seamlessly creating a landscape that is both beautiful and practical.

**Bas Smets**, Bureau Bas Smets, Brussels

“Augmented Landscapes”

Over the last centuries human occupation on the planet has drastically changed. Starting from a seemingly infinite nature dotted by confined settlements, the surface of the planet is being transformed by a limitless urbanisation, interrupted only by distinct moments of nature's resistance. Cities seem to be expanding into metropolitan areas, at the cost of the natural 'environment' that surrounds them. Nature is rapidly losing its place and space outside this urbanisation, hindering the ecosystem services it has been providing.

With a growing world population in excess of 7.5 billion, urbanisation has become a planetary ambition. With the irreversible loss of natural habitats and the uncertain impacts of climate change, it is urgent to redefine the role and the ambition of the landscape project in this process.

As part of the development process, landscape projects have great potential to produce part of the complex services that nature until now has been freely providing, from the purification of water and air to flood regulation and storage of carbon dioxide. Adaptable, evolutive and transformative by nature, landscape projects can be conceived to provide these ecosystem services. Based on the logic rather than the image of nature, these 'Augmented Landscapes' will produce unseen aesthetics.

**Jennifer Bolstad and Walter Meyer**, Local Office Landscape and Urban Design, Brooklyn

“Future-Proofing the Metropolis: A Forensic Ecology Approach”

What can pre-development ecology teach us about the design of the urban landscape? Through a variety of urban design and landscape precedent projects, this session will explore landscape systems-based strategies for identifying and addressing urban vulnerabilities, including climate volatility and sea level rise. Methods of inquiry presented will include terrain-scale systems analyses and forensic ecology. Project precedents will showcase the multiple benefits – economic, cultural, social – of a landscape-systems-based approach to designing resilient cities. Of particular focus will be the intersection and overlap of 'sustainable' and 'resilient' project initiatives and evaluation of how each adds value. This session will also explore the role of design in community organizing and policy leadership.

Implementation of resilient systems depends heavily on policy updates, especially in urban areas with complex stakeholders, regulations and jurisdictions. The designers' work in alternative energy and in landscape-based protective infrastructure has lent a platform to lead these policy shifts, working in concert with the coastal communities to envision a more resilient future.

### **Speaker Biographies**

**Jennifer Bolstad** is a landscape architect, an educator and a community organizer for social and environmental justice. Together with Walter Meyer, she is co-founder of Local Office Landscape and Urban Design, based in Brooklyn, New York. She teaches at Parsons/The New School for Design and holds degrees from Harvard College and Harvard Graduate School of Design. Her research and practice concentration is coastal landscapes at all scales, operating between infrastructure, urbanism and ecology.

**José Castillo** holds a degree in architecture from the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City as well as a Masters and a Doctor of Design degree from Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. He is the principal along Saidee Springall of **a|911**, a practice based in Mexico City whose work includes cultural, institutional, housing, mobility and urban projects in various cities in Mexico. Their award-winning projects include the Elena Garro Cultural Center, the García Terres Library and the Ara Iztacalco housing project. Their recognitions include the Bronze Medal at the Holcim Awards for Sustainable Construction Latin America (2011), Emerging Voices Award from the Architectural League of New York (2012), the Audi Urban Future Award (2014) and the 2017 Richard Rogers Fellowship.

Castillo is a visiting design critic at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. He has served as a juror on several competitions and currently sits on the advisory board of London School of Economics Cities & Urban Age programs.

Fascinated by the urban environment, **Michelle Delk** is a passionate champion of the public realm. Based in New York City, Michelle is a Partner and Landscape Architect with Snøhetta. She works to cultivate trans-disciplinary collaboration for the creative advancement of our public environment. Michelle's enthusiasm is reflected in her commitment to her firm and community. Currently she's an active board member for the Urban Design Forum in New York City and is frequently an invited speaker at conferences, universities, and communities throughout the world. With a natural ability for engaging with diverse communities and clients, Michelle guides projects ranging from master plans and brownfield redevelopments to realizations of urban plazas, parks, streetscapes, and riverfronts. Currently, she leads several efforts with Snøhetta, including the design of the Willamette Falls Riverwalk in Oregon, the Blaisdell Center Master Plan in Honolulu, and the re-imagined design of a significant public space in midtown Manhattan.

**Gina Ford** is a principal and landscape architect at Sasaki, where she leads an energized and interdisciplinary group of practitioners dedicated to the improvement of quality of life in cities through rigorous planning, exceptional design, and strong community partnerships. Gina's work encompasses a wide range of scales and project types, from public parks and plazas to large-scale landscape planning and waterfront projects. She brings to each project a passion for the process of making vibrant landscape spaces—from the conceptual design to the details of implementation—with a particular focus on the life and use of urban public environments. Gina's experience is additionally informed by extensive research, writing, travel, teaching, and competitions. She holds degrees in architecture from Wellesley College and landscape architecture from the Harvard Graduate School of Design. She serves on the board of directors for The Cultural Landscape Foundation, and on the editorial board of Architecture Boston.

**Walter Meyer**, co-founder of Local Office Landscape and Urban Design, has been recognized for leadership in coastal resiliency by the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and was named a 2013 'Champion of Change' by the White House. Meyer studied Landscape Architecture at the University of Florida and Urban Design at Harvard's Graduate School of Design. He teaches in the graduate architecture program at Parsons/The New School for Design.

In 2013, **Aki Omi** founded office ma in San Francisco. As a creative director of the firm, he leads a studio practicing at the juncture of landscape, urban design, master planning, development strategy, and sustainability planning. Current projects include Mitsui Headquarters, China Resources Headquarters, TP Link Headquarters, TP Link R&D Center, China and Merchant Mixed Use Development.

Aki's representative works include Tokyo Midtown, One Shenzhen Bay, Shenzhen One City, New York World Trade Center Public Realm, Los Angeles Waterfront Promenade, Wenzhou Lucheng Plaza, Bonifacio Global City Superblock (Philippines), and Cincinnati University Main Street.

**Bas Smets** has a background in landscape architecture, civil engineering and architecture. He founded his office in Brussels in 2007 and has since constructed projects in more than 12 countries with his team of 17 architects and landscape architects. Starting from a precise reading of the existing land, his projects reveal a landscape, visible but yet unseen. These projects vary in scale from territorial visions to infrastructural landscapes, from large parks to private gardens, from city centres to film sets. He often teams up with architects, artists and scientists. His realised projects include the large park of Thurn & Taxis in Brussels, the Himara Waterfront in Albania, the Sunken Garden in London and the memorial for the victims of the Brussels attacks of 22/3. A number of his projects are under construction: an extension of the La Défense esplanade in Paris, the extension of the Chateau Marmont in Los Angeles, and the Parc des Ateliers in Arles, in collaboration with Frank Gehry and Annabelle Selldorf.

**Sara Zewde** is a landscape designer, urbanist, and public artist. Concurrent to her independent work and research, Sara is a designer at Gustafson Guthrie Nichol, where she contributes to the development of large-scale and civic landscapes around the world. Sara holds a Master of Landscape Architecture from the Harvard Graduate School of Design, a Master of City Planning from MIT, and a BA in Sociology and Statistics from Boston University. Sara was named the 2014 National Olmsted Scholar by the Landscape Architecture Foundation and a 2016 Artist-in-Residence at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. Her design work in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil was featured at the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale.

*Programs in Urban Landscape Studies at Dumbarton Oaks are supported by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation through their initiative in Architecture, Urbanism, and the Humanities*