

Editor's Letter

Major changes to the built environment—from waterfront revitalization projects to removal of urban expressways—are natural experiments that can yield compelling evidence of social, economic, and environmental benefits. Assessing these design outcomes requires time, money, and expertise.

One of the landscape architecture profession's strengths is its integrative approach to analyzing urban landscapes and designing purposeful changes to those built environments. Human psychology, public policy, and aquatic ecology—among other areas of knowledge—inform bold visions for these public spaces.

Yet much remains to be done by educators to improve the profession's collective research capacity and facility with evidence-based practice. CELA and LAF have made recent strides to advance the discipline's knowledge base through annual conferences, research fellowships, and support for academic journals. LAAB and ASLA are also moving in this direction.

ASLA recently launched in 2023 a new grant competition to fund systematic research reviews, which are the gold standard for evidence in applied fields like medicine and engineering. The first two reviews will focus on biodiversity loss, extreme heat, and the nature-based interventions that can mitigate devastating social, economic, and ecological impacts. Each of these reviews should be published as a peer-reviewed article, in addition to the other formats that support ASLA's advocacy work in federal and state capitals across the United States.

With more than 50 percent of the global population now living in urban areas, the 21st century poses challenges not only to planetary health but also to human health, safety, and well-being. Urban resilience and livability challenges provide abundant opportunities for landscape architects to demonstrate leadership and creativity. Urban waterfront revitalization initiatives, for example, are especially good opportunities for innovation and collaboration. They also hold important lessons for educators in landscape architecture.

A national waterfront design competition concluded this spring with three design teams proposing exciting visions for a major public space in Madison, Wisconsin. Madison is built on an isthmus between two lakes with glacial origins. A thriving state capital, the city's ambitious initiative is to revitalize a prominent two-mile stretch of downtown public lakefront. This major open space features Frank Lloyd Wright's Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center, which is sited on axis with the State Capitol building at the city's center to the north. Terminating the western axis from the Capitol is the University of Wisconsin. John Nolen (1869–1937), also a landscape architect and urban planner, was influential in shaping the city's parks and open space system.

Madison is known for its extensive public engagement when making major decisions to reshape the built environment. Each finalist team's master plan was driven by evidence gleaned through extensive community engagement. This competition gave the design teams unique opportunities to display their creativity, engagement skills, and political savvy. The design competition was led by landscape architects in the City of Madison's Parks Division. Landscape architects also led the three firms' design teams.

In this third decade of the 21st century, the city of Madison wanted a design vision that addressed local and regional challenges, including housing affordability, economic opportunity, climate adaptation, and lake eutrophication. The winning proposal from Boston's Sasaki Associates was selected by the community for further refinement, phasing, and implementation.

Waterfront design competitions are multidisciplinary opportunities to create significant new precedents in urban resilience and livability. Both the competitions and the completed projects hold important lessons for designers, educators, and urban scholars.

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