

Conference Reviews

TAKING ACTION: MAKING CHANGE ***The 2024 Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture Conference***

March 20–23, 2024, St. Louis, Missouri

Taner R. Özdil

The 2024 Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture (CELA) Taking Action: Making Change Conference was an in-person event engaging landscape architecture academic and professional practitioners, students, and advocates between March 20 and 23, 2024. The CELA's once-a-year international conference was held at the historic Royal Sonesta Chase Park Plaza in the Central West End District of St. Louis, Missouri. The 2024 conference was planned as a return to the Central United States after nine years had elapsed since the 2015 CELA conference themed Incite Change | Change Insight at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas. The inquiry into “change” in landscape architecture was again at the heart of the conference agenda.

The conference location was selected for its revitalized urban district, established urban landscapes, and eclectic architecture to attract national and international attendees. The conference venue's attractive location, near the historic Forest Park system (roughly 1,326 acres combined), was considered a critical advantage. The City of St. Louis's influential historical and cultural heritage, demographic and socioeconomic conditions, and environmental positioning by the Mississippi River in the making of the United States were also considered potential draws. Furthermore, having one of the newer landscape architecture programs, Washington University in St. Louis, nearby and bringing attention to the discipline in the city and

the region was partly in the purview of some CELA Board members.

The 2024 conference provided an academic platform and in-person encounters for academic practitioners, professionals, and students to focus on education, research, scholarship, and creative activities, highlighting the theme and track of Taking Action: Making Change. In addressing the conference program, the organizers stressed the critical positioning of landscape architecture, which plays a vital role in shaping our built environment and addressing the pressing challenges of our time. Organizers also postulated that landscape architects are positioned to contribute and lead in creating positive, transformative, sustainable, resilient, and equitable changes as the world struggles with climate change, urbanization, and social inequality. The conference called upon landscape architecture educators to meet this challenge and drive meaningful impact. The conference theme and track followed up on inquiries concerning the gaps and synergies between design education, research, and practice from where we left off at the 2023 CELA Conference in San Antonio, Texas.

The CELA Board and IMI (Executive Offices of the CELA), with the support of nearly 1,000 members from 95 member institutions (full, associate, affiliate, corresponding, or international), began planning the 2024 conference immediately after the 2023 meeting. Although in 2023, CELA faced challenges such as replacing the executive director and vice president for research and creative activity (VPR) and adopting a new conference system (Oxford Abstract), preparations for the 2024 conference faced fewer hurdles.

This conference review covers data created from analyses of accepted or published 2024 CELA

presentation abstracts, information on 2024 CELA awards and recognition, and activities shaping the 2024 conference. It also highlights the conference and goals for future meetings. Due to limitations in data availability, the conference numbers and detailed content below were analyzed from secondary sources and accepted abstract numbers.

CELA 2024 CONFERENCE ACTIVITIES

A three-day, fully packed, in-person conference accommodated approximately 380 attendees, including members, non-members, students, non-industry guests, and spouses. A total of 401 abstracts were submitted in 2024, roughly a 3% increase from the 2023 conference. Of these abstracts, 349 were initially accepted following a two-step blind review process. This number later fell to 341 (an estimated 85% acceptance rate) by the time of the conference. Two hundred and one reviewers initially signed up, and after screening/matching review preferences with abstracts needing review, 167 were invited as reviewers.

The conference planned to host 275 (78.8%) oral presentations, 50 (14.3%) posters, nine (2.6%) Film & new media, and 15 (4.3%) panel presentations out of 349 accepted abstracts. Of these presentations, 239 (67.4%) were led by educators and academics, seven (2%) by professional practitioners, and 103 (29.5%) by students. While most presenter profiles stayed somewhat consistent, professional practitioners' interest in CELA conferences still seems lower, even after the 2023 conference concentrated on bridging academic and professional practices.

Keynote addresses, workshops, field sessions, and numerous double-blind peer-reviewed presentations anchored the CELA 2024 Conference. Kotchakorn Voraakhom, Micheal Allen, and CELA's 2024 Lifetime Achievement Award Recipient—Randolph (Randy) Hester—led the three keynote sessions. The conference also housed four workshops and five field sessions to enrich participants' academic and professional experiences and educational needs. Four workshops were led by the Landscape Architecture Foundation, the Landscape Architecture Accreditation Board, *Landscape Journal*, and college and department administrators (Leading the Way: Administrators Workshop). The field excursions were “Forest Park Sketch Crawl: Moving in the

Park”; “Forest Park: Waterways, Playgrounds, & Other Landscapes”; “Parks: Gateway and the Central Corridor Area”; “Missouri Botanical Garden and Tower Grove Park”, and “Big Muddy Great Rivers Adventure Tour.” On the conference's final day, the Landscape Architecture Program at Washington University in St. Louis invited CELA attendees for a welcome and campus tour. Special meeting times were also allocated for poster presentations, administrators' sessions, and CELA's Annual Award and Recognition Ceremony, to highlight a few.

SELECTED TRACK PERFORMANCES

The conference was organized along the usual 16 core tracks, anchored by the Taking Action: Making Change theme track. The film adopted as a presentation method in 2023 was revised once again as a self-standing Film + New Media track by the new board to attract more interest. Three tracks (Landscape Planning and Ecology, Landscape Performance, and Research by Design and Implementation) continued providing session attendees with credit for the Landscape Architecture Continuing Education System (LA CES). Except for these minor adjustments, the track system stayed constant between 2023 and 2024.

All conference tracks had at least nine presentations, and 12 had 15 or more accepted abstracts. This was a good indicator that track adjustments in 2022 continue to produce positive interest. A closer look at the acceptance rate by tracks illustrates that the top three tracks have more than 40 accepted abstracts each this year. These tracks were People-Environment Relationships, Design Education and Pedagogy, and Resilience and Climate Action (with a total of 135 accepted presentations out of the 349 total). The 2024 Theme Track, Taking Action: Making Change, had only 23 accepted abstracts. Furthermore, a record 15 panel presentations came from seven different tracks, primarily engaging subject experts for about an hour in a conversational setting.

The Taking Action: Making Change theme track focused on catalyzing our collective efforts, shaping a more sustainable, equitable, and resilient future. Twenty-three accepted abstracts (three panels, 16 oral presentations, and four posters) took up the above-mentioned topics on various scales and

geographies in landscape architecture, showcasing how inclusive, yet broadly defined, the theme track was in 2024. While few of these submissions concentrated on the Mississippi watershed and regional issues, the presentation topics varied from advocating for change and action in spatial planning and design to community-based or collaborative research and from climate and health-focused research to a concentration on pedagogy and practice. Perhaps a noteworthy panel presentation that needs to be highlighted here is titled “What is Next After Landscape Architecture Designated as a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Discipline?” after landscape architecture was added to the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) STEM-designated degree program list in the United States in July 2023. The panel, led by Sadik Artunc from Mississippi State University, along with panel members from the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Maryland, posed critical questions concerning the impact of the STEM designation on academic and professional practices and the Landscape Architecture Accreditation Standards (LAAB). The panel also sought the coordination of effort and leadership necessary to develop an action plan for future endeavors.

People-Environment Relationships (n=48) was the most popular track, accounting for 13.8% of all presentation submissions. The presentations were primarily concerned with environmental and social concerns involving urban, community, and rural-scale research. The presentations focused on human activity and its relationship to the environment, exploring comfort, justice, or change issues. Although the methods utilized in this track included but were not limited to surveys, video recordings, virtual reality, or mobile data mining, perception, and observation studies are at the center of most of the research designs. For example, a presentation entitled “The Various Types of Plants Visible from the Window are Linked to Distinct Facets of Wellbeing and Neighborhood Satisfaction,” led by Sara Hadavi from Kansas State University, looked at which specific green elements visible from the window exhibit stronger connections with aspects of well-being and neighborhood satisfaction that exert indirect effects on well-being in a Chicago neighborhood. The presenters found that while the view of shrubs and bushes from

the window was positively associated, surprisingly, the views of tree canopies or flowerbeds exhibited a significant association with overall well-being.

A few tracks have had a consistent presence in CELA over the years but have received less attention from presenters in recent years. They nevertheless require special focus. These tracks are Research Methods (n=9), Research by Design and Implementation (LA CES) (n=9), and Urban Design (n=10). Recent developments in landscape architecture, such as becoming a STEM field in the United States; concerns about the gap between academia and the profession; and the exponential growth of urban population, stormwater, and climate change issues as part of urban design and the urban landscape agenda underline the need to expand knowledge in these three tracks, which are critical to academic and scholarly inquiry in the field. For example, ASLA firmly recognized Urban Design as part of landscape architectural practices by starting a relatively new category in professional and student awards in 2020, acknowledging the presence of urban design in landscape architecture. Landscape architecture should pay particular attention to the increasing interest and the impact of professional and student awards in Urban Design due to changes in academic and professional practices.

Even though research activity and its processes and methods in landscape architecture have significantly evolved and become enriched over the last two decades—thanks in part to the growth of the field as a scholarly discipline as well as the advancement of technologies to explore a variety of phenomena—some CELA tracks appear to concentrate less on how things are studied and with what rigor. Given the reliability and validity expectations from scholarly and scientific inquiry to position landscape architecture among allied disciplines, this may be a valuable area for researchers and CELA to explore.

A critical panel presentation in the Research Methods track that can be highlighted as an example is “Practice-Based Research Ascending: Perspectives from Practice,” led by Megan Barnes from the Landscape Architecture Foundation and accompanied by representatives from the professional firms SWA, OJB, Reed Hilderbrand, Sasaki, Design Workshop, OLIN, and Land Design. The panel focused on the research conducted in the professional realm to build

bridges between research and practice. The panel discussed perspectives on integrating landscape performance research in practice and broader issues and concerns related to practice-based research. The session shared key insights and actionable ideas from practice that further reveal and, more precisely, represent a community of practitioners who have researched design experimentation.

Another critical dimension of the landscape architecture knowledge base in recent years worth emphasizing here was the Research by Design and Implementation track, which focuses on design research and applied research. The presentation titled “Earthen Tectonics: Material Explorations in Slip Cast and Rammed Earth Fabrication,” by a research team of faculty members in architecture and landscape architecture led by Jessica Rossi-Mastracci from the University of Minnesota, explored the material potential of rammed earth and slip cast fabrication in landscape applications. According to the authors, the work modified typical material compositions to incorporate bio-based, carbon-positive, and waste streams and anticipate fostering speculative landscape change. The material is installed and tested at an ecological research station, sited adjacent to a marsh to observe the impact of water, sediment collection, and vegetation growth through the lens of speculative long-term hydrological and landscape change, creating performative rather than simply ornamental patterns. The team’s work aimed to develop alternative material compositions and formal configurations that are multifunctional and have a smaller carbon footprint than traditional materials.

The Urban Design track was a reemerging knowledge area requiring deeper understanding and representation in CELA. For example, a presentation entitled “From Tobacco Road to Main Street: Downtown Revitalization Impact on Economic Vitality and Civic Engagement in North Carolina’s Tobacco Towns,” led by Joe More and Elen Deming from North Carolina State University, used a mixed methods approach for a regional investigation into North Carolina’s “tobacco-towns” to understand how Main Street’s efforts restore a community’s economic and social vitality. The research attempted to reveal the magnitude and recipients of financial benefits from tax revenue invested downtown; the diversity, equity, and inclusion experience of downtown re-

talization; and the social effects of mobilizing residents toward either a cohesive place of community or a divided community of interests. The study aimed to guide strategic planning decisions for small towns participating in the Main Street America program.

In conclusion, knowledge areas defined as tracks in CELA conferences, including the 2024 conference, allowed us to build concentration and trajectories where landscape architecture has been motivated to respond to the knowledge expectations and needs in academic practices in core areas and acquire new knowledge in evolving professional practices. Within the past few years, CELA added about five new tracks (e.g., Resilience and Climate Action) and revised several, while removing or consolidating three others to address the changing needs while continually responding to the core knowledge areas (e.g., Design Education and Pedagogy) since the inception of the track system in 2008.

CELA 2024 CONFERENCE INSIGHTS

The 2024 CELA conference once again renewed the organization’s commitment to fostering entirely in-person dialogue between the academy and profession while making a call for taking action and making change in landscape architecture. It provided a platform for sharing new research and enjoying impromptu interactions and networking opportunities, highlighting the necessity of such events to advance research, education, and creative scholarship to serve both the landscape architecture academic and professional practices.

As the number of presentations slowly started climbing to pre-COVID levels, expectations of the CELA conference also began evolving. First, it was hard to keep landscape architects, who live and breathe outdoors and explore built environments, to stay inside to attend sessions. The attendance issue was also attributed to the number of parallel sessions needed to accommodate the schedule. Second, there was a last-minute adjustment to some session locations due to unplanned construction involving some conference rooms. Third, the conference was organized as in-person only for the second year, mainly out of financial concerns. The CELA conference attendance numbers or registration fees were insufficient to cover conference expenses and provide

hybrid options. Fourth, the conference program and schedule were only available digitally. Overall, the increased post-pandemic conference venue expenses, travel costs, and fees for the special activities further exacerbated the conference preparations and attendance for participants and organizers. Ultimately, these issues were mostly mitigated and did not significantly impact the attendance, program, or schedule in 2024, but they raised internal questions and potential action items concerning the financial planning and experience level needed to prepare for the future conference and run CELA at all levels.

At the 2024 conference, CELA officially replaced seven elected board members and six track co-chairs (roughly 18%) who had completed their terms successfully. The CELA also awarded and recognized influential members, officers, and students. The 2024 awards included the seventh presentation of the Lifetime Achievement Award—to Randolph (Randy) Hester—and the induction of three new members to the CELA Academy of Fellows: Diane Jones Allen, Ned Crankshaw, and Eliza Pennypacker. 2024 was also the second year for the Forster Ndubisi Professional Service Award, initiated by the CELA and Landscape Architecture Foundation. The second recipient of this award was M. Ellen Deming. In addition, CELA recognized 12 of its faculty members' (including an officer) contributions to research, education, scholarship, and/or service. Eleven students were also recognized or awarded as finalists for research or creative activity or as part of CELA's Fountain Scholarship Program. In 2024, a Memorandum of Agreement was also signed with the International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA). The 2024 conference also received generous support from Land FX and ACTAR A.

The 2024 conference led to online publication of *2024 Conference Presentations and Abstract Proceedings*, comprising 341 abstracts after the final registration and presentation count. *Landscape Research Record* (LRR) 13, a double-blind peer-reviewed online publication, accepted 24 full papers out of 39 submitted and published in early 2025. Some of these presentations and publication efforts were also recognized with Outstanding Paper Awards and poster awards for 2024 submissions.

The 2024 CELA Conference, Taking Action: Making Change, achieved its mission by welcoming

landscape architecture academic practitioners and students to action, showcasing the power of education in research, teaching, and outreach. With its mighty schedule and mitigated challenges, the 2024 conference provided a meaningful opportunity for most of CELA's members who took a trip to join others in St. Louis. Beyond its capacity to bring the community together, the conference opened new discussions and debates on the vital role of landscape architecture in shaping our natural and built environment and addressing the pressing challenges of our time. The 2024 conference argued that landscape architects' unique role is leading and contributing to and helping to initiate positive, transformative, and resilient change. With this concentration in mind from the 2024 conference, the 2025 CELA Conference, themed Processes + Impacts, welcomed CELA followers to Portland, Oregon, for March 27–29, 2025, the details of which will be presented in a future review.

Taner R. Özdil, PhD, ASLA, is an associate professor of landscape architecture at the University of Texas at Arlington. Özdil has served as the vice president for research and creative scholarship (VPR) (2020–2022), past VPR (2022–2023), the co-chair of the Landscape Performance track (2016–2023), the cochair of the Taking Action: Making Change theme track (2023–2024), and CELA president-elect (2024–2025).

doi:10.3368/lj.44.2.155