

# PURPOSE AND PERCEPTIONS

## A Spotlight on Landscape Architecture

*“The human side of our profession has always brought me the greatest reward. Working closely with colleagues, clients, and communities while helping projects take shape evokes emotions of immense joy and honor.”*

- Edward D. Stone, Jr., EDSA Founder

The dawn of the 19th century brought a handful of advancements in thought, technology, and development, with movers and shakers transforming the world as we know it. While Thomas Edison was paving the way with inventions like the light bulb, Charles Darwin was busy publishing his *Theory of Evolution*. Not to mention Alexander Graham Bell, who was developing the first telephone, as Vincent Van Gogh challenged the norm of Dutch post-impressionism with the creation of *The Starry Night*. But as such artful and scientific progressions continued to breach the surface, another life-altering commodity began to gain momentum as an impactful force in design and development: that being the profession of **Landscape Architecture**.

### More Than What Meets the Eye

A practice that can be traced back to 5,000 BC with civilization's first gardens and agricultural towns, landscape architecture did not fully establish professional credibility until the mid-1800s, as Frederick Law Olmsted submitted his plans for New York City's Central Park. And, while many cultures, such as those found in China, Egypt, and India, have long coveted the skills of what would become the modern-day land planner, much of the western hemisphere has been playing catch-up to fully understand the range of expertise the vocation brings to the world's communities.

No stranger to the shifting nuances surrounding his occupation, EDSA Principal and American Society of Landscape Architects Fellow (FASLA), Richard Centolella, has endured many misconceptions about the profession over the course of his 35+ year career. “When people hear the word, ‘landscape’, they automatically think that all we do is planting plans or design gardens,” he explains. “While we’re sometimes integrated into such efforts, we’re essentially the brains behind a much more extensive operation, one that involves **creating places that help people live more fulfilling lives.**”

### Broward Architect On U.S. Council



EDWARD D. STONE  
... fine arts board

WASHINGTON — President Nixon has named prominent Fort Lauderdale architect Edward D. Stone to the Commission on Fine Arts.

Stone, who landscaped the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts here and drew up the master plan for the headquarters of the Organization of American States, operates an architectural and site planning firm in Fort Lauderdale.

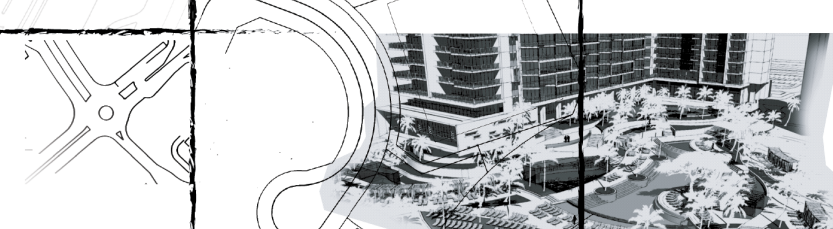
The Commission on Fine Arts advises the President on location of statues, fountains and monuments in the nation's capital, and also passes on the design for federal buildings and has a say on the selection of the appointment of people who will do the work.

The job is non-salaried, but members receive expenses for the meetings, about once a month. They serve four-year terms.



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- Richard Centolella



As such, landscape architects possess a unique skillset that integrates imagination, science, art, and technology. Bringing a deep rational and creative outlook to varied-sector assignments across the globe, professionals are making significant, intuitive connections between people, places, and ideas that may sometimes seem unrelated. So, from large-scale land planning and open space design to community consensus building, historic preservation, and resilient solutions – along with hundreds of services beyond and between – landscape architects continue to be the harmonizers among conservation and development, clients and consumers, and built and native lands. Through their knowledge, and input, the profession not only informs, but transforms, how society lives, works, and plays.

“When someone asks me what I do for a living, I tell them that I help beautify everyday life,” shares EDSA Vice President and 25-year landscape architecture veteran, Mihaela Zaharescu. “But that sentiment goes far beyond just a pretty design. It also relates to our ability to take a holistic approach to projects, looking at more than just the site itself, but the community at large, to ensure each design decision reflects the existing culture and surrounding environment.”

EDSA Principal, FASLA, and American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) National President for 2024 – 2025, Kona Gray, could not agree more, as he explains how landscape architecture is something society often takes for granted. “What we do is fundamental to human survival,” says Gray. “When you look at our capability to design with nature – for spontaneous interactions to occur – for memories and connections to form – our work really starts to tee up the future of humanity.”

## Educating and Advocating

And through such lens, the momentum towards helping others understand the value of landscape architecture, throughout academia, within the design industry, and across the development sector at large, presses on. But such efforts do not come without a handful of challenges.

As it stands, around 5,300 students are currently enrolled in 100 accredited landscape architecture programs across 74 universities in the United States. Compare that to the approximately 30,000 students participating in traditional architecture programs across 139 higher learning institutions. Though both career paths lead students down the path of contributing to the world’s future prosperity, there remains a stark difference in the numbers – why?

A variety of details speak to such statistics, examples being the duration of time both professions have been formally established, along with a general lack of professional awareness. “Most people have no direct contact with us, so they don’t have a clear vision about who we are or what we do,” offers Centolella. “Though, oddly enough, society continues to enjoy the spaces and amenities we create every day. That means it’s up to us, as organizations and practicing professionals, to teach the public, spreading the word about our role as stewards of the land and what we bring to the table as a niche design profession.”

Such thoughts have resonated with fellow landscape architects and associated disciplines over the years, with the assembly of over 250 professional organizations now working to advance the profession through knowledge sharing, financial backing, and mentorship. For

instance, non-profits like the **Landscape Architecture Foundation (LAF)** have provided research, scholarships, and leadership opportunities for students and professionals pursuing advanced knowledge of the discipline since 1966. In addition, more minority-focused organizations, such as **Women in Landscape Architecture (WILA)** and the **Black Landscape Architects Network (BlackLAN)**, strive to make the profession more diverse and accessible to all. Not to mention the additional 75+ organizations associated with the **International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA)**, which includes member groups forwarding and advocating for everything from policy and professional practice to finance and business planning.

But it goes beyond academics and peer-to-peer support. Efforts have transcended their way into the public realm, with groups like **ASLA** working to re-shape the narrative surrounding landscape architecture. By teaming with the FrameWorks Institute, a social science consultant focused on cultivating effective communication, the organization recently published a 20-page report on how to convey the importance of the practice to those unfamiliar. In addition, ASLA continues to spread awareness through various speaking engagements, public forums, and even radio advertisements on NPR.

Finally, one must not fail to recognize a recent win for the profession, that being when the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) designated landscape architecture as an official **STEM discipline**. In a proposal brought forward by ASLA, the team showcased various research, patents, and documentation that displayed the profession's use of science, technology, engineering, and math methodologies in the planning and design of sites around the world. Now officially added to the STEM-designated degree program list, landscape architecture continues to gain credibility while becoming more visible and accessible to a broader audience at a younger age.

“The strides we’ve made in recent years prove that we must remain bold in our thoughts, actions, and choices as we continue to advocate,” exclaims Gray. “In the past, we’ve been too humble, trying to figure out ways to simplify what we do so it could be more palatable for others. This approach no longer serves us. **We are Landscape Architects, and what we do is a big deal.** It’s time we start celebrating that.”

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- Mihaela Zaharescu



## **Transcending the Development Sphere**

Just as the public continues to understand the profession more in-depth, landowners, developers, and investors are looking to landscape architects and their unique competencies as an integral part of creating a well-rounded, revenue-generating project.

Managing environmental curve-balls while ensuring an assignment sustains the ebbs and flows of a fluctuating market, Zaharescu speaks into **the extended role landscape architects play within the realms of design and development**. “We are always focused on the health and preservation of nature – that is and will always be at the core of what we do,” she shares. “But we also have a deep understanding of economics, analyzing the environmental, social, and financial components before even laying pen to paper. From there, we work to depict a client’s vision, and get that concept built in a way that is both community-conscious and ecologically sensitive.”

And when it comes to real estate development of any type, size, or location, there is a universal progression that includes getting things designed, funded, constructed, operational, and profitable within a set time-frame, with the least number of hiccups as possible. But as the world’s purchasing power transfers into the hands of Gen Zs and Millennials, who now account for roughly 50 percent of the population, there adds another layer to this process that must respond the lean towards more sustainable investment choices.

Centolella, who is an involved member of the Urban Land Institute (ULI), one of the world’s largest networks of experts across real estate and planning, has discussed such topics during his time on various design councils and at Spring and Fall meetings. “As it relates to design and development, the subject of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG), has been top-of-mind across the industry for some time now,” he shares. “But for landscape architects, it’s been fundamental to our practice since the beginning of time. This has made us the **go-to experts and strategic design consultants for people and properties looking to adhere to certain environmental standards**, as they seek to achieve an eco-conscious equilibrium that will draw in the next generation.”





*“People are listening to what we have to say, so, let’s take advantage of this moment and use our influences, knowledge, and expertise to change the world.”*

- Kona Gray

So, while landscape architecture teams are sought out to select resilient materials, design for natural disasters, and calculate climate-related variances such as water consumption and carbon sequestration, the addition of certain professional certifications takes environmental stewardship to an even higher level. Becoming a **licensed Professional Landscape Architect (PLA)**, for instance, gives individuals an understanding of ethical standards that ensure the creation of an integral design solution, reflecting public health, safety and welfare. In addition, obtaining a **Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)** certification demonstrates expertise in green building practices, while **SITES Accredited Professionals (SITES AP)** are recognized for being proficient in sustainable land design and development. And though each accreditation involves learning hours and assessments, it is well worth it as landscape architects continue to contribute to the world’s welfare.

A PLA, LEED and SITES AP herself, Zaharescu is excited to see such certifications becoming a requirement for many new projects in the queue. “Just a few years ago, many decision makers weren’t in the mindset of implementing ecological solutions, as that meant a higher spend,” she explains. “Now that climate adaptation and mitigation remain at the forefront of the conversation, developers are seeing the **value of investing in their property in a way that benefits their business, people, and the planet.** It’s a win for all parties involved.”

### ***A Bright Future***

Ultimately, the profession is about more than just boosting revenue and designing something aesthetically pleasing. It is about **enhancing quality of life and strengthening the connection between people and nature in a meaningful, healthy way.** “I’m so delighted to be a landscape architect,” shares Gray. “After the trials our society has endured in recent years, the future hinges on the understanding that our work matters, and what we do has life-altering impacts.”

So, contrary to the viral Super Bowl LVII ad for Booking.com, where the actor refers to himself as a landscape architect while clipping hedges, the purpose of the profession far exceeds its initial perceptions. Landscape architecture is a career driven by problem-solvers, collaborators, storytellers, technical experts, climate activists, experience curators, creative visionaries, and much, much more – with **a goal of positively contributing to tomorrow.** “People are finally listening to what we have to say,” continues Gray. “So, let’s take advantage of this moment and use our influences, knowledge, and expertise to change the world.” □



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