



# MiSITES

VOLUME 15, NUMBER 1 **MICHIGAN** CHAPTER OF THE  
AMERICAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS



#golfclassic21

# **Tee It Up for the** **33rd Annual Michigan ASLA** **Landscape Architects, Contractors &** **Suppliers Golf Classic**

**Please join us in congratulating our**  
**2021 profession recognition honorees**

**Design Professional- Bob Doyle (SmithGroup)**

**Contractor- Matt Caruso (Decra-Scape)**

**Supplier- Dave Alverson (Red Lava)**

**Wednesday, July 28th 2021**

**9:30 am Shotgun Start**

**Mystic Creek Golf Club**

**Milford Township, MI**

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## LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Wow! What a difficult year 2020 has been! As the new president of MiASLA, I do not wish to belabor the events of 2020, but I call for all of us to rethink what we have experienced personally and professionally. The watershed events of 2020, while painful to reflect upon, have created new opportunities to refocus and redirect our professional work. Over the past year, we discovered new platforms for conducting business; new avenues for reconnecting to the physical and social world that we serve; and a greater awareness of the profound good we can perform when we plan and design strategically, scientifically, and collaboratively.

The arrival of the novel Corona virus to our shores created a new and immediate peril for which few Americans were prepared. As professionals, a high percent of our work has focused on how to bring social groups together in physical space to enhance interaction. One of the questions for 2021 and beyond, is how can we enhance social interaction while protecting participants in public spaces as we prepare to meet the next pandemic--a situation that we now know can become a new reality.

The death of George Floyd exposed a long-standing, imminent threat to our society--discrimination. This practice weakens and silently threatens our country. The Michigan chapter has taken bold steps to rectify social injustice for all Americans. Through the diligent work of a courageous group of Excom members, the chapter has created a new Vice-Presidency and Committee for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). This committee is working toward eliminating disparities in opportunity and

broadening professional membership, and is now serving as a model for national ASLA and other state chapters.

The third 2020 watershed event is the intensifying global climate change, which poses a broader threat to life on our planet. The Michigan chapter has been invited to join a consortium of five other state chapters in creating a webinar series on Global Climate Change. The purpose is to discuss how the latest scientific findings are likely to create a major paradigm shift within professional planning and design circles. LA CES credits will be offered. Look for this opportunity online in early summer.

Finally, a few of the other activities are on the books for 2021. The Annual Conference is scheduled in the Cherry Capital of the World--Traverse City, on September 17, 2021. As in the past, a sketch crawl and possible photo shoot will occur the day before with an LARide event the day after. We hope to hold this event live, but I also welcome your comments on whether a digital version should be offered.

In closing, let me extend condolences to any member or friend of MiASLA who may have lost a family member or friend over the past year. Let us regroup and rebuild in 2021. Best wishes.

**Joanne Westphal, ASLA**  
President, Michigan Chapter of ASLA

**ON THE COVER:** Oudolf Garden Detroit, designed by Piet Oudolf, is located at Belle Isle and is set to open to the public August 2021. Photo Credit: Ryan Southern Photography

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 5 Materiality and Site Furnishings in the Outdoor Realm
- 13 Oudolf Garden Detroit Update
- 19 Education Spotlight: Michael Johnson

## SHARE AN IDEA!

We're currently filling our 2021 editorial calendar. If you would like to contribute to MiSITES or suggest a topic or project to cover, please email: [SITESpublication@michiganasla.org](mailto:SITESpublication@michiganasla.org).

## STUDYING FOR THE LARE?

To sign up for our LARE study groups, please email Allison at [education@michiganasla.org](mailto:education@michiganasla.org).



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# MATERIALITY AND SITE FURNISHINGS IN THE OUTDOOR REALM

## A DESIGNER'S GUIDE TO MATERIAL ALTERNATIVES IN OUTDOOR SITE FURNISHING

Kyle Verseman, ASLA | Landscape Forms

The purpose of this article is to provide a general overview of material options as they relate to exterior site furnishings. What follows is not intended to be an exhaustive technical brief with tables and graphs full of ASTM data but rather an overview on the types of materials that are commonly offered in the marketplace. It will include design considerations for various material options related to exterior site furnishings as well as things a designer may consider related to longevity, maintenance and expectations for the materials as they age in order to make informed material selections related to unique outdoor conditions, project needs and client expectations.

### WOOD

Wood is a natural material and has been a popular choice for exterior site furnishings dating back to the 18th century. Wood is a renewable resource and can be sourced from suppliers who practice sustainable forestry operations including those set forth by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) who have established guidelines related to responsible forestry and harvesting practices. There are two types of woods commonly used in site furnishings: hardwoods and softwoods. It should be noted that not all hardwoods are hard and not all softwoods are soft. The distinction between the two is related to the cellular structure of the wood. A simple way to distinguish hardwoods from softwoods is that trees that bear leaves are hardwoods and trees that bear cones are softwoods.

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*(Left) Exterior furnishings with polypropylene fabric cushions.*

*Source: Loll Designs*

Another classification for wood species is whether they are domestic or exotic. Domestic woods refer to species that are native to North America. Exotic woods include all species that are not native to North America. For products like site furnishings that remain outdoors and are subjected to the elements including rain, UV, snow and ice, exotic hardwoods are a common selection due to their tight grain, structural integrity and overall hardness. Some of the more common exotic woods include teak, jarrah, ipe' and purpleheart. Common domestic woods include cedar, redwood, black locust, oak, maple and ash. Generally exotic hardwoods are typically harder than domestic hardwoods. Thermally modified ash is a domestic hardwood that has been thermally (not chemically) modified to alter the chemistry of the wood making it more resistant to environmental elements. Thermally Modified Ash can also be reclaimed wood, particularly from trees that were impacted by the emerald ash borer. The hardness of wood is measured by the Janka Hardness Test which measures a wood's resistance to denting and wear by measuring the force required to embed a nearly ½" diameter steel ball into the wood. Woods with high Janka scores are extremely hard and difficult to carve into.

Wood absorbs water in humid environments and loses moisture in dry environments. Under consistent conditions, it seeks to reach an equilibrium with its maximum mechanical properties being achieved at between 10-15 percent. Most hardwoods used in site furnishings have the potential to last 20+ years under normal use. Many of the popular species of hardwoods used in site furnishings have natural tannins that are toxic to microorganisms which cause decay and rotting. Wood, however, as a natural substance can warp, check, split and crack. Good timber design is essential to maximizing durability. Natural



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*(Left) The natural patina process of ipe, jarrah, and domestically sourced thermally modified ash. Source: Landscape Forms*

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*(Right) Stainless steel bike racks. Source: Landscape Forms*

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*(Middle right) Tea staining on stainless steel. Source: K. Verseman*

.....  
*(Far right) Anodized aluminum bench frame. Source: Landscape Forms*

cracking is to be expected in site furniture as it ages. This cracking most often does not create a condition for splinters, nor does it compromise the structural integrity of the wood but rather enhances its character.

#### Designer Considerations for Wood in Site Furnishings:

- Renewable resource
- Relatively low cost
- Excellent strength to weight ratio
- Hard, durable material, however cracking to be expected
- Unfinished wood will patina to a silver/grey color over time outdoors
- Natural material (evokes warmth)
- Poor conductor of heat (seating surfaces remain cool in summer sun)
- Low maintenance
- Typically left untreated for outdoor applications. If treating with a finish, use stains or oils – do not use varnish or polyurethane. Stains and oils will require ongoing maintenance (reapplication) and can rub off on clothing.

- Some woods (i.e. jarrah) may temporarily leach tannins upon initial installation which can temporarily stain adjacent surfaces. This condition is temporary and fades over time with rain and UV exposure.

#### **METAL**

Metals are a common component of site furniture. The most common metals used in site furniture include carbon steel, stainless steel and aluminum. Carbon steel is an alloy composed mostly of iron along with carbon (less than 2%) and small amounts of manganese, silicon, phosphorus and oxygen (less than 1%). Carbon steel is ductile, malleable, and can be hammered, rolled or pressed into shapes without breaking. Hot rolled carbon steel is used for structural shapes, angles, channels, sheet and plate. Pipe and tube are roll-formed from sheet, cut into strips and welded at the seam. Carbon steel needs to be finished to prevent corrosion in the outdoors. One of the more common forms of finishes to protect carbon steel in site furnishings includes the application of a polyester powder coat. Powdercoating carbon steel provides a



durable, attractive finish that prevents corrosion while providing high performance durability and is also an avenue for a designer to inject color into the landscape. Powdercoat is also a good insulator which helps prevent metal surfaces from becoming too hot in the environment. Steel is a permanent material that can be recycled an infinite number of times and is 100 percent recyclable without loss of quality. Approximately 30% of new steel products contain on average 30 percent recycled steel content.

**Stainless steel** is a generic term that describes more than 60 different grades of low carbon steel which contain at least 10% chromium. The addition of chromium to carbon steel is what gives the stainless steel its corrosion resistance. Stainless steels are rust-resistant alloys because the chromium combines with oxygen to form an invisible layer of chromium-oxide that is self-protective and resists corrosion. There are different grades of stainless steel with the two most common to site furnishings being Grade 304 and Grade 316. Stainless steels with a higher grade number exhibit higher corrosion resistance

but are also more costly. Stainless steel provides good corrosion resistance without a finish; however, it should be noted that stainless steel can exhibit corrosion through a process commonly referred to as ‘tea staining’. Tea staining typically occurs where water with significant chloride content is in regular contact with the surface, thus causing a discoloration (brown stain) on the surface (particularly an issue in coastal environments.) Stainless steel can be processed with a variety of mill or abrasive finishes ranging from a dull low-sheen to a highly polished mirror-like finish.

**Aluminum** is an elemental metal that is soft and unstable in its pure form. Exposure to oxygen forms a surface layer, aluminum oxide, which is very hard and durable and prevents corrosion. Anodized aluminum is aluminum that has been treated through an electrochemical process to develop a very durable finish. Aluminum is lightweight and can be processed to be extremely strong by adding elements like silicon, magnesium and lithium to create an alloy and then further strengthened by hot or cold rolling. Aluminum is available in extrusions,



rolled sheet, strip, wire, case, die cast and impact forged shapes. Cast aluminum is both hard and durable which makes it a good choice for creating detailed shapes.

**Galvanized steel** is steel that has been treated with zinc which acts as a corrosion preventative. Steel galvanizing processes include hot dip, electrogalvanized, Sherardizing, and dry galvanizing or 'shot blasting'. Not all types of galvanizing will accept paint or powdercoat and many prevent proper adhesion. Galvanized steel is commonly used in building materials due to its high corrosion resistance and long life cycle.

#### Designer Considerations for Metals in Site Furnishings:

- Strong, durable and relatively low cost (note some steel types are more costly than others)
- Can be made into custom shapes
- Carbon steel must be treated to prevent corrosion
- Cost can vary dependent upon type and grade of metal being used
- Good conductor of heat (can make for hot seating surfaces in summer sun). Utilization of powdercoat helps insulate the metal. Light colors will remain cooler in summer sun. Addition of patterns or perforation in metals can also reduce heat gain.
- Stainless steel finishes can become very hot in the sun
- Low maintenance, however damaged finishes may require periodic touch up to prevent corrosion
- Available with high recycled content and is 100% recyclable

#### **CONCRETE**

Concrete is a manufactured material whose basic ingredients include aggregate, sand, cement and water. Specialty elements and colored pigments are added to achieve unique properties and characteristics such as higher strength and various colors. The most common types of concrete that are utilized in manufactured site furnishings include precast concrete, ultra high performance concrete (UHPC), and fiber reinforced concrete. Concrete is a highly versatile medium with exceptional design capabilities for site furnishings.



Concrete has a high compression strength and demonstrates good resistance to impact and abrasion. Certain types resist water and chemicals and provide significant flexibility in shaping as well as opportunities to achieve very thin and flexible cross sections. Common finishes for concrete include as-cast, polished, acid etched and sandblasted.

Designer Considerations for Concrete in Site Furnishings:

- Strong, durable, and relatively low cost
- Can be made into custom shapes including thin profiles
- Color can be achieved through color additives (pigments) and aggregate (note: blue pigments are rare and can cost significantly more)
- Poor conductor of heat (seating surfaces remain cool in summer sun)
- Low maintenance
- Heavy, may require specific equipment for installation
- It is a porous material – staining may occur, however can often be cleaned and UV exposure will help stains fade over time
- Slight imperfections to be expected – honeycombing, bug holes, hairline cracks and fins are to be expected to a certain degree. Slight imperfections give the product character through evidence of its craftsmanship and do not undermine structural integrity.

**POLYETHYLENE**

Polyethylene is a type of thermoplastic polymer resin, and the most widely used plastic in the world. It accepts color pigmentation without degradation of material quality. It is highly flexible and durable under normal use and resists the growth of mold and bacteria. Polyethylene repels moisture and when combined with UV inhibitors, it holds color very well and does not fade over time.

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*(Left) A custom precast concrete bench designed by SmithGroup (above), and UHPC allows for thin shapes and profiles. Source: K. Verseman*

*(Right) Polyethylene litter receptacles. Source: K. Verseman*



There are different grades of Polyethylene that are appropriate for varying parts of exterior site furnishings. Linear Low Density (LLDPE) is strong and flexible – often used for litter liners. Linear Medium Density (LMDPE) exhibits good stiffness and impact strength – it is often used in planters, litter tops, seating and bollard sleeves. Ultra-high Molecular Weight Polyethylene (UHMWPE) has the toughest and highest impact as well as low friction properties which makes it a great material to be used in chair glides, bumpers and latch mechanisms. Polyethylene is low maintenance and typically cost effective. It is easily shaped and manufactured. Color is integral and not a surface finish and it is readily recyclable. Some considerations of using polyethylene – while it exhibits good abrasion resistance, it is not scuff proof. Care should be taken to avoid unnecessary abrasive contact with materials such as stone, concrete and brick.

#### Designer Considerations for Polyethylene in Site Furnishings:

- Strong, durable and relatively low cost
- Can be made into custom shapes
- Color can be achieved through color additives (pigments) and aggregate
- Many different grades of polyethylene appropriate for various uses in site furnishings
- Low maintenance
- Often includes significant (up to 100%) recycled content such as used milk jugs. Is also recyclable.

#### **TEXTILES / FABRICS**

Fabrics are commonly used in residential and commercial grade site furnishings that include pillows and seat cushions as well as fabric umbrellas. Textiles can be used to soften the underlying structure and introduce color, pattern and texture in the environment. A common textile used with outdoor site furnishings consist of solution dyed acrylic fibers. This fabric has superior UV resistance compared to other fibers, resists mold and mildew and is relatively easy to clean. It is also a good choice because it dries quickly when wet and has no dye sites. One item to note, even though it is UV resistant, it has been observed that some colors are more fade resistant than others and color selection should be carefully considered when specifying based on site conditions and UV exposure.

#### Designer Considerations for Textiles in Site Furnishings:

- Many colors, patterns and textures available
- Select marine grade fabric with UV resistance for longevity
- Select lighter colors where UV exposure is significant (sunny, southern climates in particular)
- Good candidate for branding (text, logos, etc.)

#### **CONCLUSION**

There are many choices to make when it comes to selecting site furnishings for your project. Considerations such as design aesthetic, accessibility, geographic location, site conditions, client needs, program needs, environmental impact and sustainability, and available maintenance program (or lack thereof) just to name a few. Evaluating these choices can difficult and that is where the assistance of a manufacturer’s representative can help. Not only can they assist you with evaluating material options, but they can also provide you with technical data, assistance with specifications, custom projects and budgeting. Just reach out and let us know how we can help. •

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# LARide "Cherryland" CycleTour 2021

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## DIVERSITY, EQUITY, & INCLUSION

The Diverse Perspectives Series is hosted by the Michigan ASLA Chapter Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee (DEI). This series aims to highlight minority design students and professionals, while providing a platform to share their experiences, work and contributions within the profession of landscape architecture.

This month, we are highlighting Landscape Architecture and Environmental Design Masters candidate from the Florida International University, Mara Stegaru.



### Mara Stegaru

Candidate for Master of Landscape Architecture  
and Environmental + Urban Design  
**Florida International University**

Registration



When: **May 26th**  
Time: **6:00pm (EST)**

<https://www.michiganasla.org/>

*The DEI Committee aims to encourage, promote, and celebrate diversity, equity, and inclusion in our chapter and profession.*

Interested in joining or learning more about the Michigan ASLA DEI Committee? Contact our Vice-President of DEI, Stephanie Onwenu at [dei@michiganasla.org](mailto:dei@michiganasla.org)

Visit our webpage at  
<https://www.michiganasla.org/diversity-equity-and-inclusion>

## DIVERSITY, EQUITY, & INCLUSION



Source: Ryan Southern Photography

# UDOLF GARDEN DETROIT UPDATE

PIET OUDOLF'S NEW PUBLIC GARDEN ON BELLE ISLE IS OPENING AUG 2021

**Maura Campbell | Oudolf Garden Detroit**

## **COURTING PIET OUDOLF**

Four years ago, in early April 2017, Piet Oudolf, considered by many to be the premier public garden designer in the world today, made his first-ever trip to Detroit. He came for his first date intrigued by a “love letter” he had received in late 2016 from members of the Garden Club of Michigan, who wanted to commission him to design a garden on Belle Isle, the Olmsted influenced 982-acre island-park in the Detroit River, now run as a Michigan state park.

Since he was in town for less than two days, it was important to make every minute count. After being picked up from the airport, Oudolf was taken to Belle Isle via surface streets so he could begin to see the “real” Detroit, a city of contrasts, gritty with a can-do spirit, full of opportunity and possibility. That night he made a presentation to an eclectic mix of 90 or so traditional and non-traditional community leaders and garden pros, who sat still and enthralled as he shared nearly 300 slides of his work from around the world including the High Line in New York and Lurie Garden in Chicago.

Piet was shown a number of potential sites during his visit and on the second day, just before heading to lunch, he asked if he could do one more loop on the island. As the car turned left on Picnic Way between the Anna Scripps Whitcomb Conservatory and the Nancy Brown Peace Carillon, Oudolf asked the driver to stop, he jumped out arms raised and said “Here, here is where my garden should go.” He was pointing to the scraggly turf site in between the Carillon and the U.S. Canadian Peace Monument. From the aerial photos of the site, it was easy to trace the outline of the grandstand that was built each year on the site to view the Detroit Grand Prix.

## **A SEED IS GERMINATED**

That day the seed germinated for what we now call Oudolf Garden Detroit and its all-volunteer grounds crew operating as the non-profit corporation Friends of Oudolf Garden. This all-volunteer group made it happen from inception to completion with a grand opening scheduled for August 28, 2021. When asked, Oudolf will say that it is the most natural site of any of his public gardens. After three subsequent visits to Detroit, he will also tell you how much he has come to love Detroit and Detroiters.

This garden is arguably the first big new attraction on Belle Isle since the Michigan Department of Natural Resources took over operations in February 2014. Oudolf's newest public garden is planted in the Dutch Wave planting style – a relaxed and naturalistic style that aims to make plant design less rigid and controlled than traditional gardens. Plants are chosen for their four-season interest, not just while in flower or for color but also texture and shape and the ability to behave well with their neighboring plants.

It is also the first garden Oudolf has designed using all three of his iconic planting styles – matrix planting, block planting and group planting. From inception to installation this garden has been groundbreaking.

## **A GARDEN TO GROW TOURISM AND ECONOMIC IMPACT**

Belle Isle currently welcomes around 4.5 million visitors a year. Lurie Garden in Chicago welcomes around 10 million and the High Line has become one of the most popular tourist attractions in New York City attracting more than 10 million visitors annually. This garden has the potential of being the number one tourist



attraction on Detroit's east side and possibly the entire region. Local growers already expect the demand to go up for the types of plants visitors see growing in the garden. That demand, along with increased tourism, could provide an economic lift to the park, the neighborhood and beyond.

In order to get to the point of opening the garden to the public, funds had to be raised to design, install and maintain the garden, fiscal sponsors secured, memos of agreement and understanding signed and public hearings and community outreach events held. To date, Oudolf Garden Detroit has raised more than \$4.4 million and plans to continue to raise at least another \$300,000 for subsequent improvements and educational programming. Right now more than \$2.2 million is in an endowment fund at the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan to ensure the garden will be maintained in the future.

#### **MOTHER NATURE ADDS TWISTS AND TURNS TO THE GARDEN**

Originally Oudolf planned a 1.5-acre garden but as he became more excited about the garden and the site, Oudolf replaced his first design with a bigger and even more creative second design. Then Mother Nature dictated a third design. After breaking ground for the garden in June 2019, we all watched as the water on Belle Isle and the garden site hit record highs in July 2019. All that could be done was to wait for the water to recede, ask growers if they could over winter the plants and go back to the drawing board to raise the main site up 3 feet. This would ensure it could withstand flooding for at least the next 100 years. Not satisfied with flooding, Mother Nature hit again with a worldwide pandemic in 2020 that delayed construction for several months in 2020.

The third design has turned out to be the best and luckily, since it was an outdoor public garden, construction and installation could be done in compliance with state mandated COVID-19 safety measures.

#### **THE GARDEN IS PLANTED**

In late August 2020, 26,000 plants were planted in record time on the site. More than 90 percent of the plants have come from Michigan growers that were planted by a combination of professionals and highly experienced volunteers.



Two of Piet's closest U.S. friends and collaborators Roy Diblik and Austin Eischeid came to town to take Oudolf's artistic and complex design off the page and draw it on the ground ready for the plants. In October 2020 volunteers added 48,000 bulbs to the garden following the bulb design Oudolf had created to add additional depth and seasonal interest to the garden. When planting was completed several days ahead of schedule, Oudolf, who was monitoring the progress from the Netherlands via FaceTime, said no group had ever done a better job planting one of his gardens than the Detroit team. Additional plants will go in this spring and the rain garden will be completed. In 2022, a wetlands garden will be planted at the base of the carillon.

### **INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGY OVERCOMES CHALLENGES**

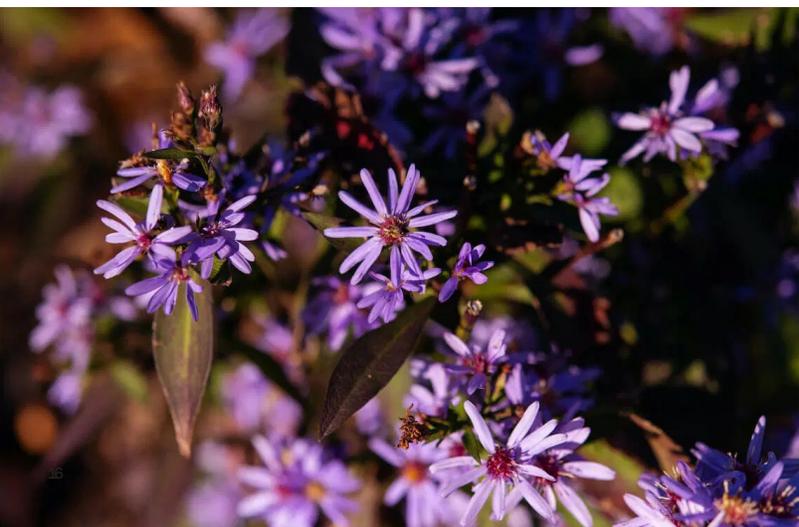
One of the primary ways so much was accomplished during challenging times was through innovative use of the website and technology. Oudolf Garden Detroit has leveraged the effectiveness of its all-volunteer Grounds Crew by extensively relying on technology. In addition to managing its own website, Facebook and Instagram accounts, it has tracked donations to support the Garden across four organizations: The Garden Club of Michigan, The Belle Isle Conservancy, Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan and the Friends of Oudolf Garden. The centralized database manages 4,000 plus interested garden followers and 1,100 volunteers.

To realize Piet Oudolf's design and install this complex garden of more than 74,000 plants, grasses, bulbs and trees representing 154 total species in 2,400 distinct locations, Mapping Solutions working with Oudolf Garden Detroit, created a geographic Information System (GIS) locationally enabled database to precisely place the multitude of plant groupings. For educational purposes, the GIS system allows the general public to click on Piet's design for plants or his design for bulbs and see where each plant is located in the garden. The

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*(Left) Images from a volunteer planting event during the fall of 2020, and (right) a view of the garden taking shape with the carillon beyond.*  
Source: Ryan Southen Photography





Source: Ryan Southern Photography

mobile web application allows users to view drone aerial imagery and is also GPS-enabled. The garden has become a learning classroom.

### LEADERS WITH VISION

The garden would not have been possible without the vision and support of local foundations and individuals and the three organizations who served as its initial fiscal sponsors, The Garden Club of Michigan, the Belle Isle Conservancy and the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan. Nor could it have happened without the professional expertise from its talented local contractors including landscape architects InSite Design and general contractor Anglin Civil. The Grounds Crew through Friends of Oudolf Garden is dedicated to creating and maintaining the garden as a free venue for all Detroiters and visitors for generations to come.

Oudolf Garden Detroit employs ecological maintenance practices as a model of sustainable garden management in an urban park setting. Plants are left throughout the winter providing bird and insect populations with shelter and food resources. A late winter cutback leaves plant debris on site as living mulch. No synthetic chemicals or pesticides will be used on the garden beds. As it grows, the garden will become a haven for wildlife, birds, butterflies, insects and bees as well as people.

As this ecological and artistic garden comes to life, the team is hard at work further developing ties to the community and planting the seeds for education both inside and outside the garden. People will be able to gather in the garden and learn ways to take what they see home with them as well. The dream is that 100 years from now this garden will still be growing and thriving on this incredible island park in the middle of the international waterway between Canada and the United States. •

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# EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT: MICHAEL JOHNSON

Q&A WITH A LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE FOUNDATION BOARD MEMBER

MiSITES Editorial Board and Michael Johnson | SmithGroup



## **Hi, Michael. Please introduce yourself!**

I co-lead SmithGroup's Urban Design Practice and have been in the firm's Ann Arbor office for 14 years. I studied landscape architecture at Ball State University and urban design at the University of Michigan. I have spent my career working across scales in a wide range of cities and geographies around the country and globe. I currently serve on the Landscape Architecture Foundation (LAF) Board as the VP of Research. My work at LAF is focused on raising the profile of collaborative research that blurs boundaries between academia and applied practice within the design field.

## **How did you get involved with the Landscape Architecture Foundation?**

In 2014 I was asked by my boss, mentor, and friend (and current ASLA President) Tom Mroz if I would consider joining the LAF board following the passing of our friend and colleague Deb Mitchell. I was honored and surprised. I did some research on the organization, called a few friends and colleagues, and was completely blown away by the impact the organization was having on our profession. I was specifically impressed by the focus on scholarship, research, and design leadership.

I truly appreciate being part of the long-standing commitment that SmithGroup (and formerly JJR) have had to LAF. In 1986, our firm helped establish the JJR Research Fund. In 2009, LAF was the recipient of a major bequest from Clarence Roy, one of the three founders of JJR, and his wife Ruth. The gift was the largest LAF has received in its 44-year history, and helped launch the Landscape Performance Series – which just celebrated its 10-year anniversary. That gift was followed in 2015 by a bequest from Deb Mitchell that led to a first-

of-its-kind, \$25,000 annual grant. This grant program supports research projects that fuse academia and practice, and generates knowledge and insights that expand landscape architecture's scope and impact.

### **What value does LAF bring to the profession?**

LAF's work is increasing the capacity and influence of landscape architects to create a more sustainable, just, and resilient future for our cities and communities. The core programming is focused on scholarship, leadership and research. I really feel that the organization has become a forward-leaning arm for the profession, especially as it relates to equity, diversity, climate change and the tremendously beneficial impact that landscape architects can have addressing these issues.

It is impressive to note that LAF has awarded over \$1.8 million to more than 600 students through two annual scholarships programs. With \$180,000 available annually, LAF is a leading source of scholarships for landscape architecture students. These awards recognize emerging leadership, reward superior student performance, support increased professional diversity, and assist students with unmet financial need.

LAF has also invested over \$3 million in research initiatives and pioneered a performance-metric case study methodology for landscape architecture. Their work completely aligns with what SmithGroup has traditionally focused our research investments on: (1) bridging the gap between research and practice and (2) measuring and quantifying the environmental, social, and economic benefits of landscapes and the built environment. LAF's strategic efforts are building a crucial body of knowledge, informing the future of our design practice and helping to make the case for more sustainable policies and design solutions.



*(Right) Michael Johnson participating in public engagement opportunities led by SmithGroup. Source: SmithGroup*



Source: SmithGroup

### **What projects have excited you the most during your time with LAF?**

I'm really excited about the current "[Designing a Green New Deal](#)" Superstudio and Summit. This effort seeks to advance national climate action on regional and local levels through innovative new ideas for climate-responsive landscapes, buildings, infrastructures, and public works projects. The Superstudio initiative emphasizes the essential role designers must play in leading the nation's response to climate change, both at the scale of a national plan and through built works that exemplify how we can get to where we need to be. The promise of a Green New Deal demands critical, imaginative examination if it is to be the vehicle for a better future that is more sustainable and more just. LAF is undertaking two initiatives to flesh out what this climate-action vision could mean for the future and to give form and visual clarity to the scale, scope, and pace of physical and social transformation.

I was also extremely humbled to help with development of the [Deb Mitchell Research Grant](#). It was an inspiring and emotional experience to work with incredible colleagues across academia and practice while also trying my best to understand what Deb would have wanted. We have since awarded two \$25,000 grants over the last two years that truly embody the spirit of the grant and contribute to the legacy of cross-disciplinary innovation that Deb brought to the profession and to my firm. One of the highlights of my career has been reviewing entries, interviewing candidates, debating the proposal with amazing colleagues, and getting to call each of the first two winners of the grant.

### **Q: How has your work with LAF impacted you or influenced your work?**

LAF brought me back home to the profession of landscape architecture. I spent much of my early career not only being frustrated having to explain to people what landscape architects do, but also feeling more comfortable using my other title as "urban designer" because I thought it was easier to understand and better described what I do. My experience with the LAF Board has not only allowed me to collaborate with like-minded people from across the profession to tackle important global and local challenges, it has made me proud to do that all as a landscape architect.

I remember walking into my first board meeting with several of my idols in the field and being blown away by the way that potential professional competitors were able to collaborate to solve even bigger problems together. I continue to be impressed with the respectful sharing and forward-thinking collaboration that occurs every time we get together. I have made new connections and life-long friends, and look forward to continuing to push the boundaries of the profession I love.

### **What advice would you give to landscape architect students or future landscape architect leaders?**

1. Solve the right problem. No matter where you are in your career, always ask questions, listen to those who will be most impacted by your work for answers, and spend a disproportionate amount of time getting to the heart of the real issues we need to address.
2. Collaborate! The design professions are stronger together and need each other and others outside of our professional rooms to tackle wicked and seemingly unsolvable problems.
3. Give back. Donate your time or money, whatever you can. And be bold advocates and activists with your giving. Champion new practices and new leaders. Help the profession strengthen and diversify our capacity and our global perspective of who we serve.

### **What is your favorite part about being on the LAF Board?**

LAF is on the leading edge of the profession regarding landscape solutions for climate change, rapid urbanization, species extinction, and social and racial inequity. I especially enjoy the collaborative spirit of the board. It is a fun group to be a part of, and I leave each meeting motivated to do more for the profession. One of the true honors of my career was contributing to the [New Landscape Declaration](#) as part of the board. This provided a profound and timely call to action for the profession that built upon and added to the legacy of the original declaration written by Ian McHarg in 1996. It has inspired not only reflection and conversation, but action to move these principles forward. •



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