

Parks for All?

PORTLAND, HOUSELESSNESS, AND QUESTIONS ON LANDSCAPES OF HOME

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ADDY SMITH-REIMAN

in conversation with

NICK ACETO, ASLA,

JOHANNA CAIRNS, ASLA,

STEVEN MANSFIELD, ASLA,

GRACE MCNEILL,

and

BRIAN TOWNSEND

Steven: I've been in Portland for four years; I come from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I work with Matthew Cunningham Landscape Design and I'm a co-chair of the Maine Section of BSLA. My interest in jumping in to this houselessness conversation is to compare what I've seen of houselessness in the South and how people react to it there with the situation here, in Portland.

Nick: I'm Nick Aceto with Aceto Landscape Architects. For me, this topic is important as a native Portlander. I lived away for quite a while and recently relocated our practice to the Old Port here in Portland, proudly to serve my home city. It's an important topic and one that we've engaged in a number of ways. We won a Portland Society for Architecture (PSA) competition with Russ Tyson and Liz Trice to

design a homeless shelter block and associated public space in the West End. We parlayed our prize winnings into a homeless awareness Park(ing) Day installation. Recently, we've been fortunate to work with Kevin Bunker and Developers Collaborative as a client, the City of Portland, and Brian on the Portland Homeless Services Center, which is a 50,000 square foot facility on Riverside Street in Portland. That's been a very interesting project and process and I'm eager to hear Brian's take on it in this conversation.

Grace: I also work at ALA with Nick. I have only been a landscape designer for about six months. I graduated from Penn State last year. One of the first projects I started working on here at ALA was the new Homeless Services Center project. It's been interesting to translate my schooling into a completely

different type of project than what I was used to.

Brian: Hi. I'm the executive director at Amistad, here in Portland. We generally have a low profile in the community; we're sort of quiet on purpose. There's been an exception to that in the last few months, because of our engagement with the Homeless Services Center project with Nick and Grace and Kevin Bunker. Also with Kevin, we partnered on a new, 38 bed women's housing community that just got launched, Freedom Place.

The heartbeat of what we do is connection with folks who are unhoused. That's a large group and we work with a large group. We see our work through the lens of supporting folks who exist at the intersection of poverty and trauma, substance use

disorders, hunger, and homelessness. We engage through the peer support model. Almost all our staff are folks who have gotten through their own life circumstances that are similar to the folks we're supporting. Therefore, they're uniquely able to connect in a meaningful, purposeful way. Because of this, we get good, timely, accurate information about what's really a priority for people. We also learn immediately and urgently about what's happening "on the streets," which also means in the hotels, in the shelters, and in the parks.

We're pretty authentically humble about all of it because we never know everything. Our lens is always limited. But we do try to leverage what we understand and know to try to influence, partners in the community to shape systems and policies so that those needs get addressed.

I'm excited to be part of the conversation.

Johanna: I'm from Portland. I went to school in Massachusetts and started working for Matthew Cunningham Landscape Design. We've since moved up here to Portland, and I'm happy to be home. I also co-chair the Maine Section of BSLA with Steven.

I first got involved with the houseless community through the organization Food, Not Bombs in college. Since getting into landscape architecture, in graduate school we talked about some of these ideas in classes. It would be ideal if we could bridge work and this kind of work. I was lucky to work on a pro bono project with Matthew for the Cambridge Women's Center. I'd like to do more, and I'd like to do more work up here in Portland, especially. I'm really excited to be a part of this conversation.

Addy: Thank you all for joining this conversation. I am trained as a landscape architect and planner, and currently serving as executive director of the Portland Society for Architecture (PSA). Tonight's conversation is one piece of larger work that PSA is doing on this topic. I'd like to start here:

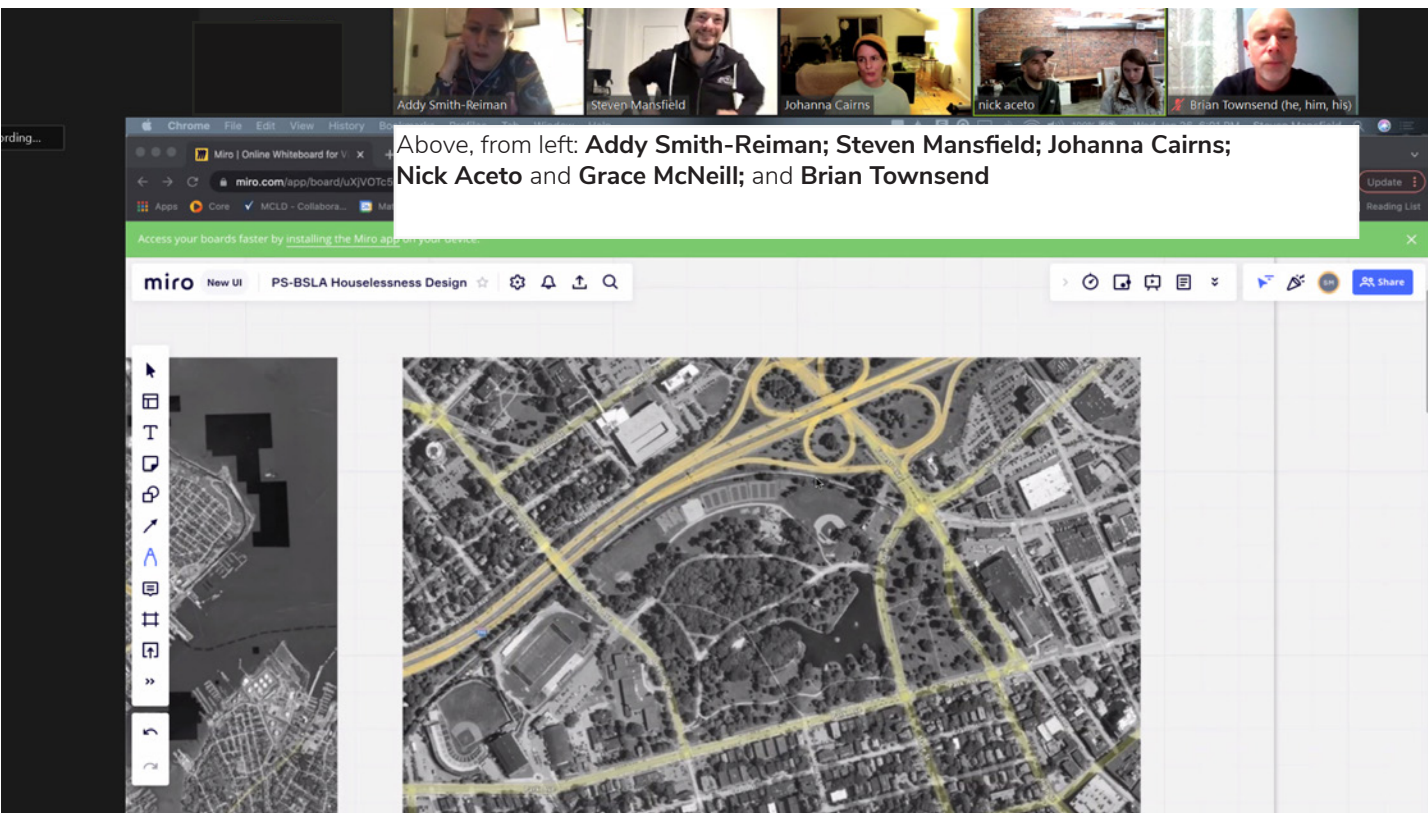
When you're looking at a master plan, there's a particular public that is being thought of. How, as designers, can you rethink what the master planning process is, especially about parks and open spaces, to include the full public? If we were to include the houseless in our planning, considerations might include transportation networks, temporary homes, gathering spaces, places to receive services, and there's a lot of stigma and

fears. How does one draw through that riddle?

Nick: In our studio every day we do residential work and typically a lot of our residential work is higher end residential work, like a lot of landscape architects. Design is a luxury that, in many cases, is only afforded by people who have the resources to afford it. So that's one interesting side of the spectrum that we practice on. The other side that I think our studio is particularly focused on and driven towards is public work.

Sometimes that's in the form of private development, ironically -- housing projects and multifamily projects -- and sometimes it's parks and sometimes it's homeless shelters. One of the dilemmas that we discuss constantly in the studio is the idea of public space and how, especially in Portland, it's a place for pretty things to happen. The hipsters at the food trucks in the East End look nice and it's a pretty image, but the fact of the matter is that as landscape architects, we design public spaces for everybody.

If we designed public spaces that were more engaging and activated and made for people, would that then make those spaces safer? That might include making those spaces comfortable and



more habitable for people without houses, right? Maybe we create public landscapes that people can sleep in. Would that be a bad thing? Would it be a bad thing to create public landscapes for people skateboarding? Would it be a bad thing to create landscapes for people to create graffiti, create art? I don't know. We're creating a stage for pure democracy. As a former skateboarder, naturally I have a rebellious spirit in my heart. When I go to a great skate park, it's always struck me to see all the activity that's happening and how the skateboarders work it out. It's kind of chaos, but it's self-regulated chaos. I've always thought that this was a perfect model for really good public space.

When I look out the window from our office to the space across the street here, I see a unique, new space. It's well composed, they just designed it. Construction was just completed. There are new trees there and everything's in order, it's very orderly. But there's nobody there. There's certainly nobody sleeping there.

There's nobody skateboarding there and there's nobody making art there. So, what happens there? It's for the three restaurants. That's fine, well, and good. But I think public space can be so much more than it is.

In Portland, we have this attitude to keep "those people" away, whoever they are, keep them out. That is not what public space is. And it's not what good design is. It's not how good cities work.

Steven: I totally agree. I come from a similar background. I still ride BMX. When I worked in Louisiana, I worked in a landscape architecture firm that designed 50% high end residential and 50% public spaces. When I was working on a public garden or plaza downtown, we sometimes secretly designed things into it that weren't really supposed to

be there. There were large fountains in one plaza that people used to bathe in. At first, it was discouraged but then people stopped caring. It was 105 degrees outside, and people were just hanging out, getting a good breeze. The Mississippi River was right there. People were skating and riding BMX in the same spot, on different little rails and ledges that were put in. Nobody really cared because it was 105 degrees and nobody was out there doing anything else. It wasn't a problem.

And then, we were also designing residential outdoor garden living areas, asking questions like, how many outlets do you want? What do you want in your outdoor kitchen? You want a grill? Do you want a refrigerator?

These little elements could very easily be designed into public spaces.

GFCI (for electric outlets) is at the bottom of all light poles, it's super simple. Most lighting manufacturers offer the option to put them in. What's it going to hurt? It's taking nothing away. Grills scattered around. All these little things that we all want our own backyards for our own private use, but don't want other people to have them in parks. But they would be so accessible for people to have them in parks in ways that anybody could use them.

How many times have you, as a person who is not houseless, been out and your phone runs out of battery? You're at the park. What are you going to do? Well, you could have charged your phone, but you didn't want somebody else charging their phone there. So now we don't get to either.

By not wanting a certain type of person to do something out there now not allows anybody to do something out there. It's designing for uninhabitable and inhospitable spaces. If you design a bench that sucks to sit in, nobody's going

to sit in it at all. It's a huge bummer.

Johanna: Those of you who have been in Portland for a while, have you noticed a lot of defensive architecture strategies around?

Addy: Absolutely.

Nick: We've had projects in the city here in the last couple of years to design public privately owned public spaces, where the design objective from the beginning was, just make sure no one can sleep there. There's no way to make the space comfortable without designing a space that someone can find a way to sleep in. They're not different things.

Addy: It's interesting too, when we keep hearing about the parks as our backyards, especially for outdoor gathering during the pandemic, that the spaces again are only intended to be the outdoor backyard for a certain public.

Portland has a history of this. At one point, before any of us moved back or moved here, there were rigid structures put around planters -- sort of the same features used to keep birds off of ledges. They were used to keep people from sitting on the planters. There was such a public outcry that they were all removed, but there is a long history here of an aggressive approach to creating that pastoral picturesque, but not the messiness of home.

Steven: One problem with the stigma against houseless is that it lumps everybody into one group and which is not the case at all. People come from a huge range of backgrounds. There's also a huge range of what they want and need. Some want help from a shelter and some do not want help from a shelter, but it all gets lumped into one answer on what is best. We know, as people, that this is not the same. So, as a designer and planner, how do you answer that? And how do we connect to larger trail

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networks and other access points and parks and people and needs and services throughout the city?

Nick: Thinking about the homeless shelter process, there were a lot of conversations around the adjacency of the shelter site to a broad conservation easement and open space directly adjacent, and the adjacency to the river and the whole river corridor. Should there be a barrier, or should that be a permeable boundary where people can come and go? People could camp in the woods and the line between where the shelter site begins and the woods is blurred, or is there a hard, hard line?

Different folks had different, very specific ideas on that.

And I'm still trying to understand the best way to treat that. I think some houseless people do choose to camp and some people don't. And then, I think at the end of the day, it comes down to basic human needs: people just want to get a good night's sleep and get rest, and feed themselves and be warm. And if that means that they have to camp in the woods to get a good night's sleep, then that's what they have to do.

Maybe parks become a place where houseless folks sleep and where they can access services nearby. I'm not sure. I am curious to hear Brian's thoughts on sleeping outside and what choices people have and what they choose.

Brian: I'll point out that during the planning process for the homeless service center, Nick and Nick's team were definitely the progressive voices in

the room around utilization of space. I wish that the whole group had been able and willing to advance some of the vision. The thing that stands out is the concept of indoors and outdoors and trying to find the right way to create space that accommodates people with their various agencies and preferences, through a phased willingness to accept the support of a facility like the Homeless Service Center.

The idea was to create some covered, outdoor pavilion-type spaces that could extend the Homeless Service Center so that it would be more of an indoor and outdoor space. In my mind, this is

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If you aggregate that through a community, you have a community that's far more robust and rich and interesting, and all of a sudden the things that superficially look like signs of poverty actually are something altogether different.

Brian Townsend

Executive Director of Amistad, Portland, Maine

logically connected to what might be informal sites in the woods around that property and would allow the teams that were going to be at the Homeless Service Center to holistically engage with anyone and everyone in and around that property on the same terms as a person who was trying to get their needs met around "shelter or survival," making connections, trying to support people with basic needs, but also building trust and understanding for what each individual was trying to accomplish, including potentially not wanting help or not wanting to come indoors.

It's really the right approach. Unfortunately, I think there are

entrenched feelings against that level of perceived disorder and non-linear programming. It's fallback you see in systems all the time where everything is generally fear-based, instead of potential-based or hope-based.

Whatever the reason, most people will generally try to find a place that's secluded enough to keep them from being harassed or from having their privacy compromised for safety, all of it. But most people aren't equipped to stay by themselves for long periods of time without being able to renew their resources, so most do need to be close to some sort of urban infrastructure.

It's impossible to generalize the experience of the folks who are unhoused. If you cut a path through Deering Oaks Park last year when houseless folks were there en masse, you initially had this impression of sort of generalizable qualities that don't hold up to even a superficial kind of inspection. Everyone has a very separate story to tell about what brought them

to this moment in time in this place. No one has the same trajectory. It's helpful to have building blocks of understanding about the failures of capitalism and the realities of childhood trauma and everything else that sort of generally tends to wash lots of people onto the shore of various forms of need, but it also is a generalization that is wise to abandon quickly.

Have gratitude to people for demonstrating that on this very, very, very brief existence that we have, the more worldviews and senses of what life really is that we interact with, the more fulfilled we are. If you aggregate that through a community, you have a

community that's far more robust and rich and interesting, and all of a sudden the things that superficially look like signs of poverty actually are something altogether different.

Addy: I think that's brilliant, Brian. It also immediately made me think of how designers render these spaces. These renderings are the marketing tool of what to expect, what we want to see. It's a false, idealized use of public space. The humans that use these spaces are very rarely represented.

Steven: There's a lot of policy that we've discussed that we as designers can't don't have control over. As landscape architects and architects, we design for a client who often wants a specific image. What are some ways that we can think about spaces, even residential spaces, to make the surroundings better for everyone? Is it through planting types, through utility access that can just be snuck in for one way or another, through production gardens? The City Citrus program in Baton Rouge invites people who have a citrus tree in their front yard to put it on a map. If a citrus tree is on the map, you can go and find it and pick Satsuma oranges (or whatever) whenever you want. As designers, how can we think about streetscapes and think about parks and think about front yards that will also help the environment as a whole, not just the person paying for it and their idealized view?

We are stewards of the public realm. Little things like making sure how your home addresses the street is important, and you don't put your four-car garage on the street because that's inhumane. That's one way to answer your question, Steven. There are many ways that we can participate in the civic landscape: individually from a residential garden scale level, up to like a public park, you know, city town center level, right. It

may be putting fruit trees in your front yard. It may also be just your attitude towards the public realm and being a good neighbor and being a good participant in your community and illustrating that with how you how you design your space.

Grace: There's something interesting that you said, Steven, about to access utilities and resources and how simple it is. Just throw up outlets onto a street lamp! When we spoke to a group of houseless, people when we were in the process of designing the shelter, the number one thing they all said was that there are no outlets in the city anywhere. It's hard to find somewhere to charge your phone. And once you do, you gatekeep that location so that no one else knows where it is so that you can always have access.

Something like that simple should be accessible everywhere. Same thing with access to clean drinking water. The city of Paris has drinking fountains that have clean public water. Anybody can access them at any time. Little things like that sort of thing should be implemented more often in public spaces throughout the city of Portland.

Johanna: Are there zones with free internet in the city?

Addy: There is Congress Square Park. It's privately funded, but there's Wi-Fi there. And then it's the libraries. The libraries have served a huge function in providing restrooms and gathering spaces and internet and power and infrastructure. With COVID, they've been closed for two years, and it's been really amazing to see what's happened. But those resources will come online again too.

Steven: What about outdoor entertainment and information? We, as people who are not houseless, have

our homes and we can watch TV and the news and these things in our house. There's a lot of people who cannot watch and be up to date with certain things going on. Why not outdoor information centers? From a design standpoint, it would be terrible to have gigantic screens blaring at you 24/7, but it doesn't have to be something like that. Look at the tower on the Time and Temperature Building that tells the time of day. That's a great feature. Even if you don't have a phone or a watch, you still know what time it is. Why can't something that tells important news updates be designed in as a feature in our public spaces?

Nick: I think it comes down to how much money does it make? As a city or as individuals, what does it do if we provide this utility for houseless people, whether it's a place to sleep, food to eat, a place to get information, a place to plug in a phone. What does it do for me?

I'd like to ask: What does it do for our city? If our city is in a better place, then we're going to be in a better place. If we think of ourselves as existing within a community that's different way to frame it.

Johanna: When people gather, isn't there some amount of law enforcement that comes and clears people in the end?

Addy: I live four blocks from Deering Oaks Park. There, they would close the park at dusk. For a few hours, houseless people would leave. They would go over to the post office for a while, and then they come back. There's a cycle of moving around and there really isn't any kind of enforcement to break that up.

Nick: One thing we heard in our research was that sometimes people are just looking for a place to rest. If they're continually being moved along, just getting restorative sleep and rest is a huge benefit When people are ready to

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make a better way for themselves, they need rest first.

In the quasi-public spaces that we've worked on, it's been a bit of a game. We're trying to design comfortable, habitable public spaces. It's hard to draw a line between the desirable people in the pretty picture whom owners want to use the space and the people that may use the space and who may not be "desirable." As landscape architects, we're trying to design good, comfortable, habitable public spaces.

Steven: I think when it comes to owners and people in positions of development power like that, it's a question of what do they actually want?

Do they understand and will they embrace the reality of what's going to happen? It's an educational standpoint.

I think of my experience in parks and design in Baton Rouge, and conversations we had with the person in charge, Davis Rohr. Davis Rohr was in charge of Baton Rouge's downtown development district. In eight years, he revitalized all of downtown, transforming it from a boarded-up ghost town to a downtown booming with offices, nightlife, apartments, and people living downtown.

The houseless were still there, living with everybody in the different little parks, along the areas. As we were designing these riverfront parks with the fountains that were used for bathing and for cooling off we talked about it. He would say, "there's going to be homeless people in here. Just make sure that there's no spot for somebody to hide. We're going to put outlets in every light pole. We're going to speakers for music. We're going

to make it an enjoyable space." Homeless people could be there. As a designer, knowing that the person who was trying to implement the park was also aware that this was happening and was still going to happen was probably the most beneficial thing to the project.

If we didn't go in with that attitude, but that did happen, the design of the park would have been seen as a complete disaster. But the attitude of knowing that this is life and this is going to happen and that's OK helped make the park design a complete success.

Nick: Is it better that we design spaces where people can sleep in the open, in

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I think that's always a great starting question. I'm optimistic. Even if there's a very diverse group discussing these questions or responding to situations, if you poke at the fear a bit, you end up in solution land. Syringes are a big one, right? Nobody wants to find one, step on one, be out and about with their kids and see one, and that's true for everyone I know, including every single person I know who is actively using substances. If you break it down, nobody wants it.

If it's a question of creating public space or developing a pathway or whatever it is, and the question becomes, will this have any utility for most people in Portland if it's going to immediately

become a place where there's syringes? Is it going to go the way of other spaces we've seen where it's no longer useful to anyone except those who are using that kind of thing? Then the question becomes really considering

Nick Aceto

Aceto Landscape Architects, Portland, Maine

the community we have versus the community we aspire to have in our own minds.

Like it or not, we have a community where a lot of people are using intravenous drugs. And a lot of those folks are unhoused. A lot of those folks are in really precarious situations. The solutions that exist for parks and places near schools, or any place you want to start with, is to say, commonly, with everyone in the room, what's missing? That might be syringe disposal units that are in more far flung places, that are much more visible, or that are easier to use. That could mean re-routing the mindsets of folks who think about park upkeep or park safety to be more of a mission-focused effort, including asking

full view? Or is it better that we create spaces that are tucked away where people can inhabit unpoliced? Recently we worked on a development project in which we deliberately designed a trail through a portion of forests where we knew there was a homeless encampment. The idea was to create some activity there for some safety, knowing that the encampment that was there was full of syringes and other things. What is the right thing to do? It's an honest question. Is the right thing to do to create that trail and encourage activation and clean up the space? Or did we just take away someone's home? Is it up to us to say that's not a healthy home?

Brian: I appreciate these questions about what's the "right" thing to do there.

what can I do to engage with folks who are actively using, to support them? What are the needs that are unmet?

If people start with a fear-based response of “I’m scared of what’s going to happen if someone steps on a needle there,” or “I’m scared that someone’s going to overdose while we’re at the festival,” or whatever it is, there’s a bigger picture answer that those things are happening anyway.

Substance use is as old as humanity. People have lived with substance use in their homes, in their neighborhoods, in communities, on their streets forever. Nothing we’re seeing is all that different than what we’ve seen in the past. It manifests differently in Portland than it does in Cumberland, Maine, or in Boston; it manifests a little differently everywhere. But there are common themes.

In the end, I feel like we’ve done such a thorough job of not addressing how we want to live realistically in the community with these realistic situations and instead we hang on to the fears and the aspirations.

We don’t know the answers, but definitely engage those folks. Engage the people who are actually at the sites or engage people that have been in sites before. That’s something we usually have access to are people who have recent or long term history of surviving in that way themselves. If there were simple answers, then none of us would be here in this conversation.

Steven: One of our goals in this roundtable is not to leave with answers but to open up questions or ideas for the readers -- mostly landscape architects -- to think about as they’re going through the process of anything that they’re designing.

Addy: ...under that umbrella of “home.”

Nick: It’s extremely complex. It’s not just a matter of making more beautiful spaces, or more fruit trees for people to eat. There’s a whole slew of issues to deal with from infrastructure to economics

to safety to public perception and cultural paradigms and policies. And then there’s design, and where does design begin and end? It’s fluid and it’s dynamic and it’s all design.

When I look at our portfolio, a lot of our projects aren’t the flashiest projects, and most don’t belong on a magazine cover. But I think about all the work that goes into the design of identifying a place for something to happen and the conversations that occur and the influence that we might have on guiding certain decisions in the way of making places for people, for everyone. I think about adding some empathy in the process, beyond just economics or policy; this is part of our role as designers.

I enjoy that. Sometimes it doesn’t always lead to the great greatest visuals, but it’s design. And I hope that some of the students out there can read this get a sense of that and be excited about it. When I graduated, I wanted to make renderings. I wanted to make beautiful places and I still do; I still want to make beautiful places. But ultimately, I want to make people feel good and I want to use our medium -- the environment, our landscape -- to help make people feel better and feel healthier and make our communities work better. And sometimes it’s not drawings. It’s conversations, it’s meetings. It’s a lot of things beyond typical landscape architectural design.

Addy: *Where does design begin and who does it engage? There are so many elements of design, from first really landing in the site and taking inventory under the real conditions, all the way to the renderings.*

As a grad student, I ran a studio for undergrads. I got in a lot of trouble, actually. I asked my students to design a park for every illicit behavior. So, there were 18-year-olds who were hanging out at parks at three o’clock in the morning and taking an inventory of what was happening.

And parents were getting very upset

and so I was spoken to but it was really meant to ask my students to think, what is the 24 hour life cycle of the place that you’re making in the public realm? I love the idea of accepting that this public exists and is not going away and we can’t draw it away, we can’t render it away. It’s there. How do we embrace that?

Grace: In one of the most interesting studios I had in school, we were allowed to decide what problems we each wanted to tackle. The studio was based in Baltimore, Maryland. We did a lot of research and our professors said, “we know that there are a lot of problems in this city that aren’t going to be solved through design alone, but we want you to look at how design can be used to come to some sort of aid.” It’s not going to be the end-all and be-all solution because it just can’t be. Ultimately, design can’t be the one thing that fixes this problem. There are a lot of other things that need to be happening as well. But that was a cool thought process. How far could we stretch design to be part of this solution? We know it’s not going to be the only thing, but how far can we take it?

Nick: Our training tends to make us very empathic. We think deeply every day about how people interact with other people and how people interact with their environment. And that’s not what most people think about every day, in their jobs. Some people are crunching numbers. Some people are thinking about mechanical systems, about how water flows through a pipe. But we think about how people interact with each other. We’re trying to bring people together, connect human beings. And I think that the way that we’ve trained our minds to think makes us potentially great assets to helping solve some of these bigger problems on a political scale or otherwise.

Addy: I don’t think that anyone could top that, Nick. **Thank you everyone.**