

GROUNDWORK

Conversations Shaping the Profession

Session 2 | May 18, 2026

839 REGISTERED

Hosted by Brad McCauley, FASLA, PLA
ASLA President

Artificial Intelligence: Professional Responsibility in an Era of Rapid Change

Moderated by ASLA President Brad McCauley, ASLA, this second installment of the Groundwork series drew more than 830 registered participants — the largest audience in the series to date — for a candid, unscripted conversation about one of the most rapidly evolving forces reshaping landscape architecture: artificial intelligence.

The session explored how AI is showing up in practice, what it demands in terms of professional judgment, and what it means for the profession that the infrastructure powering these tools is being built on the landscape itself.

ASLA adopted a policy on artificial intelligence in fall 2025, taking a clear position: AI is a tool, not a substitute for human judgment, creativity, or professional responsibility. Regardless of how these tools are used, the licensed landscape architect remains responsible for the work. The session was designed to put that principle to the test — not in the abstract, but in the specifics of real workflows, real firms, and real decisions.

"Today's conversation is not about whether AI is good or bad," McCauley said in his opening. "It's about how we engage with it — as professionals responsible for the outcomes of our work."

Five panelists joined the conversation:

- **Keith Bowers**, FASLA, Practice Leader and Advocate, Biohabitats
- **Jenn Becker**, ASLA, Digital Technology Strategist, Confluence
- **Bill Odle**, ASLA, President, TBG Partners
- **Donnie Longenecker**, ASLA, Director of Undergraduate, Continuing Education, and Internship Programs, University of Georgia College of Environment and Design
- **Mary McCall**, ASLA, Professional Landscape Architect and Founder, Quite Contrary Studios

A pre-session poll asked participants to describe their current relationship with AI in professional practice. The results showed a wide spread — active users, cautious explorers, and skeptics were all in the room.

As McCauley observed: "That range is exactly what we want reflected in this discussion."

Where AI Is Showing Up — and Where Judgment Still Sits

The first segment of the conversation began with a straightforward question: where are you actually using AI right now? What followed was a picture of wide adoption, uneven confidence, and shared uncertainty about where the line is.

Becker described Confluence's approach through two umbrellas: AI as a communication tool and AI as a customization tool. Her firm uses natural language to communicate with design software — testing agentic workflows in SketchUp and Lumion, building custom plugins through Claude Code, using AI for post-processing, data analysis, and drone compliance documentation. "Every week we use it in a different way," she said. "As the tools evolve, it's going to change."

Bowers framed his firm's relationship with AI as a productive tension. BioHabitats uses citizen science platforms and acoustic monitoring tools — both AI-embedded — and has found genuine value there. An AI-assisted acoustic monitoring project processed thousands of hours of birdsong data, identifying species and frequency in ways that would have taken far longer by ear. But that use sits alongside a guiding principle the firm is still drafting: *nature intelligence leads*. "Does artificial intelligence truly capture nature intelligence? We would say no — it doesn't even come close." Bowers also raised the WEIRD bias — a term describing how AI systems reflect the Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, and Democratic populations that built them, leaving out significant portions of indigenous and marginalized knowledge worldwide.

Longenecker brought the educator's view. A summer studio experiment at UGA tested AI in second-semester design, with results that were candid: for plan-view design on a specific site, "it sucked." For ideation and image generation, it was more useful — once students learned to write prompts and arrived with a sense of what they were looking for. The more lasting lesson was about hallucination. When students were asked to describe a career in academic landscape architecture, they submitted AI-generated answers uncritically — answers that described tenure-track faculty doing the same day-to-day work as a practicing professional. "That's a perfect example of hallucination," Longenecker said. "The onus is on us to set the guardrails and help people understand where the limitations are."

McCall introduced a theme that ran through the rest of the session: the danger of output that *feels* finished. "You get tons of information almost at a rate that you cannot actually process and really check at all. Can you really check it all?" She cited junior staff relying on AI for plant lists — producing results that sounded credible but were often wrong — without yet having the experience to recognize the difference.

Odle amplified the concern: "AI gives you something that feels complete. And then you kind of take it as it's done. That's the most dangerous part."

Some of the most consistent concerns involve students and early-career professionals defaulting to AI for communication — before they've developed the ability to communicate without it.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- AI is in use across firm types and contexts — from SketchUp plugins to acoustic monitoring to proposal writing. The tools are already embedded in practice.
- The risk is not AI's limitations. The risk is AI's *plausibility* — output that looks and feels complete, even when it's wrong.
- AI cannot tell the difference between knowledge and belief if the belief belongs to the person who typed the prompt.

- Professional judgment is not a backup system. It is the prerequisite for using these tools responsibly.
- AI's training data reflects the communities and perspectives that built it. For a profession rooted in place, ecology, and community, that gap matters.

AI Infrastructure, Environment, and Long-Term Responsibility

The second segment shifted the conversation from software to infrastructure. AI may feel like a tool in a browser window, but it runs on data centers that consume land, water, and energy at a scale the profession has not yet fully reckoned with.

McCall, drawing on a background in clean energy, offered the baseline. Data center energy use is projected to triple by 2030. The United States hosts more data centers than any other country — by a factor of ten. Energy accounts for 76% of global carbon emissions; electricity accounts for 33% of that. And since 2025, the push for behind-the-meter clean energy has shifted: much of the new data center infrastructure is now powered by gas, backed by diesel and methane. "It's hyperlocalizing some of these emissions," she said.

Bowers added the on-the-ground view from direct project experience. Site selection for data centers is frequently handled by a separate team from site design — meaning that by the time a landscape architect is brought in, the site has already been chosen. What they often find is a 50- to 100-acre sprawl of impervious surface with minimal room to work. He pointed to the European Union's regulatory framework as a contrast: in the United States, zoning, building standards, and comprehensive planning have not caught up. "There are very few regulations," he said. "Developers can get away with this." He also named the water issue directly: up to 30% to 40% of water consumed by data centers is lost to evaporation — drawn from groundwater or municipal systems without returning to the landscape.

The pattern has a historical parallel. Bowers cited a colleague from Appalachia who described data center development in lower-income rural communities as "basically just another wave of extractivism — same pattern as coal, same community, same political dynamics."

Longenecker described a Shark Tank pitch competition in his professional practice course, where one student team proposed a firm specializing in data center consulting. Their pitch: these developments are coming regardless. How do landscape architects position themselves from the very beginning — including site selection — to influence the outcome toward community benefit and environmental responsibility?

The question of what to do when a data center project arrives on a firm's desk generated practical responses. Bowers: ask whether the site selection process has happened yet, and if so, on what basis. Becker: treat these as you would any other project — site analysis, zoning, buffers — and advocate as a profession for site certification standards the tech industry would have to meet. Odle: understanding the developer's financial balance sheet is a more powerful lever than most landscape architects use. "If we can get in on the economic side of things, we could present a trade-off — this site costs a little more, but there are long-term benefits."

Becker described a startup encounter at a tech conference: a company capturing waste heat from data centers to grow crops donated to lower-income families. The underlying message: not all sustainable innovation is publicized.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- AI infrastructure has a physical footprint — on land, water, energy systems, and communities — that is growing faster than regulatory frameworks can track.
- Landscape architects are typically brought in after site selection, when the most consequential decisions have already been made. The profession needs to insert itself earlier.
- The U.S. has no consistent regulatory standard for data center siting or design. The EU framework is a reference point that practitioners and advocacy organizations can point to.
- Water consumption — particularly the 30% to 40% lost to evaporation — is a largely unaddressed impact.
- Data centers are disproportionately sited in lower-income, rural communities. The pattern has historical precedent.
- Understanding developers' economics is one of the most practical levers landscape architects can have on these projects.

Business, Clients, and the Broader Ecosystem

The third segment turned to the business of landscape architecture — how AI is reshaping what clients expect, how value is defined, and whether the profession is positioned to benefit from the efficiencies it is helping to create.

Odle named the pressure clearly: clients want faster turnaround, and they are not paying more for it. "Every hour matters," he said, "and it feels like we have less and less." His firm's approach is to use AI to reduce what he called *operational drag* — the time consumed by timesheets, proposals, fee generation, RFP analysis — in order to protect time for design work. "It's a tool to help with efficiencies, not to replace judgment." He drew the parallel to AutoCAD: when it arrived, it was supposed to transform productivity. It did — but clients didn't pay more for it. The same pattern may apply here.

TBG Partners has responded with two structural moves. The firm implemented a technology fee — half to one percent added to every invoice — to offset rising software costs. Roughly 75 to 80% of clients have accepted it without friction. They've also adopted a consolidated AI platform, giving every staff member access to multiple tools under a single secure license, and launched an internal show-and-tell series in which anyone using the platform can share their workflows — project managers with interns, interns with principals. "It's allowing everybody to show how they're using it."

Bowers framed the question differently: not how AI *will* change his firm, but how they are being intentional about how it *won't*. "How do we be purposeful about what AI will not change — and how is that of value to our clients?" Field work, site engagement, ecological intelligence — these are not efficiencies to be optimized. They are the work.

Odle offered the clearest statement of what the profession cannot afford to lose: "Landscape architecture is about creating people-centric experiences with emotional connections. That is what makes successful projects. AI can't do that."

Longenecker made the case for a more deliberate bridge between practitioners and educators. "We need to understand what practitioners are doing with AI, how they're using it in practice, so that we can properly prepare the next generation." He described a summer collaboration between UGA and Confluence — testing AI directly in a design studio — as one model.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- AI is accelerating client expectations around speed and turnaround. It is not, at this point, translating to higher fees.
- Operational drag — proposals, fee generation, compliance documentation, timesheets — is a legitimate and relatively low-risk domain for AI efficiency tools.
- A technology fee is a replicable practice. Most clients will accept it. It is not a profit center; it is a cost recovery mechanism.
- Consolidated platforms with broad staff access — combined with internal knowledge-sharing — are producing more organic adoption than top-down tool mandates.
- The things AI cannot replicate — site knowledge, ecological intelligence, community engagement, emotional connection — are the same things that define the profession's value.
- The gap between how AI is being used in practice and how it is being taught in school is not self-correcting. It requires active collaboration.

What the Room Was Asking

The chat was running throughout the session. Several questions and concerns emerged from the audience that weren't fully addressed in the discussion:

- **Intellectual property and data training.** At what threshold does using AI expose a firm's work to being used for model training? The line between free, paid, and enterprise accounts was unclear, and most firms are not paying for protection they may need.
- **Embodied carbon and material disclosure.** Multiple attendees asked whether ASLA is considering requiring environmental product disclosures from AI companies — similar to environmental product declarations (EPDs) for materials — as a precondition of professional endorsement.
- **Regulatory advocacy on data centers.** Several attendees asked whether ASLA would partner with AIA and other allied organizations to develop zoning, building standards, and legislative guidance for data center development.
- **Billable time versus creative time.** A recurring frustration: the incompatibility of billable-hour structures with the slower, reflective thinking that produces good design — and the possibility that AI is making that tension worse, not better.
- **AI and the public.** Multiple practitioners described clients arriving with AI-generated site plans, expecting professional review and implementation. The concern: the public may be losing its sense of what professional expertise adds, before the profession has made that case.
- **The student pipeline.** As MLA programs contract and graduate funding tightens, attendees raised concern about the profession's ability to develop the next generation of practitioners capable of using — and critically evaluating — these tools.

Universal Takeaways

While each panelist came from a different vantage point — a digital innovation studio, an ecological design firm, a large Texas practice, a research university, an independent practitioner — several ideas held across all of them:

- **AI is already in practice — the question is whether it's in practice intentionally.** The tools are embedded in software firms already use, in citizen science platforms, in proposal workflows. The choice is not whether to engage them. It is whether to engage them on purpose.
- **Output that looks complete is the most dangerous kind.** Every panelist, from the most active user to the most skeptical, returned to the same concern: AI produces responses that carry the sense of authority. The professional responsibility is to know when that authority is earned and when it isn't.
- **The profession's value goes beyond speed.** AI can accelerate the operational parts of practice. It cannot replicate field observation, ecological intelligence, site-specific judgment, or the kind of human engagement that produces meaningful places. That distinction needs to be made louder, more often, and in the language clients understand.
- **The infrastructure is not separate from the work.** The data centers powering AI tools are landscape projects — sited, designed, and maintained in real communities on real land. Landscape architects are not passive users of this infrastructure. They are, or should be, among the professionals shaping how it is built.
- **Policy and practice need each other.** Individual firms are developing AI policies. ASLA has adopted an AI position. Students are pitching firms that specialize in data center consultation. None of it is coordinated yet. The session was one step toward coordination.

"AI is ... something we'll be working through as a profession for a very long time. But conversations like this — where we share what's real, what's working, and where we're still figuring things out — are how we move forward together," McCauley said.

Groundwork is ASLA's Presidential Forum series — candid, practitioner-led conversations on the issues actively shaping landscape architecture. Learn more and access recordings at asla.org/groundwork.