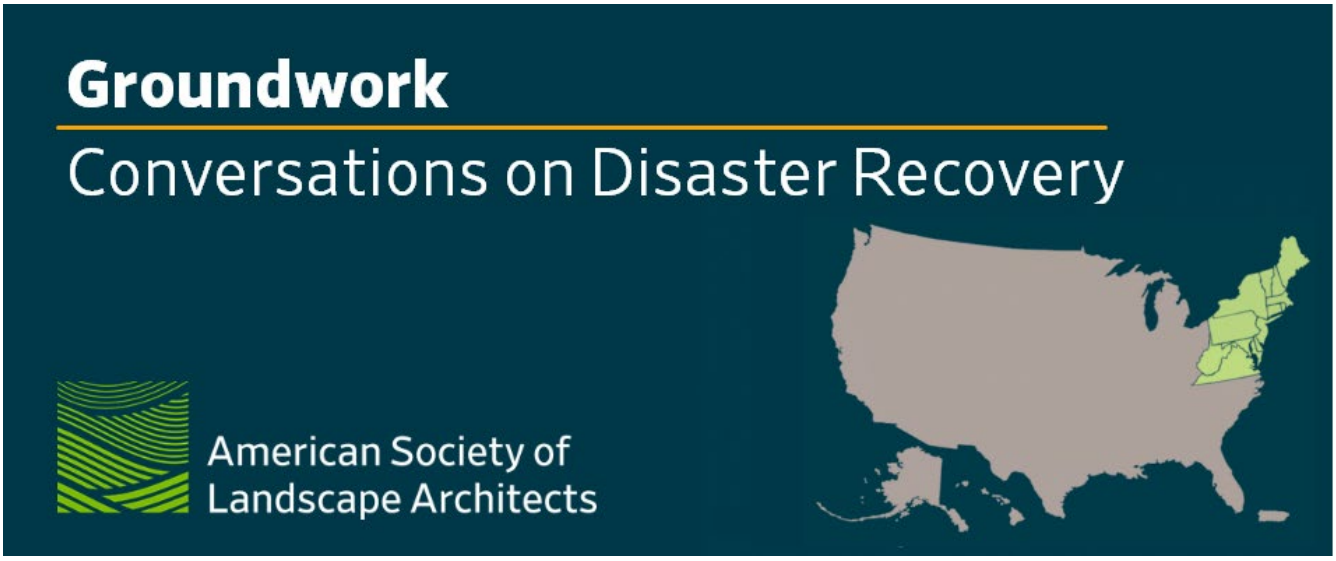

Northeast Region

June 24, 2025

The final session of ASLA's Groundwork: Conversations on Disaster Recovery series brought attention to the Northeast—a region where dense cities, layered infrastructure, and centuries of development intersect with accelerating climate risks. While not marked by recent headline-grabbing catastrophes, the Northeast faces chronic, compounding stressors: sea level rise, extreme rainfall, aging systems, and complex land use legacies.

This forum gathered landscape architects and public leaders to discuss how the profession can respond—not just to disasters, but to the conditions that make them worse. ASLA President Kona Gray, FASLA, PLA, framed the session by noting, "Recovery is not just about what's broken. It's about what's been vulnerable all along—and how we work to change that."

Panelists explored the intersection of design, equity, and foresight—showing how landscape architects in the Northeast are anticipating risk, strengthening public trust, and embedding resilience at every scale.

Clearing the Debris

In the Northeast, "clearing the debris" is often a metaphor as much as a reality. While hurricanes and flooding events do bring physical damage, the debris that lingers is also bureaucratic, political, and infrastructural. Speakers described a slow churn of overlapping systems that make recovery harder—not because of chaos, but because of complexity.

Rebuilding with Purpose

Reconstruction after a disaster offers an opportunity to do more than replace what was lost. Speakers explored how landscape architects can guide communities to rebuild smarter—integrating green infrastructure, honoring cultural heritage, and addressing social inequities that disasters often expose or worsen. In this region, recovery projects increasingly balance economic needs, ecological health, and community well-being.

From Fort Wayne, Stacy Haviland explained the paradox of flood defenses: levees protect but also limit riverfront development, with strict maintenance rules enforcing lawn interiors over resilient plantings. In Minneapolis–Saint Paul, Joni Giese detailed a collaborative, farmer-led watershed strategy where incentives helped reduce runoff: "we funnel money" through trusted local agencies to create upstream storage (Joni Giese). Meanwhile, in Fargo, Dominic Fisher recounted a rapid push for the Red River diversion post-flood, noting how urgent timelines sidestepped design alternatives—but opened pathways for university-led partnerships and training of emergency managers. Alan Shearer emphasized treating nature-based solutions not as buzzwords but strategic entry points, especially for engagement with the insurance sector.

Key Takeaways

- Infrastructure can operate as both an opportunity and a constraint. Levees and dams shape what gets built—and how.
- Inclusive planning drives real change. Engaging farmers and community groups creates stewardship and shared investment.
- Designers and emergency planners belong together. Integrated approaches can offset rushed decisions and expand capacity.

Looking Ahead

Disaster recovery isn't just about responding to the last event—it's about preparing for what's next. Panelists discussed strategies for embedding resilience in everyday planning, from regional-scale hazard mitigation to small-scale community partnerships. They reflected on how landscape architects can help shape systems that are adaptable, inclusive, and ready to face future challenges in a changing climate.

Lisa Du Russel described a shift in her practice from technical intervention to relationship-centered design: "start by listening, not designing" (Lisa Du Russel). Ohio's Charles Frederick emphasized the increasing importance of rain gardens and green infrastructure as natural systems confront freeze–thaw cycles and combined-sewer overflows. Denise Hurt reflected on Cedar Rapids' post-derecho recovery, noting strategic tree selections: "some oaks… produced seeds… stock our nursery"—a testament to genetic and ecological

resilience. Education is evolving, too—Dominic Fisher highlighted the use of serious games and UN resources to train emerging professionals, while Alan Shearer urged a greater focus on social and psychological resilience, beyond technical fixes.

Key Takeaways

- Co-creation is preferred over consultation. Place-based dialogue and collaborative listening are core to resilient design.
- The social dimension is critical. Resilience must nurture community identity, not just safeguard infrastructure.
- Cultivating systemic tools makes the difference. From game-based simulations to academic curricula, preparing future professionals is key.

Reflecting on Conversation

This forum highlighted that disaster recovery is not a single moment; it's a sustained process. From emotional cues to resilience hubs, every phase demands both technical acumen and social empathy. Whether restoring trees, negotiating natural corridors, or mobilizing community governance, landscape architects are uniquely positioned to lead holistic recovery—by amplifying local voices, aligning ecological systems, and designing for social well-being.

Universal Takeaways

- Recovery starts with emotion and community rebuilding, not just physical debris removal.
- Infrastructure restoration should be a catalyst for long-lasting resilience, not a return to status quo.
- Moving forward means valuing relationships, listening deeply, and designing with people—not merely for them.

Recordings Coming Soon + Join the Next Groundwork Forums

Continuing regional discussions will continue to explore disaster recovery across the U.S. landscape. Get all the resources and details on the Groundwork page at www.asla.org/groundwork-2025.