

**Honorary Membership
Nomination Narrative**

Nominee: Chelina Odbert, Founding Principal and CEO of Kounkuey Design Initiative

Nominee's Contact Information:

309 E. 8th Street #205
Los Angeles, CA 90014
213-537-0031

Dear Esteemed Honors and Awards Committee Members:

We are thrilled to offer the following nomination for Chelina Odbert for Honorary Membership to the American Society of Landscape Architects. According to the nomination criteria, successful candidates for this honor should demonstrate "achievements of national or international significance or influence [that] have provided notable service to the profession of landscape architecture". As admirers and collaborators with Chelina and Kounkuey Design Initiative for over a decade, we have the experience to know that Chelina is worthy of this recognition.

Chelina believes in the power of community-engaged design to advance racial, environmental, and economic equity in neighborhoods and cities. As co-founder and CEO of Kounkuey Design Initiative (KDI), she has built an award-winning practice that brings good design to places where it is not often found, that connects landscape-rich design interventions to large-scale policy change, and that models an equity-driven and impactful path forward for the next generation of designers.

Global Recognition for Innovation in Practice

Chelina's expertise covers a range of topics including participatory planning, social entrepreneurship, community-led development, environmental resiliency, and gender-inclusive planning and design. She has extensive field experience through her work in Africa, Latin America, and the US.

Chelina has shaped KDI into an internationally recognized and award-winning non-profit organization and lectures globally about the participatory models of planning and design the organization has pioneered. KDI was the 2022 Cooper Hewitt National Design Award Winner for Landscape Architecture, and was named an Emerging Voice by The Architectural League of New York in 2021. The organization has been commissioned by leading international development organizations including The World Bank, UN Habitat, and Swedish International Development Agency; partnered with academic institutions such as Harvard University, UCLA, MIT, and University College London; and led projects with municipalities and public agencies like the Los Angeles Department of Transportation, Government of Kenya, and Philadelphia Parks and Recreation.

Chelina writes extensively about KDI's community-engaged approach to planning and design in the U.S. and abroad, and she has been recognized by notable institutions including the Van Alen Institute, Ashoka Changemakers, and the Aspen Institute. In 2019, Chelina was named one of six Knight Foundation Public Space Fellows.. She has held teaching appointments at Harvard Graduate School of Design and UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs.

Landscape as a Tool for Equity

KDI is an interdisciplinary practice committed to building a more just public realm: one that is complete, inclusive, and resilient. Rooted in landscape architecture, KDI works across urban planning, policy, research, architecture, community organizing, and civil engineering to expand equity and inclusivity in places that have long been overlooked or actively harmed by traditional design and planning approaches.

To address these challenges, the firm designs landscapes of inclusion, including parks, streetscapes, and climate-resilient infrastructure. They also advocate for more equitable public policies, undertake original research to account for injustices in the built environment, and create long-term plans, giving people more equitable access to a thriving public realm, regardless of race, income, gender, sexual orientation, or housing status. Award-winning work in this space includes: a 2021 ASLA Southern California Award in Parks and Recreation for *Nuestro Lugar (Our Place)*, a community park serving a rural agricultural community in the Eastern Coachella Valley; an APA California Chapter Award for Advancing Diversity and Social Change for *Changing Lanes*, a gender equity transportation study for Los Angeles; and an APA California Chapter Award of Excellence in Transportation Plan for *The Neighborhood Mobility Plan for the Communities of Thermal and Oasis*, an effort to increase transportation choices for rural populations, increasing active transportation options and helping to ease congestion and reducing climate change impacts. The KDI-designed pilot “play streets” - a collaborative project with various Los Angeles communities and the Los Angeles Department of Transportation - was featured in the *New York Times*, bringing visibility to the need for equitable and safe places for play and the value of reclaiming streets for civic life.

Educating, Inspiring and Leading the Next Generation

As a Mexican-American woman growing up in Sacramento, Chelina witnessed firsthand how the built environment shapes opportunity. From a young age, she has been intent on undoing that imbalance. Chelina co-founded KDI while enrolled at Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD), a move to manifest her intention to shift her design focus to the low-income communities long overlooked and/or harmed by design. Her approach to practice demonstrates the power of bringing together social justice and design, forces that are often posed as opposing or mutually-exclusive.

Chelina has gone on to teach about equity and inclusion in design at the GSD and elsewhere while writing, lecturing, and championing the concepts in practice globally. It is hard to overstate the uniqueness of Chelina as a role model or KDI as an inspiring model of practice for the next generation of practitioners. Her work is viewed as proof positive that design can achieve social good, that practice can be sustainable and just, and that community co-creation can achieve design excellence.

This nomination includes letters from the worlds of landscape architecture and socially-motivated public work supporting Chelina. Please give due consideration to Chelina for this wonderful recognition. We truly believe she is a worthy and true champion of our profession.

Sincerely,



Gina Ford, FASLA
Principal and Co-Founder
Agency Landscape + Planning



Brie Hensold, HASLA
Principal and Co-Founder
Agency Landscape + Planning

CITY OF LOS ANGELES

CALIFORNIA

Connie Llanos
INTERIM GENERAL MANAGER



KAREN BASS
MAYOR

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

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February 17, 2023

Honorary Membership Nominations
c/o Honors and Awards
American Society of Landscape Architects
636 Eye Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001

Subject: Letter of Support- Nomination of Chelina Odbert for National Honorary ASLA Status

Dear ASLA Executive Committee and Board of Trustees:

With great pleasure, I endorse the nomination of Chelina Odbert to National Honorary ASLA status. Through our multiple collaborative projects in the City of Los Angeles, Chelina has challenged historical silos of design and demonstrated that design can be a tool of justice. Collaborating with her interdisciplinary team and community-based partners, she makes cities and communities not only more beautiful, vibrant, and resilient but also more equitable, inclusive, and functional for people regardless of race, gender, income, sexual orientation, or housing status. Confronting painful histories in low-income communities of color that have long been excluded, harmed, or otherwise marginalized in traditional design and planning practices, Chelina develops engagements that are accessible, at every stage of the process.

Chelina has been a trusted partner of LADOT since 2015. Our first collaboration was the development of the Los Angeles Play Streets Program, which is now a beloved City program. Although cities such as New York and London have had Play Streets programs for some time, Chelina and her team ensured that community members were front and center throughout the design and programming of Play Streets LA. This ensured that the program met the needs of local residents, tailored for the unique and diverse contexts of Los Angeles neighborhoods. Play Streets is an impactful program that addresses kids' and families' needs for park access in the short term, as it can take years for the City to expand permanent amenities in park poor communities. This partnership exemplifies how Chelina's leadership has brought practical, functional, beautiful and inspiring design interventions directly to Los Angeles communities. After six years of successfully piloting the Los Angeles Play Streets program, Chelina and her team are working alongside us at LADOT to expand Play Streets and make it a permanent fixture in our City programming.

One of the principal throughlines in Chelina's work has been a focus on creating gender equity in the built environment. She has overseen two initiatives with LADOT to bring women into the design and

planning processes that shape the landscape of our City. From 2019 through 2021, LADOT again collaborated with Chelina on the production of *Changing Lanes*, our award-winning gender equity transportation study. As a design practitioner interested in creating real change, Chelina steered away from just identifying concerns and instead steered us toward action. As a result, we are now working with Chelina and her team to create LADOT's first-ever Gender Equity Action Plan, funded by a grant secured by the KDII team, to help us take tangible steps towards greater gender equity in LA's public realm.

Chelina's creativity, thoughtfulness, and commitment to delivering more inclusive and resilient public spaces has both challenged and contributed significantly to the landscape architecture profession. I can see no better person to be welcomed into membership of ASLA. Please do not hesitate to contact me at Connie.Llanos@lacity.org should you have further questions. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Connie Llanos
Interim General Manager
Los Angeles Department of Transportation

February 13, 2023

Honorary Membership Nominations
c/o Honors and Awards
636 Eye Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001-3736

Re: Honorary ASLA Membership Nomination for Chelina Odbert.

Dear Honorary Membership Nomination Committee:

I write to you to enthusiastically support the nomination of Chelina Odbert for Honorary ASLA membership. Understanding the purpose of the Honorary membership being to recognize non-landscape architects whose achievements of national or international significance or influence have provided notable service to the profession of landscape architecture, I cannot think of someone more deserving of this honor.

I had the honor, and pleasure, of getting to know Chelina when we were both studying at the Harvard Graduate School of Design—she receiving her masters in Urban Planning and myself my masters in Landscape Architecture as well as Urban Planning. Even then, Chelina had a focus on the public realm and a keen sense of how the design of our public realm mediates our experience of a place and community. She understood that attention to both physical space and program is critical to creating public spaces where people experience community, safety, comfort, and joy. Chelina also had a passion for and commitment to bringing great design to all—using planning and design to improve quality of life in places where people and their public realm have been overlooked and underserved.

Since then, she has followed through on her passion and applied her skills through the founding and leadership of the Kounkuey Design Initiative (KDI). As an interdisciplinary practice actively planning, designing, and building better, more inclusive public realm around the world in places like Kibera, Nairobi to the Coachella Valley in California that are so often overlooked by most designers, KDI provides a model of responsible design and of a responsible design practice. Understanding the interdisciplinary nature of

creating “productive public spaces,” Cheilna has brought together landscape architects with engineers, architects, planners, community organizers and others within KDI and among their partners and developed an approach to public space planning and design that reaches out and engages a community’s needs and priorities holistically. Many designers use the term co-design in describing their work with communities, but I feel Chelina and her team at KDI are one of the few who truly practice it. She is not only changing our public realm for the better, but also the process by which we design it.

As the 2022 Cooper Hewitt Design Award Winner for Landscape Architecture, it goes without saying that the Kounkuey Design Initiative and Chelina are leaders and influencers in our field. Chelina’s service to our profession goes beyond the productive public spaces she has helped plan and design in so many communities: she is not protective of her process or her methods and through research, education, and advocacy has made her work and the work of KDI knowable and accessible. As landscape architects, most of us strive to do good, to work with and serve communities. Chelina does this every day in her work and gives many landscape architects a better opportunity to do this too—be it through the 16 landscape architects who work or have worked at KDI, the model she provides of a thriving non-profit design practice, the workshops she has led, or lectures she has given. Chelina is not only deserving of this honor, ASLA will be better with her as a member!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Pippa Brashear". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Pippa Brashear, RLA
Principal, SCAPE Landscape Architecture



February 10, 2023

Honorary Membership Nominations
c/o Honors and Awards
636 Eye Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001-3736

Dear Honors and Awards Committee Members:

I am writing to enthusiastically support the nomination of Chelina Odbert for Honorary ASLA status. I think Chelina represents the best of what community-driven design can do to create a healthier, more equitable, and more beautiful public realm for residents in low-income communities of color.

I have worked with Chelina for nearly a decade in my role as a Senior Program Officer at The California Endowment, a statewide health foundation, where I led our Building Healthy Communities initiative in the Eastern Coachella Valley. BHC was a 10 year, \$1 billion comprehensive community initiative launched by The California Endowment in 2010 to transform 14 of California's communities most devastated by health inequities into places where all people have an opportunity to thrive. The Eastern Coachella Valley (ECV) is an unincorporated, rural, desert area that is home to predominantly monolingual Spanish-speaking, low-income residents. These migrant farmworking communities here face severe barriers to transportation, recreation, housing, employment, health, and a safe environment, with significant impact on health outcomes and life expectancy.

Chelina and her nonprofit design firm KDI have radically reshaped the ECV's built environment. At the heart of this transformation is a network of new parks that integrate built elements like sports amenities, community halls, therapeutic gardens, and marketplaces with stormwater infrastructure, ecological landscaping, and graphic elements that represent elements of the region's cultural landscape and wildlife that residents said is important to their identity. Small businesses and community programs activate and sustain each site, bring income to the community, and provide social and cultural benefits.

In addition to these parks, KDI has designed and installed a prototype shade structure at a bus stop; and helped to secure more than \$6 million in Federal transportation funds to implement streetscape improvements along major corridors in the region. In each of these cases, KDI didn't wait for an RFP or a client commission; they saw inequities in the built environment, worked with resident and government partners to develop projects to address those inequities, and raised funds for and delivered those projects.

Just as importantly, KDI has helped steer government agencies and elected officials towards more equitable outcomes - in the way that the regional parks department engages residents, for instance, or the County transportation department allocates resources. KDI has done all of this by designing a



multidisciplinary design process that centers low-income residents of color and engages people who typically have been excluded from making decisions about their neighborhoods.

It is extremely rare to find a design firm that focuses on social justice through community driven design excellence. I hope that ASLA will recognize Chelina's leadership in establishing and sustaining this way of practicing landscape architecture.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions. Thank you.

Best wishes,

Margarita Luna

mluna@calendow.org

(213) 928-8744

February 28, 2023

Honorary Membership Nominations
c/o Honors and Awards
636 Eye Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001-3736

Dear Honors and Awards Committee Members:

I am pleased to offer this letter in support of the nomination of Chelina Odbert for recognition as an Honorary ASLA member. As I understand it, the intent of this award is to recognize people outside the profession of landscape architecture who have achieved nationally-significant work and influence in service to the profession of landscape architecture. Chelina is a wonderful model of this kind of contribution, creating a landscape-rich body of urban and community design work that speaks to the ASLA's ideals of environmental sustainability, social equity, and design excellence.

I have known Chelina since her days as a student at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, where I served on the landscape architecture faculty for fifteen years. Even as a student, her energy and commitment were obvious, especially when she teamed up with a number of her compatriots from around the world to create the Kounkuey Design Initiative. Their initial efforts were directed at improving environmental conditions in Kibera, Nairobi's largest informal settlement, where they sought to upgrade sanitary conditions, create income-generating composting business, address water quality in an adjacent lake, and improve public facilities, recreation areas, and shared community spaces. Chelina has continued at the helm of KDI in her professional career, sustaining her commitment to community-driven improvements to public space.

I am now the curator of the Oberlander Prize for The Cultural Landscape Foundation, so I maintain a broad familiarity with contemporary landscape design practice. KDI continues to lead the field in identifying problems at the intersection of environmental justice and social equity—so much so that when TCLF organized a forum on activist practices in Dallas this past October, Chelina was one of the featured speakers. She was articulate and persuasive—a great spokesperson for her causes, one who could help spread the word about the good work being done by landscape architects around the world today.

All this is to say that Chelina's practice at KDI is a pioneering and global model for community-driven design. Leaning into the tools of open space and public realm initiatives as catalysts for change, KDI's work often flips the script on traditional design and planning processes, seeking to reveal unseen needs or unheard voices. Whether the outcomes are a shade pavilion as a community forum for migrant field workers or a DIY bus stop for communities of color in Coachella Valley, each design solution is poetic, impactful and unexpected. Importantly, the work always speaks to broader issues of culture, environment and equity – and is scalable and replicable.

The numerous awards and honors bestowed on KDI as a firm and Chelina as an individual all speak to the relevance and importance of this kind of activist and equity-driven practice. The recognition of Chelina as an Honorary ASLA member would bring an important advocate more squarely into the fold and amplify the great public realm work of KDI as impactful and visionary for all to see.

I offer my full support for Chelina's nomination and stand ready to answer any questions or concerns. Please let me know if I might be of further assistance.

Best wishes,

John Beardsley
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(301) 908-8510

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