Groundwork

Conversations on Disaster Recovery



The second session of ASLA's *Groundwork: Conversations on Disaster Recovery* series turned westward, bringing together landscape architects from across the Northwest, Southwest, Hawai'i, and Alaska to reflect on disasters that are reshaping both their regions and their profession.

From fire-scarred hillsides to melting glaciers, participants described disasters that were not just isolated incidents but ongoing conditions redefining communities, ecosystems, and the work of landscape architects.

ASLA President Kona Gray, FASLA, PLA, opened the forum with a reminder that the scale and diversity of disasters across the West demand a new mindset: "Disaster recovery must be baked into how we plan, design, and build—not something we think about after the damage is done."

What followed was a wide-ranging, candid conversation that moved from immediate response to long-term transformation, revealing how landscape architects are helping communities recover, rethink, and reimagine their futures.

Clearing the Debris

Early recovery, panelists agreed, is about more than clearing rubble; it's about making critical decisions in chaos—decisions that often determine what survives and what doesn't.

Stephanie Landregan, FASLA, PLA, Director, UCLA Extension Landscape Architecture Program and Horticulture Program, described working on post-fire recovery in Altadena, California, where living trees that survived initial fire damage were slated for removal



during hasty cleanup efforts. "We had to be first responders not just for people, but for the living systems that give those communities identity and resilience," she said.

Peter Briggs, ASLA, PLA, Principal, Corvus Designs (Anchorage, Alaska), noted that in remote communities, restoring transportation and communication often took priority over restoring ecological systems—decisions that sometimes compounded vulnerability in the long term.

Megan A. Horn, Principal, Studio-MLA, added that hidden forces, like insurance risk models, often drive recovery decisions without explicit public input. "Insurance companies have been quietly mapping climate risk for decades. We need to learn from them—and insist that nature is treated as critical infrastructure from the start."

Across the board, panelists emphasized that early actions—often made under extreme pressure—set the trajectory for community resilience or renewed risk.

Key Takeaways

- Early recovery decisions can either protect or erase vital natural infrastructure.
- Landscape architects must advocate for landscape systems as critical infrastructure during initial recovery phases.
- Geographic remoteness (Alaska, Hawaiʻi) demands better pre-disaster inventories and access plans.
- Non-obvious systems like insurance underwriting influence recovery priorities behind the scenes.

Rebuilding with Purpose

The second phase of the conversation explored the tension between the urgency to rebuild and the opportunity to design for greater resilience.

Nakomis Buckingham, Assoc. ASLA, Landscape Designer, The Design Laboratory (Arizona), reframed disaster itself: "In the Southwest, we're not recovering from a single event. We're surviving an ongoing transformation—longer, hotter, drier seasons. Urgency is every day."

Jonah Susskind, ASLA, Director of Climate Strategy, SWA Group (California), shared how mobility corridors originally designed for evacuation were adapted post-wildfire in Northern California to serve broader resilience functions, becoming emergency staging areas, secondary evacuation routes, and even ecological buffers.

Landregan emphasized the need for systemic reform in land use planning: "We have setbacks for zoning. We have setbacks for fires. Why aren't they the same? We need performance-based policies, not just legacy zoning."

Jackson Blalock, ASLA, Marine and Estuarine Resilience Program Manager, Pacific Conservation District (Washington State), highlighted partnerships with coastal tribes as models for managed retreat,



demonstrating how traditional ecological knowledge and community engagement can frame adaptation not as loss, but as strategic survival.

Throughout the discussion, speakers stressed that rebuilding is not simply a technical task; it is a political, cultural, and ecological negotiation that must prioritize resilience over replication.

Key Takeaways

- Speed pressures must be balanced by embedding adaptation into rebuilding.
- Landscape architects must design shovel-ready projects that integrate resilience, not just rapid construction.
- Outdated land use policies continue to impede better recovery outcomes.
- Indigenous and rural community collaborations offer scalable models for equitable rebuilding.

Looking Ahead

In the final round, the conversation shifted toward the future—and what proactive recovery leadership should look like.

Rick Halsey, Director, California Chaparral Institute, emphasized the need to design landscapes that actively interrupt fire behavior, not merely survive it: "The biggest threat isn't flames—it's embers. We can design to break the fire pathways."

Judith Stilgenbauer, FASLA, Professor and Landscape Architecture Program Director, University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa, stressed the urgency of restoring Indigenous infrastructure models in Hawaiʻi, particularly blue-green systems that managed water and land in harmony long before Western development patterns disrupted them.

Bronwen Mastro, ASLA, Landscape Architect at Bend (Oregon) Park & Recreation District, argued for embedding landscape architects directly in policymaking systems, not just consulting from the sidelines. "It's not enough to be at the table. We need to set the table— and build the room."

Finally, Briggs highlighted the importance of public memory in disaster recovery—arguing for green memorial spaces that remind communities why certain land was left undeveloped after disasters, preventing the cycle of forgetting and re-endangering.

Key Takeaways

- Landscape architects must act as pre-responders, influencing design, planning, and policy before the next disaster hits.
- Traditional ecological knowledge provides effective, culturally embedded resilience strategies.
- Fire-adapted, flood-adapted, and heat-resilient design must become default practice.
- Public spaces can serve both ecological and memorial functions after disasters.



• Embedding design leadership into governance structures is critical for long-term impact.

Reflecting on Conversation

Across wildly different landscapes—from the tropical coastlines of Hawai'i to the glacial rivers of Alaska, from the chaparral hills of California to the deserts of Arizona—the message from practitioners was strikingly consistent: recovery is no longer enough. In the face of accelerating climate extremes, survival itself requires redesign.

Groundwork revealed how landscape architects are uniquely positioned not only to repair but to reimagine. Whether working through community trauma, challenging outdated policies, or restoring ecological knowledge long overlooked, the profession is stepping into a larger role: as the builders of landscapes that can survive and adapt alongside the communities they serve.

The West's disasters are a preview of a wider global future. The solutions landscape architects are testing here—resilient design, pre-disaster planning, and systemic policy engagement—will shape how communities everywhere confront a changing world.

Universal Takeaways

- Disaster recovery must be understood as ongoing adaptation, not episodic response.
- Landscape architects' strength lies in reimagining systems, not just rebuilding sites.
- Collaborations with Indigenous, rural, and frontline communities are essential for equitable resilience.
- Policy engagement is no longer optional—it is a survival strategy for communities and the profession.
- Preparing for the future demands designing for uncertainty and building systems capable of dynamic change.

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 https://www.asla.org/ContentDetail.aspx?id=66753.



