

Groundwork

Conversations on Disaster Recovery



Southeast Region – March 18, 2025

Hosted by ASLA President Kona Gray, FASLA, on March 18, 2025, this first of four regional discussions focused on the Southeastern U.S. Landscape architects from the region focused reflected on the challenges they faced, exchanged lessons learned, and shared insights into how to rebuild stronger, more adaptable communities.

Setting the Stage: A Region Under Pressure

Gray opened the first Groundwork forum by naming the reality we’re all facing: disaster recovery is no longer a question of “if” —it’s “when.” The Southeast region, from Florida to Puerto Rico to North Carolina, is experiencing the growing impact of climate-fueled disasters—flooding, hurricanes, wildfires, and severe storms—with increasing frequency and intensity.

In just the first quarter of 2025, FEMA already made nine major disaster declarations. In 2024, FEMA recorded more than 100 such declarations, and NOAA tracked 27 billion-dollar disasters—a near-record. “We can’t stop disasters from happening,” Gray said, “but we can shape how communities recover and prepare for the future.”

This conversation—designed as an open, unscripted, no-slides discussion—brought together professionals from across the Southeast to talk honestly about what they’ve lived through, what they’ve learned, and what the profession must do next.

Clearing the Debris - Laying the Foundation for Recovery

Panelists emphasized that early recovery is logistically and emotionally overwhelming, and local governments often don’t have the capacity or funding to handle it. Landscape architects have a critical role in this stage—not just in cleanup, but in helping to assess the



damage, triage priorities, and begin conversations about what should return and what should change.

Drake Fowler, ASLA, Executive Director of the North Carolina Arboretum, described the loss of 10,000 trees—mostly old-growth oaks—after Tropical Storm Helene, “We are still in the space. We are still clearing debris. Our Arboretum sits on 435 acres... The first challenge was just access.”

Clearing debris was more than a physical task—it was emotional. He emphasized that resilience begins with clearing pathways, literally and figuratively, to assess and plan.

Mark Arnold, reflecting on his work in Mayfield, Kentucky after an EF-4 tornado, shared how community disorientation impacted recovery, “People told us, ‘I drove through town and didn’t know where I was.’ All the markers were gone. We realized how important even wayfinding becomes in disaster recovery.”

Leigh Gevelinger, ASLA, based in Sanibel Island, Florida, echoed the compounding stress of repeated storms: “We’ve been hit by three major surge events in the last two years—Hurricane Ian, Helene, and Milton. The urgency is real, but we also need space to think clearly about what comes next.”

Key Takeaways

- Recovery starts with clearing and assessment, often with limited access and resources.
- Local teams need training in resilience planning before disaster strikes.
- Landscape architects can bring a systems view to help communities prioritize what matters most.
- Public landscapes are often overlooked but play a vital role in community morale and healing.

Rebuilding with Purpose – Balancing Speed and Thoughtful Design

The second phase of the conversation focused on the tension between urgency and intentionality. After a disaster, there is enormous pressure—from politicians, developers, and residents—to rebuild quickly. But that speed can result in rebuilding vulnerabilities rather than correcting them.

Jay Wozniak, reflecting on his work with FEMA’s long-term community recovery team in Mississippi, emphasized the imbalance between urgency and quality: “There’s an incredible push to move quickly. But when you rebuild exactly what failed—what’s the point?”

Speakers discussed experiences with:

- Insurance companies abandoning high-risk areas, leaving communities to self-fund resilience.
- The lack of state-level policies supporting resilient redevelopment.

- Missed opportunities to incorporate universal design, green infrastructure, and coastal defenses.

Gevelinger pointed to local governments and permitting delays: “We had to educate permitting boards that new standards were necessary. You can’t rebuild in the same vulnerable way, even if people are pressuring you to move fast.”

There was also strong discussion around how nonprofit and academic design communities can step up with community-based design, offering planning and conceptual assistance where resources are scarce.

Michael Petty, from Louisiana, underscored the role of policy and education: “It really comes down to educating—not just the public, but council members, permit reviewers. We need everyone to understand what resilient design looks like.”

Key Takeaways

- Speed is essential—but rebuilding must be guided by long-term thinking.
- There is a gap between what local communities need and what state/federal agencies fund.
- Design non-profits and universities can be key players in bringing resilience-focused design to under-resourced communities.
- Collaboration with engineers, planners, and emergency management must be built before disaster strikes.

Looking Ahead – What Will We Do Differently Next Time?

In the final portion, panelists turned toward lessons learned and the imperative of future-ready planning.

In Florida, clamming industries are collapsing. In Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, landscape architects are designing for Category 5 hurricanes. In urbanizing regions of the Southeast, there’s rising concern about wildfires and the need for “firescaped” communities.

Andy Fox, FASLA, raised a compelling idea, “We need something like ‘Landscape Architects Without Borders.’ APA and AIA already have volunteer disaster response teams. Why not us?”

His point touched on a shared sentiment: landscape architects want to mobilize, not just design. Several participants agreed on the need for organized, nimble volunteer efforts to support communities lacking recovery resources.

Cameron Yates, ASLA, from Memphis, shared a proactive example from Tennessee, “We’ve been working on flood mitigation in Millington, along Big Creek. It’s not

reactive—it’s designed as a system to absorb and manage water before it becomes a problem.”

One recurring theme: the landscape is changing, and our profession must change with it. That means using tools like GIS, advocating for managed retreat where appropriate and investing in adaptive planting strategies that anticipate new climate extremes. Panelists emphasized that landscape architects can be leaders in building systems of preparedness, not just recovery.

Gevelinger emphasized climate-adaptive planting, “We’re learning how to think differently about trees. Which species can handle surge? High winds? Salt exposure? We’re not just planting—we’re testing survival strategies.”

Key Takeaways

- Communities must plan for future threats, not past patterns.
- GIS and predictive modeling are underused tools in landscape architecture.
- We need more investment in plant material research, especially in storm-resilient urban trees.
- Accessibility and equity in recovery must be centered—including the needs of disabled and vulnerable populations.
- There is strong interest in forming a design-oriented disaster response network, akin to Engineers Without Borders.

Universal Ideas That Transcend Region

While this session focused on the Southeast, several insights resonated universally:

- Resilience is a design problem—and design can lead the way.
- Recovery must be just, inclusive, and community driven.
- Every project should be viewed as a chance to prepare for the next disaster.
- Landscape architects are uniquely equipped to bridge policy, design, and community.

Arnold summed up a lot of the conversation simply, “You know any landscape architect with any training at all would be doing exactly what we’re doing. We’re just bringing a message of sustainability and long-term thinking to these projects... It’s not magic. It’s just being a good landscape architect.”

Recordings Coming Soon + Join the Next Groundwork Forums

This was just the first in ASLA’s Groundwork series. Upcoming regional discussions will continue to explore disaster recovery across the U.S. landscape. Three more are planned this Spring. Get all the resources and details on the Groundwork page at

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

