



**“WE” IS A RELIGION AT SEATTLE-BASED GUSTAFSON GUTHRIE NICHOL.**

BY JANE MARGOLIES / PHOTOGRAPHY BY KYLE JOHNSON

# DRAWN TOGETHER

**B**ACK IN 1997, Kathryn Gustafson, FASLA, wasn't looking to start a second firm. She already had Gustafson Porter, which she'd launched in London with Neil Porter following two decades of practicing landscape architecture to wide acclaim from her adopted home of Paris.

But she did need help. She'd temporarily returned to her native Washington State to be near family, and she'd come up with a con-

cept for what would become the Arthur Ross Terrace at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. She had to win the design competition first, though, and that meant putting together graphics for the submission. She needed someone who could draw. She'd heard about a talented 23-year-old who was interning at a Seattle landscape architecture firm while studying at the University of Washington. That intern was Shannon Nichol, FASLA.

## OPPOSITE

GGN's founders, from left: Shannon Nichol, FASLA; Jennifer Guthrie, FASLA; and Kathryn Gustafson, FASLA.



**LEFT**  
Plaster models of firm projects hang above the desk of Kate Mortensen, GGN's administrator.

**OPPOSITE**  
The office overlooks Puget Sound.

Together they worked on the submission and, after Gustafson's scheme won the competition, on the execution of the elevated plaza with the fountain at its center. By the time Gustafson had embarked on a second stateside project—the stadium for the Seattle Seahawks—she was also getting a hand from Jennifer Guthrie, FASLA, who'd graduated from the University of Washington with dual degrees in architecture and landscape architecture and had cut her teeth at a tiny Seattle firm that specialized in engineered landscapes.

Despite their differences in age and experience, the three women recognized in each other a shared trait. All three were will-

ing to do whatever it might take to make a project the very best it could be. They were all in.

After the projects were completed, Nichol and Guthrie asked Gustafson if she'd continue to work with them. She said yes, they each kicked in \$7,000, and in 1999 the firm that is now Gustafson Guthrie Nichol, or GGN, was born.

In the 18 years since, GGN has shaped landscapes in cities all over the globe that are strikingly original, sensitive to their sites—and welcoming. There's the Lurie Garden in Millennium Park in Chicago, with its 15-foot-high hedge and a canal that invites you to kick off your shoes; North End

Parks, three acres of paths, plazas, and pergolas that reunite Boston's oldest neighborhood with the rest of the city; and the sculptural setting for the National Museum of African American History and Culture on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. In 2011, the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum bestowed its National Design Award for Landscape Architecture on GGN, and in 2017 the American Society of Landscape Architects singled it out for its coveted Firm Award.

Most of the staff, now numbering 45, work from bright, open-plan offices at GGN headquarters in Seattle. Five staff members are based in Washington, D.C.—including Rodrigo Abela, ASLA,



who joined the firm not long after it was formed and today is one of nine principals—and cycle in and out of Seattle, just as Seattle staff might work from the D.C. studio for a spell. And then there's Gustafson, who serves as a sort of “visiting professor,” as Nichol and Guthrie put it. She returns to town several times a year but more typically videoconferences in from Paris.

It was during a videoconference interview with her that I remarked that it must have taken a leap of faith back in 1999 for someone of her stature to partner with two comparative youngsters. Gustafson, who is known for her bluntness, retorted, “Young doesn't mean stupid.”

At college, Nichol studied engineering before switching to landscape architecture. Like Gustafson, she's a Washington State native. But whereas Gustafson came from the semiarid high plateau of the Yakima Valley (one reason water often works its way into her landscapes), Nichol is from the forested north. Her family lived off a remote logging road and learned to make what they didn't have—her mother wove place mats and wall hangings on a loom her father built. During summer jobs, Nichol operated a forklift and drove a combine.

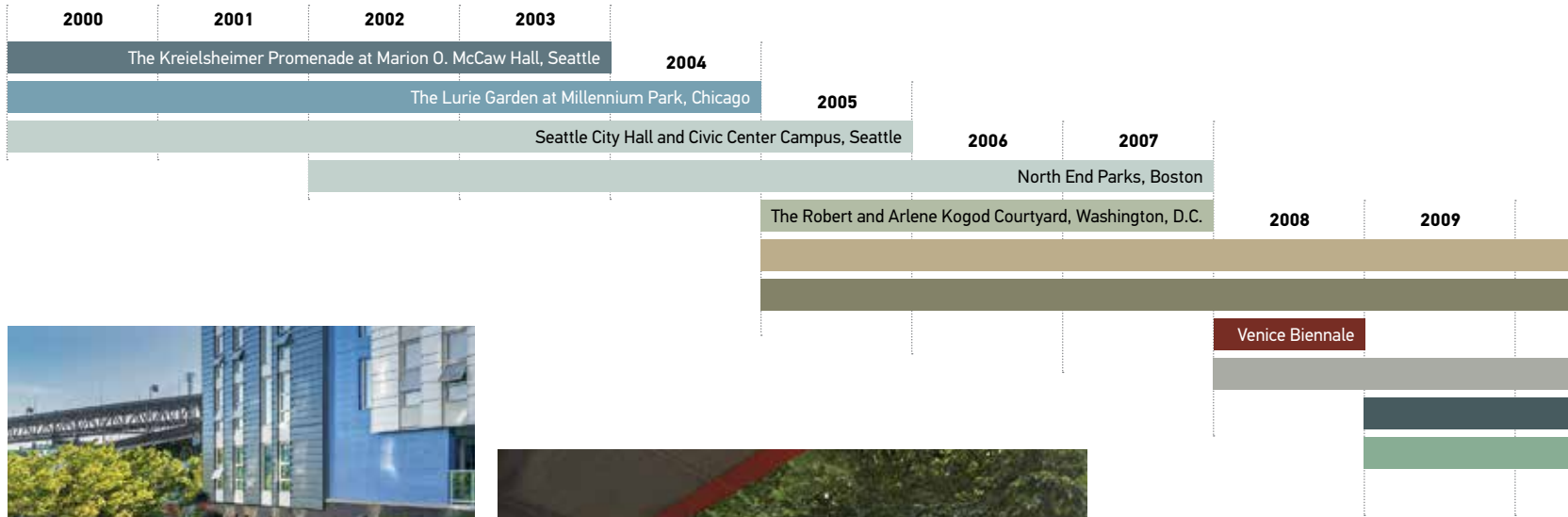
Guthrie grew up in Newport Beach, in Southern California. She was in the architecture program at the University of Washing-

ton when a professor, reviewing her work on a project, remarked that she seemed to be spending more time plotting out how to get *into* her building than she was on the building itself. Maybe, he suggested, she should try a landscape architecture class. Her first, taught by the legendary Richard Haag, FASLA, was “wacky, interesting, scary,” she says. But she was hooked.

By the time Gustafson met up with Nichol and Guthrie she'd already made a name for herself doing work that veered toward land art (though she'd begun her landscape architecture career with nitty-gritty infrastructure projects). When she agreed to partner with them, she made it



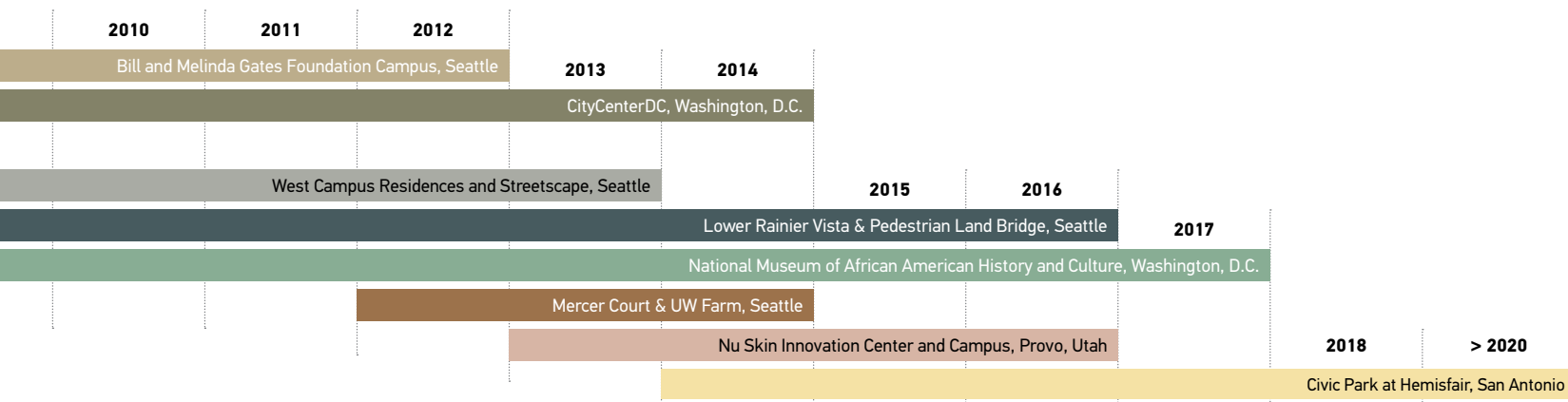
# TIMELINE OF GGN KEY PROJECTS BY START DATE



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**  
 Seattle area projects: Mercer Court and UW Farm; West Campus residences at UW; Lakeshore Residence garden; Kreielsheimer Promenade at Marion O. McCaw Hall; Chromer Building Parklet & Streatory.



CATHERINE TIGHE, TOP LEFT; BEN BENSCHNEIDER, TOP RIGHT; GGN, CENTER RIGHT; BOTTOM RIGHT; AND BOTTOM LEFT



clear they'd have to run the Seattle office on their own. "I simply didn't have the time," she says. "I'd done it for 20 years. They needed to do it and learn it."

So Nichol and Guthrie set up an office in a couple rooms over a restaurant, their windows facing a highway viaduct. They cobbled together desks on IKEA sawhorses and used their own personal computers, lugged in from home. Their Paris-based partner was the rainmaker in the early days of the firm—then called Gustafson Partners, to capitalize on her name recognition. She brought in projects Guthrie and Nichol would never have dreamed of getting on their own.

Their first was the landscape design for the civic center area in downtown Seattle, revolving around a new city hall by Pe-

ter Bohlin of Bohlin Cywinski Jackson—one of a handful of architecture firms GGN has collaborated with on multiple projects. (They get about half their work through such pre-existing relationships.) The steep site is bifurcated by Fifth Avenue, a north-south thoroughfare. The landscape architects unified it with water, which not only appears in much of their work but also, of course, suits Seattle, a coastal city.

Visiting the site on my own, I simply followed the water. At the steepest point, it bubbles up in a rectilinear pool in front of the municipal courthouse. Cross Fifth Avenue, enter city hall, and water appears again, flowing under a metal grille in the lobby. It reaches a stepped slope and splashes down. Outside the building, water re-emerges. It is

channeled into an elevated chute and courses down to a plaza dotted with red maples and jets of water that do a decent job of drowning out the sound of street traffic. Limestone walls enclose planting and seating areas. The landscape and building work together—the building part of the landscape and the landscape part of the building, all of it adding up to a series of layered spaces offering a variety of places for people to meet up and hang out.

As admiring reviews of this and other early projects rolled in, the firm grew. Gustafson, who'd studied art and fashion in the United States before getting a degree at *École Nationale Supérieure de Paysage*, in Versailles, France, gave a lecture at the University of Virginia and met Abela, then wrapping up master's degrees in architecture and



**LEFT**

A design review with (left to right) Laurel Li; Yuichiro Tsutsumi; Makie Suzuki; Shannon Nichol, FASLA; and Keith McPeters takes place at a tall table.

**OPPOSITE**

Using a light box for drawing.

landscape architecture. They hit it off, and soon the partners had lured him to Seattle. When the firm numbered about a dozen staff members, it moved to larger offices in a building on a pier.

“It was quintessential Seattle,” says Guthrie of this second studio. Windows wrapped three sides. Sunlight streamed in. The pier, and thus their office, would rock in the wake of the ferries plying Puget Sound.

By then they’d not only outgrown their original space, they’d outgrown their original name. It had been coined to emphasize the best-known partner in the firm, but it ended up confusing people. “Where’s Gustafson?” cli-

ents would ask when Nichol and Guthrie showed up for meetings. “We learned quickly,” Guthrie says, “that we had to have our names on the door.”

They found they needed to make other changes, too, as their business grew. Assign job titles, for instance, which at first they’d resisted. Their mantra had been that age and seniority didn’t matter, that good ideas can come from anyone, including the youngest members of the staff (as they themselves once were). “Our thinking was that if you work hard enough you can figure things out,” says Nichol, whose father is a self-taught engineer. “We told people to just come and start working.”

But eventually, something had to give. New staffers asked, *How do you want us to do things? What are the dos and don’ts?* The founders—who say they still “oscillate between wanting to be democratic, even anarchic, and making sure design leadership happens,” in Nichol’s words—insist they don’t have a formula for what she calls their “slow design.” But there are some constants: They do intensive site analysis, digging into the historical, natural, and cultural background of the land, and they use that research to create a narrative about their site and, ultimately, a design for a space people will want to use. They value the hand-drawn aspect of their plans and don’t, for instance, allow CAD to redraw





their arcs (arcs aren't perfect in nature, after all). They obsess over details.

And they've come up with a vetting process that sharpens their design work and prevents them from succumbing to generic cut-and-paste features—although it took some tweaking to get the process right.

Most if not all landscape architecture firms do vetting, of course. But whereas many use it to do a final checkoff on technical matters when a design is done—Do we need an expansion joint here? Does everything meet codes?—GGN wanted to vet its work during the design process, repeatedly. It's an idea they say

was inspired by Foster + Partners, their collaborators on the Robert and Arlene Kogod Courtyard of the Smithsonian American Art Museum and National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., as well as on the 10-acre, mixed-use CityCenterDC.

At first, GGN tried what they called a "design review day." But that didn't work. Staff members were nervous. They were hanging drawings up on a wall and making formal presentations. The principals, however, envisioned more of a work session. "We wanted to sit down around a piece of paper," Nichol says. "It wasn't about grading people, it was about, *how can we make our work better?*"

They shrank the audience for the reviews because when there are a lot of bodies in a room it's hard to be critical. They handpicked people who are good at giving feedback, good at thinking on their feet, and good at sketching quickly with a pencil and paper—invaluable for capturing ideas that bubble up in meetings. The group includes the three founders plus Abela and two other principals, Keith McPeters and David Malda, ASLA. They called themselves the "design critters." (Get it?) At every stage in the design of a project, members of the project team sit down with one or two of these critics. Even the firm's founders go through the process. Nichol, in particular, looks forward to it.





**LEFT**  
Samples of stone and other materials are organized on shelves.

**OPPOSITE**  
Guthrie (right) and associate Chihiro Shinohara Donovan participate in a meeting.

“For me, that’s a thrill ride. You don’t think you’re developing blind spots, but you are. It just rustles you up.”

She and Guthrie told me about the firm’s MO while we were sitting in the conference room in their current office, which they moved to when they outgrew the pier. It’s in a lovely, 11-story 1923 building that houses a number of architecture and design firms, including Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, with whom they recently worked on the Nu Skin campus in Provo, Utah. The conference room’s windows offer a view of the water. Pike Place Market, a block away, serves as the staff cafeteria.

They click through slides of two of the projects they’ve done in their hometown, both of which we’ll visit later: the campus for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, in the Uptown neighborhood (see “Share the Wealth,” *LAM*, November 2014); and the Lower Rainier Vista at the University of Washington, in the University District. Nichol does much of the talking.

Nichol is razor-sharp, articulate, and funny. Guthrie, meanwhile, is quiet and thoughtful. The latter has overseen some of the firm’s biggest, most complex projects, and she just finished a term as the president of the Landscape Architecture Foundation. Abela says that if GGN had a managing partner, she’d be it.

Nichol says she and Guthrie “are two halves of the same brain.”

I ride with Guthrie to the Gates Foundation, and we turn off Fifth Avenue onto a woonerf-like drive across from the Seattle Center. The Gates Foundation occupies what was once a 12-acre asphalt parking lot, and the vast impervious surface used to dump runoff into Puget Sound. In the re-creation of the site, parking was buried below grade in a garage under a green roof. Today all the rain that isn’t absorbed by the *Sedum* on the roof is captured in a million-gallon underground cistern and reused.

Melinda Gates, who oversaw the \$500 million campus project



(paid for by family, not foundation, funds), wanted the landscape to express the foundation's "humble and mindful" mantra. The \$42 billion foundation is ambitious, too—they aim to improve education, combat poverty, and eradicate malaria and polio in developing countries. That ambition is reflected in the buildings on the campus: two large glass-walled boomerang-shaped structures by the Seattle firm NBBJ. That left the "humble and mindful" part to GGN.

During research, the landscape architects learned that the site was likely once a sedge bog—still, serene, and saturated with water. So they conceived of the whole campus as a sort of wet meadow with a plaza "floating" on top of it. In execution, what in their minds was a single body of water became five different pools, each planted with native reeds; the plaza, made of cement—a "humble" material if ever there was one—separates them. Wooden bridges lead to

campus buildings. Two people are holding a meeting at a café table under a bigleaf maple as we stroll through.

Although the campus is not open to the public, GGN aligned its features with the street grid to give it a relationship to the rest of the city. And the firm drew some of the components of the landscape out to the edges of the site to give passersby a taste of the private realm—a taste that's both literal and symbolic. Board-form walls define beds bordering the street. Plants in them include dwarf blueberry bushes, and anyone can reach in for some fruit to snack on—a gesture that reflects the generosity of both the foundation and the landscape.

**RIGHT**  
Designer  
Joan Walbert,  
Associate  
ASLA, draws  
at the light  
table.



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hey've done an extraordinary job, those two," says Gustafson, 66, of her cofounders. "I brought the art piece into it. Shannon and Jennifer brought in a lot of good design but also the environment, social things, cultural things—a bigger, wider scale of thinking. It's given our work body and depth."

And they've created a firm that draws, and retains, talented designers. I go out to lunch with three principals—Bernie Alonzo, ASLA; Tess Schiavone; and Grant Stewart, ASLA—and learn that all have been at the firm a decade or more.

But, this being GGN, contributions can come from members of the staff with considerably

shorter tenures. I witness this myself when Malda lets me sit in a "design critters" session. On another day, he might be playing the role of critic, but during the session I get to see, a corporate headquarters he's working on with two other team members is under review.

His critics are McPeters, who shows up in the conference room with a black Moleskine notebook and sits near the rubber-banded bunches of colored pencils on the table, and Gustafson, who will videoconference in from Paris. Malda fiddles with a draw-on computer. By his side is GGN

associate Katherine Liss, ASLA, also on the headquarters team. The meeting is scheduled for 7:30 a.m., timed to accommodate Gustafson in Paris.

Soon she appears at the top of the screen on the far wall, hovering over a diagram of the site. Malda quickly brings her up to date on changes to the project since she last checked in. A building that was supposed to be part of the compound has been axed, with obvious implications for the landscape.

Gustafson zeroes in on a path in an area between buildings that she says is “rigid.” She thinks it should be more open, and Malda himself has been uneasy about the path’s relationship to the street. Gustafson also is troubled by a lack of “hierarchy” of the spaces. She can be seen reaching for a pad of paper and a pencil. At one point, Malda turns the drawing function on the computer over to her. Soon there are lines, circles, and dashes all over the plan. Meanwhile, McPeters

has made several sketches in his notebook, holding some up to a camera so Gustafson can see. The drawings keep the conversation going, but none of them provides the key to unlock a design solution.

That is something done by Liss, who has been at the firm for a year and a half. She’d been quiet during much of the conversation. Then she says, “What if we do this?” She reaches for the stylus and draws a large green rectangle in front of one of the buildings, defining a generous lawn.

Gustafson, quickly picking up the train of thought, says, “Now do that to the other side.” Liss adds a green rectangle in front of the opposite building. In a couple of minutes a new diagram, with a wider path, is roughed out. Malda salutes Gustafson, and her face disappears—most likely to reappear on another screen somewhere else in the office.

When I catch up with Malda a week or so later, I learn that after

the meeting he and McPeters continued to sketch throughout the day, energized by the discussion in the conference room. “I think that’s where we, as an office, are at our best,” he says. “Pushing hard on each other, prodding and testing, to collectively make a better thing.”

Still, it takes a certain type of office culture for accomplished designers like Malda to feel comfortable letting their guards down, admitting they might not have all the answers. But, clearly, the rewards are great.

“You can sit at your desk grappling on your own,” he continues. “But when you get in that group you’re getting that big office brain looking at something. You’re utilizing that bigger experience of everyone. It doesn’t become my project or your project. It’s using the best of everybody.” ●

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