STEWARD to the Planet

The Work of Shawn Kelly, FASLA, Focuses on Place-Based Design

Profile by Ifsha Buttitta for LASN

For Shawn Kelly, MLA, PLA, FASLA, president-elect of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), the importance and impact of landscape architecture have never been more paramount than now. “It is a simple truth that our planet is overstressed,” Kelly noted. “Landscape architects really do make a difference. Green landscapes help people to cope.”

Making a difference on a large scale is what Kelly plans to continue to do once he begins his term as ASLA president this October. (The new officers will be sworn in during the 2018 ASLA meeting in Philadelphia.) He hopes to tackle many issues, including but not limited to building membership in the ASLA, ensuring equity in the profession and encouraging students to become advocates in the industry so that they can have future influence at state and national levels. “I want to celebrate the profession, too,” Kelly said. “We should create more avenues and more synergy—with more people in our profession, there is more energy.”

Kelly’s long-spanning career in landscape architecture goes back many decades and has traversed three continents. One of his first major projects was erosion control monitoring plots in Burkina Faso (sub-Saharan Africa) in 1979-1980. He is the principal of Williams Bay, Wisconsin-based Kelly Design Group, LLC. His current work focuses primarily in the Midwest. With a bachelor of science in renewable natural resources and a masters in landscape architecture, education is important to Kelly. This year marks 23 years of full-time teaching at the department of landscape architecture at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

“It is easy in practice to get jaded, derivative or repetitive. When you’re teaching students, they don’t have that. I’m amazed by the energy they have, and it gives you energy,” Kelly said.

He encourages independent thinking and problem solving among his students. The first assignment he gives them is to come up with their own definition of
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sustainability. Another question he poses to them is, “Does the term ‘natural’ include people or not?”

For his own work, Kelly focuses intently on place-based design.

“The world is developing so fast,” he observes, adding that as a landscape architect his intention is to avoid creating spaces and places that all look like one another, no matter the location. “I want to honor the elements. We have the ability as landscape architects to capture that, to celebrate culture rather than to lose it.” His philosophy is to provide opportunities through design for the celebration of life as an important process, and “to walk softly and leave the site better for our involvement.” Therefore, it is critical throughout the entire landscape design process to take into consideration the history of the site and the materials best suited for it.

Another aspect of his design philosophy is the fact that you do not plant a landscape; instead, you grow one. “This begins with the earth and courses its way through all that follows. Everything is a detail, and every detail must make sense for the project, place, time and context in which it exists.”

Kelly has honed his skills since beginning his career in San Diego as a military planner and landscape draftsman. From California, where he was originally licensed as a landscape architect, he moved to Wisconsin and started Kelly Design Group, LLC in 1994. The firm’s projects encompass residential, commercial, urban, educational and recreational designs, as well as environmental restoration.

A huge issue for Kelly is water harvesting. He participated in the Western Water Resources Symposium in 2015 in Washington.
D.C., and was invited to be a speaker and panel member regarding city sustainability with a focus on water security at Habitat III in Quito, Ecuador in October 2016. The fact that the world is running out of potable water is a critical concern and one he focuses much of his speaking and advocacy efforts on, including at the International Federation of Landscape Architects.

Initially from Prescott, Arizona, Kelly's initial interest was to study and practice international agriculture. Several professors, and later his wife, encouraged Kelly to look into landscape architecture.

"I was always drawing," he recalled.

Earning an MLA was the ideal path for him to enter into the profession and work as a practitioner. He was a student member of the ASLA and continued his involvement with the association as he entered the profession. In Wisconsin, he was president of the ASLA state chapter (WIASLA) during the national organization's centennial year. He has also served two terms as a WIASLA trustee, a position that acts as liaison between the state and national organization. He has been awarded three state chapter ASLA Certificates of Achievement, and one national ASLA Certificate of Achievement. He is also the author of several bills in the Wisconsin Legislature, most recently the Practice Act for Landscape Architects (AB 142, 2009 WI Act 123).

Above: Shoreline revetments and native plantings have restored this residential water frontage. "I want to honor the elements," explains Shawn Kelly. "We have the ability as landscape architects to capture that, and to walk softly and leave the site better for our involvement."
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His colleagues in the industry have noted his dedication. “As both a practitioner and educator, Shawn represents a large portion of ASLA’s diverse membership. He is a life-long learner and always strives to know all he can about pressing issues,” said Greg Miller, FASLA, the current president of the ASLA and principal landscape architect of Morrow Reardon Wilkinson Miller Ltd. in Albuquerque, New Mexico. (See his profile in the Jan. 2018 issue.)

“He understands the opportunities for ASLA to position the profession at the forefront of a new era of environmental, social and culturally sensitive design,” Miller said. “He is also keenly aware of the unique skills and abilities of landscape architects to affect positive change in our communities.

“Shawn is very detail oriented, while keeping a clear understanding of the big picture. This allows him to be an effective problem solver with the context of large issues.”

For Kelly, landscape architecture work is cathartic. “You start with all of these issues, and you are working through many different things. It is a cohesion of art and science—sometimes one more powerful than the other, both influencing the outcome. That balance is the magic of what we do. Issues such as harvesting storm water, keeping culture intact and ensuring accessibility all come together in cohesive landscaping.”

Shawn Kelly, FASLA (left) was sworn in as ASLA president-elect in Los Angeles, Oct. 23, 2017. Shawn will be sworn in as ASLA president during the Presidents’ Dinner in Philadelphia, Oct. 22, 2018.