



American Society of
Landscape Architects



Climate Action Now

A Landscape Architect's
Guide to Climate Advocacy

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ASLA 2021 Professional Analysis and Planning Honor Award.
Mosswood Park Master Plan and Community Engagement.
Einwiller Kuehl Inc., LMS Architecture, Art is Luv.
(Image credit: Project team)



Overview

Landscape architects can advance climate action on multiple fronts at once. The ASLA Climate Action Committee (CAC) in partnership with ASLA has provided a guide on how to expand our collective advocacy efforts to shape the future of local communities now. Local climate advocacy, rooted in local climate issues, can plant the seeds for broader change.

The purpose of this guide is to help landscape architecture professionals become better climate advocates individually, as well as through firms, public institutions, non-profit organizations and community groups, and ASLA's chapters and national organization.

Climate action starts with making an individual commitment. You, as a landscape architect, designer, researcher, and educator, have a large sphere of influence. You can take action through your workplace, at your children's school, at your local town hall or city council meeting, with non-profit organizations, and at the state and federal levels.

The guide is organized around four major goals. Each goal offers action items and supporting web-based resources. The goals and actions included in the guide, while not exhaustive, provide a menu of approaches that landscape architects are encouraged to take to increase our positive impact on the climate.

ASLA 2021 Professional Urban Design Award of Excellence.
Repairing the Rift: Ricardo Lara
Linear Park. SWA Group.
(Image credit: SWA Group / Jonnu Singleton)



An Opportunity for Positive, Lasting Change

Climate Ready East Boston, Boston, Massachusetts. Stoss Landscape Urbanism

Climate change is the most pressing challenge facing humanity, causing interconnected and cascading environmental, social, justice, and economic crises. It is also a complex and often technical challenge that few people can viscerally comprehend through scientific data and reports. Most communities will come to understand the high stakes of climate change through increasingly negative impacts on their health, well-being, property, and infrastructure.

By improving the performance of our built projects and engaging in sustained advocacy efforts beyond traditional project work, landscape architects can create positive climate solutions and help communities adapt to a changing climate. Landscape architects can accelerate efforts to sequester carbon, enhance biodiversity, and protect communities from extreme heat, flooding, wildfires, and other weather events that pose a growing threat to human survival. These efforts also increase community wealth and create well-paying creative and green jobs.

As a creative discipline, we bring expertise on nature-based solutions, technological innovation, and strategic thinking that deliver benefits for nature and people. Landscape architects design at all scales—at the global, regional, local, and site levels—to strengthen, protect, and enhance ecosystems. This important work ensures the health, safety, and welfare of all people, prioritizing historically marginalized communities, which will bear a disproportionate share of negative climate impacts.

We call on our peers and allied professions to help strengthen our actions through interdisciplinary collaboration on nature-based approaches. With sustained private and public sector investment in transformative landscape projects, we can achieve the scale of regeneration required.



What You Can Do Now: Top Priorities for Climate Action

John W. Cook Academy Space to Grow Schoolyard, Chicago, Illinois.
site design group, ltd. (site)

1) Drawdown Greenhouse Gases and Build in Resilience Faster

Demonstrate your climate leadership by accelerating greenhouse-gas emission drawdown and increasing the resilience of communities to existing and expected climate impacts. Landscape architects can hold each other accountable to take steps more rapidly and keep global warming under the critical 1.5 °C limit.

2) Advance Climate Justice

Environmental and climate justice are extensions of civil rights. Far too often, policy decisions about land use, zoning, transportation, and others result in negative health, safety, and economic impacts on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. You have the education and training to reverse these trends and instead lead the development of equitable outcomes that rely on fair, just, and inclusive processes.

3) Persuade and Amplify

Leveraging your design and communication skills, engage communities with relatable, impactful plans and designs that help build greater support for investing in community-based climate solutions.

4) Shape Local, State, and Federal policies

Your education and training makes you uniquely qualified to be an effective advocate for climate-positive policies, while also advancing environmental justice and economic development. There are many ways for landscape architects to lead policy changes that create more sustainable and resilient communities.



Drawdown Greenhouse Gases Faster and Build in Resilience

Key Climate Actions to Take

Yourself:

Get Educated — [Read ASLA climate action resources](#) and [Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming](#) by Paul Hawken.

ASLA 2020 Professional Research Design Honor Award.
Climate Positive Design. Pamela Conrad, ASLA, CMG Landscape Architecture.
(Image credit: CMG Landscape Architecture)

Dive Deep — Understand how climate change impacts your community: how weather patterns have changed, the state of ecosystems and restoration opportunities, and the degree of climate risks, including wildfires, flooding, extreme heat, and drought where relevant.

With your firm / organization:

Create a Plan — Create an organizational climate action plan to achieve zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2040 in your office and with all projects. (Examples: [University of California at Berkeley](#), [SOM](#), and [SmithGroup](#))

Measure Progress — Set measurable climate performance standards for your organization and document through an existing rating or benchmarking system.

Build Human Resources — Designate a climate lead for your organization and grow climate experts who can provide guidance internally and to clients.

Move the Marketplace — Request environmental statements from product manufacturers, creating demand for zero-carbon and carbon-positive alternatives within the landscape architecture industry. (See: [SITES Credit 5.9: Support sustainability in materials manufacturing](#))

With your community:

Educate Every Client — Through “advocacy by design,” help clients understand how landscape planning and design strategies can sequester greenhouse gas emissions and increase community resilience to climate impacts.

Just Say No — Educate clients where possible but also be ready to reject planning and design work that is not climate-responsible.

Apply Climate Positive Design — Use Climate Positive Design and the [Pathfinder Carbon Calculator](#) as planning and design tools. Improve your projects’ carbon impact by reducing embodied and operational carbon while increasing carbon sequestration.

Create Healthy Connectivity — Weave in sustainable forms of transportation, such as walking and biking, in your projects, reducing communities’ dependence on cars.

Design for a Changing Climate — Plan and design for changing weather patterns, ecosystems, and climate risks, including wildfires, flooding, extreme heat, and drought in your community.



Climate Leader Profile: Pamela Conrad, ASLA, Principal at CMG Landscape Architecture and Founder of Climate Positive Design

While there are lots of ways to advocate for climate action outside of the office, “there’s so much we can do through our everyday work that can really add up to make a difference,” notes Conrad. “Don’t be afraid to educate clients and collaborators from the very beginning, talk about climate-smart design in proposals and interviews to gain alignment, and follow through with strategies that measurably address climate change as a priority.” Take the guesswork out of design by measuring the carbon impact of your projects through tools like Pathfinder App, developed by Pamela with support from the Landscape Architecture Foundation Fellowship for Innovation and Leadership and CMG Landscape Architecture.



Advance Climate Justice

Key Climate Actions to Take

West Florissant Avenue Great Streets Master Plan, St. Louis County, Missouri. SWT Design

Yourself:

Educate Yourself — Learn about the history of environmental and climate justice and its devastating impacts on communities of color and underserved communities. Start with a famous book by Dr. Robert Bullard, known as the father of the environmental justice movement: [*Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*](#). Then, explore the interactive [ASLA Environmental Justice Professional Practice Network Living History Timeline](#), which is principally organized by key moments in the history of the environmental justice movement.

Volunteer — Volunteer with and donate to local community design centers. [The Association for Community Design](#) can point you to a local community design center.

Monitor — Monitor community, statewide, and regional infrastructure investments and assess whether the distribution of resources and decision-making processes are equitable.

Amplify — Amplify the tenets of [ASLA's Racial Equity Action Plan](#), which was developed with the Black Landscape Architect's Network (BlackLAN) and ASLA's iAdvocate Network campaigns on environmental justice.

Increase Representation — Commit to tangibly increasing the representation of diverse practitioners within the landscape architecture profession. Explore ASLA's [Career Discovery and Diversity resources](#).

With your firm / organization:

Hire — Recruit, hire, retain, and promote diverse landscape architects, including in leadership positions. Look to the [Black Landscape Architect's Network](#) for candidates and resources.

Partner — Search for diverse partners and create diverse planning and design teams to bid on projects, including partnering with Minority Business Enterprise (MBE)- and/or Women Business Enterprise-certified businesses. Learn more about the Small Business Administration's [MBE](#) and [Women-Owned Business](#) contracting programs.

Eliminate — Identify discriminatory land use, citing, and permit decisions on your projects and take action to eliminate these practices.

Donate — Donate planning and design services to historically marginalized and underserved communities. Use design skills to communicate the causes and effects of environmental and climate justice issues such as hazardous areas, pollution, lack of access to green infrastructure and open space, and insufficient access to resources and security from water-energy-food systems.

Apply — Become familiar with the [Environmental Protection Agency's \(EPA\) environmental justice programs](#). Qualified firms can apply and/or bid to provide technical assistance through federal grant programs to municipalities and communities on climate topics.

With your community:

Change Policies — Engage with your metropolitan planning organization (MPO) to change policies that perpetuate inequities. Access the Federal Highway Administration's [Metropolitan Planning Organization Database](#) to identify MPO's in your state.

Trailblaze — Some communities have adopted comprehensive equity plans that analyze policies and projects through an equity lens, such as [Baltimore's Equity Planning Committee \[EPC\] plan](#). If your community doesn't have one, create one! Work with city and community leaders to develop a plan that meets the equity needs of your residents.

Engage — Create new policies for responsible public engagement practices. Integrate local knowledge and community voices to co-design strategies for enhancing the environment and community resilience. Leverage community assets and empower communities to make decisions that impact our collective future.

Align — Collaborate with organizations that support and are working to address climate justice, including the [NAACP](#); [National Urban League](#); [The Bullard Center at Texas Southern University](#); [WE-ACT](#); [the Hip Hop Caucus](#); [Climate + and Community Project](#); and more.



Climate Leader Profile: Dr. Austin Allen, Ph.D, ASLA, Associate Professor of Practice, Landscape Architecture, University of Texas at Arlington, and Co-founder, Design Jones, LLC

For Dr. Austin Allen, grassroots storytelling and community engagement are inseparable from landscape architecture.

By strengthening shared narratives around histories of a place that honor local community knowledge, landscape architects can help build capacity in diverse communities to be agents of change in their local landscapes. “Through a SOM Foundation grant, our team is working with historic Freedmen’s Towns along the Trinity River in the Dallas/Fort Worth Area,” Dr. Allen explains. Community outreach and careful investigation has “uncovered examples of what is now known as ‘green infrastructure’ in these historically isolated and neglected places. By filtering testimonies through our landscape architecture lens, we can draw connections and say to the residents of Joppee, ‘you know those gravel mines in your neighborhood that are now lakes? You built the foundation for green infrastructure that prevents flooding and cleans stormwater runoff before it enters the river.’ This is how green infrastructure becomes relevant, when we merge new technologies with historical vernacular technologies that people recognize as their own.”



Persuade and Amplify

Key climate actions to take

Yourself:

Present — Participate in webinars, conferences, radio shows, and podcasts hosted by professionals within and without the landscape architecture profession.

Talk to the Editors — Introduce yourself to local and state news editors on the phone or via email and alert them of your new climate-focused projects. Position yourself as an authority on climate change and someone who can be called upon for comment, background, and expertise. Editors covering major climate events are always looking for new perspectives and quotes.

Comment — If you discover articles that are incorrect or without scientific basis, offer your own fact-based perspectives in letters-to-the-editor. Find opportunities to correct misperceptions about nature-based climate solutions by providing fact-based information backed by statistics and examples.

Express Yourself — Write an op-ed for your local newspaper or community blog connecting a local issue to climate change.

Reach Out — Get involved in local schools, non-profit organizations, community groups, and regional chapters of related professions.

ASLA 2019 Professional Communications Award of Excellence.
The FloMo: A Mobile Messenger for Sea Level Rise. Bionic.
(Image credit: Bionic)

With your firm / organization:

Create Resources — Create public educational materials (web and print pamphlets, brochures, stickers, hand-outs, etc.) for use by your local ASLA chapter in partnership with other local landscape architecture professionals, students, and university faculty.

Build Climate Networks — Grow state ASLA chapters' efforts on climate action by building new connections among local members and climate experts. Volunteer to represent your chapter or university through the ASLA Climate Action Network.

Amplify — Maintain a robust website, blog, and social media presence that educates visitors about how landscape architecture provides climate solutions.

With your community:

Organize — Host or co-host community education sessions about the benefits of native plants and ecosystems, stormwater management funding options, or other local climate topics with local community groups and non-profit organizations.



Climate Leader Profile: Aida Curtis, ASLA, President, Curtis + Rogers Design Studio

"We have the opportunity to incorporate nature-based solutions to increase climate resilience and create more benefits for communities, and we have to communicate these opportunities clearly." Curtis, sees a

glaring disconnect between infrastructure proposals and the general public's understanding of their built environment. "The first thing we did was illustrate what a 15-foot wall would look like along the Miami waterfront, which is what the Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) had proposed in their Miami Dade Back Bay Storm Risk Management Study. We depicted it as realistically as we could, so people could understand the Corps' proposal, including rendering graffiti on the wall. *The New York Times* picked up the story, featuring our renderings. It created quite the negative reaction. Then, we came up with a better, climate-smart solution." Miami-Dade County has since rejected the study and asked the Corps to explore more nature-based solutions.



Shape Local, State, and Federal Policies

Key Climate Actions to Take

Yourself:

Take Action — Sign up for [ASLA's iAdvocate tool](#) to support federal, and state legislation, regulations, and other policy developments that address climate change.

Volunteer — Volunteer on local, state and/or federal boards that address climate, environmental, planning, or other related areas. Many volunteer boards and commissions possess incredible policy decision-making authority over climate, environmental, planning issues, and more. [Learn how to apply for federal board and commission opportunities.](#)

ASLA 2016 Professional Communications Honor Award.
Sea Change: Boston.
Sasaki Associates, Inc.
(Image credit: Sasaki Associates, Inc.)

Be an Expert — Provide testimony, public comments, and project examples at local and/or state hearings on policies or projects that impact climate-positive work.

Fix It — Organize or volunteer for a ballot or petition campaign on critical climate, environmental, and social justice issues for state and local legislation and regulations.

Lead — Consider non-traditional professional employment to include policy positions in local, state and federal regulatory agencies (i.e. Departments of Environment, Natural Resources, Transportation, Housing, etc.). Landscape architects' problem-solving and analytical skills make them ideal to fill climate policy positions. [Learn how to apply for federal policy appointment positions.](#)

With your firm / organization:

Show Your Work — Design one-pagers of your projects that include data, metrics, and policy implications that address climate change, environmental justice, and economic development. Share these one-pagers with your elected officials and other federal, state, and local policy makers.

Show and Tell — Invite elected officials and other policy makers to tour a completed project. Use [ASLA's Guide to Hosting a Site Tour](#) to showcase for policymakers how landscape architecture projects are helping to solve climate change and which new policies are needed. And mark your calendars, because August is ASLA Site Visit Month.

Be a Change Agent — Identify and change at least one local and/or state code or policy that was a barrier to implementing your climate-positive and environmentally just project.

Follow the Money — Influence state, local, and federal procurement processes that involve climate-positive design projects. Get to know contracting officers and urge them to scope projects in a manner that will address climate change. The Congressional Research Service has published an [Overview of the Federal Procurement Process](#) (updated January 12, 2021).

With your community:

Join the Collective — Join your state ASLA Chapter to help advance collective advocacy goals, including climate positive design, environmental justice, li-

censure, and more. Help your ASLA chapter host a [State Advocacy Day](#).

Be a Champion — Help create and champion your city’s climate action plan. Landscape architects can use their expertise to help perfect, implement, and grow a city or town’s climate action plan. (Examples: [Climate Action Plan – Green Houston](#) and [Climate Ready Boston](#))

Educate Policymakers — Organize a local forum to highlight the policies needed to support climate-positive work. Invite elected officials, community leaders, other design professionals, and others to learn and benefit from landscape architects’ problem-solving skills.

Give Back — Work with communities that can benefit from the skills and training of landscape architects to help them identify policy and design solutions to ensure climate and environmental justice.



Climate Leader Profile: Gena Wirth, ASLA, Design Principal, SCAPE

SCAPE is no stranger to regulations that can challenge ecologically progressive design. Important legislation, like the Clean Water Act, protects existing shorelines but can create complexities and hurdles to implementing in-water habitat restoration

efforts, particularly when they are linked to multi-benefit projects and involve in-water fill. “That’s where nature-based pilot projects can be so useful,” says Gena Wirth. “A lot of our climate adaptation projects ask ‘how can we advocate to make regulations more flexible and more adaptive to climate change?’ By piloting sooner and faster—like we’re doing with a 300-foot-long gravel beach at Eden Landing in San Francisco Bay—we can design and test climate solutions in a reasonable timeframe.” Through pilot projects, SCAPE helps chart new regulatory pathways to resilient projects, making them more replicable and accessible.



Climate Leader Profile: Billy Fleming, ASLA, Wilks Family Director, The McHarg Center, University of Pennsylvania

Landscape architects can also create big impacts outside of traditional firm structures. Billy Fleming utilizes a combination of creative work—projects like “An Atlas for the Green New Deal” and “Designing a Green New Deal” studio work—and direct advocacy partnering with a global network of activists and scholars to take climate policy ideas like the Green New Deal from big ideas to concrete reality. This includes working with the climate + community project to collaborate on writing a series of low-carbon policy briefs tied to public housing, transportation, schools, and public lands.

Billy credits Professor Judy Brittenum with encouraging him along this unique path during his first year as an undergraduate of the University of Arkansas: “She used to walk through the studio at 5:00 p.m. or so every day and tell all of us to leave, that ‘there’s a big world out there beyond landscape architecture,’ and that we couldn’t wait until we were out of school to find our place in it. For some of my classmates, that meant going out to meet the people who’d become their future clients. For me, it was about finding a real community of activists, scholars, and others who’d help me carve out this very strange and incredibly fulfilling place in the field that I now occupy. So, I’d say go out and find your own community in the climate justice movement, make yourself useful to them, and take it from there.”

Resources

Commitments

- [International Federation of Landscape Architects \(IFLA\) Climate Action Commitment](#)
- [Architecture 2030 1.5°C COP26 Communiqué](#)
- [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#)

Landscape Architecture Organization Resources

- [ACT Best Practices for Low Carbon Resilience](#)
- [Canadian Society of Landscape Architects Climate Adaptation Primers](#)
- [Climate + community project](#)
- [Green New Deal Superstudio](#)
- [Landscape Architecture Foundation \(LAF\) Performance Series](#)
- [Landscape Institute - Landscape for 2030](#)
- [Resilient by Design](#)

ASLA Resources

- [ASLA Guide to Mitigation](#)
- [ASLA Guide to Resilient Design](#)
- [ASLA Guide to Sustainable Transportation](#)
- [ASLA Online Learning](#)
- [ASLA Public Policies](#)
- [ASLA Research Report: Landscape Performance + Metrics Primer for Landscape Architects: Measuring Landscape Performance on the Ground](#)
- [ASLA Smart Policies for a Changing Climate Report](#)
- [ASLA SITES in 10 Advocacy Tool](#)

Tools

- [2030 Palette](#)
- [Athena Impact Estimator](#)
- [AutoCASE](#)
- [Building Transparency - EC3 Tool](#)
- [Carbon Smart Materials Palette](#)
- [Climate Positive Design Pathfinder App](#)
- [Climate Positive Design Toolkit](#)
- [i-Tree](#)
- [LAF Benefits Toolkit](#)
- [Sustainable SITES Initiative](#)