

*Landscape Architecture Foundation: What are you drawing inspiration from right now (design projects, lectures, books, films, etc.)?*

Gary Strang: In general, I do not look at designed landscapes for inspiration. I prefer to look at naturally occurring, vernacular, urban or industrial landscapes that have emerged organically from their circumstances, because I believe these new ecologies are the key to generating meaningful contemporary landscapes. Each GLS project emerges from the unique social, economic, urbanistic and ecological circumstances of the site which are far more interesting than formal strategies. Beyond that, travel and hearing people's life stories are always a source of inspiration. Fresh in my mind is a recent lecture I attended by Jared Diamond who wrote *The Third Chimpanzee; Guns, Germs and Steel; Collapse; and The World Until Yesterday*. He has had three amazing careers in physiology, ornithology and geography, and has risked his academic credibility by becoming a generalist, albeit a brilliant one. I like his work because he is, in the most illuminating way, raising the red flag about ecological collapse, by putting forward case studies of societies that have succeeded or failed in the management of their resources. One of the stories I like best is how Japan went from the brink of ecological collapse in the 1400's to being a world power in the 1800's through a sophisticated program of reforestation that strengthened every aspect of society. He has maintained that real wealth comes from the soil.

*LAF: What potential for sustainability most excites you on one of your current projects?*

GLS: We have some highrise work in San Francisco that I find particularly engaging. The density supports a high quality of materials and details while the level of integration of landscape and architectural systems and spaces is very high. With nearly every horizontal surface dedicated to landscape, and with rain water capture, grey water reuse, and chiller water captured for fountains, we can see the beginning of a trend where landscapes and buildings are becoming one organism. While this is a new development, it is highly reminiscent of the best pre-industrial landscapes where water capture, storage and reuse (both practical and ornamental) all took place within the building footprint or in the immediate urban setting. Here I am thinking about Roman and Islamic water systems and cisterns located beneath buildings and plazas.

*LAF: What do you need to know, but you don't know right now?*

I would like to know how to better quantify the economic benefits of a superbly designed landscape, and how to talk about it in terms that a client would find compelling. I think most people intuitively understand that cities with memorable open spaces are more highly valued perceptually and economically. However, convincing clients to invest in beautiful spaces is difficult because this is a fuzzy long term economic benefit that can easily be traded off. Creating a space which has the potential to anchor a district or transform a neighborhood is not an economic benefit that can be easily understood like a bedroom, bathroom or parking space. As private investors take on a larger and larger responsibility in the development of urban open space and amenities, it would be helpful to learn how to better speak their language.

*LAF: What advice would you give to emerging leaders in the profession?*

GLS: I think young professionals already understand that much of the really exciting and innovative work, such as waterfronts and the transformation of formerly industrial space, is the result of urban densification. We need to be city builders as much as garden designers. Therefore, I believe that multi-disciplinary action is more important than ever, and landscape architects can be more effective by developing expertise in other fields such as economics, civil engineering, structures, architecture or industrial design.

*LAF: What challenge would you give to emerging leaders in the profession?*

Following on the previous question, I think the big leap for landscape architecture is to augment our behavioral, ecological and horticultural expertise by focusing equally on craft, precision, detailing and materials. Given the highly controlled nature of urban commissions, we will have to be better versed in the constructed aspects of the contemporary landscape if we want to have a seat at the table.

*Bonus question: If applicable, tell us about a situation where you used data or landscape performance to make a difference.*

GLS: I cannot say we have used data to change the course of a project, however we have used our intuition to ask the right questions of others who have produced the data. On a high profile university project we found that our consultant team was turning to some very complicated and expensive technical solutions to solve our stormwater problems. By taking a decidedly low tech approach, based on observation of nature, we were able to disperse the water over a large area and eliminate a system of pumps and subsurface plumbing that probably would have run into tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars for a very small space.