

Session Descriptions | WI ASLA Spring Conference 2026

General Session A / Keynote

Title: Purpose, Data, and the Future of Landscape Architecture

Presenter: Torey Carter-Conneen, Hon. ASLA, CAE - Chief Executive Officer, ASLA

Course Description: In an era of rapid environmental and social change, we are here to highlight the proven, tangible value that landscape architecture brings to our communities and ecosystems. We will explore the strategic ways we are working to protect the integrity of the profession while leveraging data-driven insights to prepare for a resilient and innovative future.

Education Session 1A

Title: Can Landscape Architects Better Inform General Contractors?

Presenter: Sarah McDonald, PLA, CLARB, ASLA & Tom Mortensen, PLA, ASLA

Course Description: As landscape architects, there are times when our designs are not executed and installed as we envisioned or intended. No matter how tight the specs are written, or how many notes and details are on the plan sheets, the end result can be disappointing. Construction administration and oversight is not always in our contracts, but as Landscape Architects, we can inform and engage with general contractors and owners at the beginning of a project to set expectations and achieve better results.

Education Session 1B

Title: AI and the New Era of Park Planning

Presenter: Ryan Peterson, PLA

Course Description: Is traditional park planning broken? Growing demands, aging infrastructure and limited resources suggest it might be. In this session, we'll introduce a smarter way forward; one that uses automation, GIS and artificial intelligence to guide planning and investment. We'll explore how, by weaving together applied science, community voices and thoughtful design, cities can build park systems that are smarter and more sustainable, and that provide lasting value for generations to come.

Education Session 2A

Title: Two Micro Projects: Opportunities and More Opportunities

Presenter: Shawn T. Kelly, PLA, FASLA

Course Description: Two projects will be illustrated from the perspective of ADA access considerations within stormwater challenged sites. Both projects are small scale, but with great potential for benefit to the local environment with proper consideration of aggressive stormwater management options.

Education Session 2B

Title: The Case for Longevity in the Tree Selection Criteria

Presenter: Jay Weiss

Course Description: Forestry professionals often select species for urban tolerance yet overlook those with genetic strength for true longevity. This presentation will examine Wisconsin's most frequently planted trees and contrast them with overlooked, resilient species capable of thriving for generations, challenging conventional choices and highlighting the trees with enduring value for our landscapes.

Education Session 3A

Title: Walter Bubbert: Wisconsin's Mid-Century Modern Man

Presenter: Therese Gripenrog, PLA

Course Description: Walter Bubbert was a Landscape Architect, Cultural Historian, and Socialist. He was a 1930 graduate of the UW-Madison and, in addition to designing many residential estates, he was co-founder of the WI ASLA, a WPA employee and advocate for protecting important state landscapes, the first Chairman of the WI State Centennial Committee, and the long-time colleague and friend of Jens Jensen/Landscape Architect; Charles Brown/State Archaeologist; and Frank Zeidler/Milwaukee's last Socialist Mayor.

Education Session 3B

Title: The Cooling Effect of Trees From Parcel to City Scales

Presenter: Bob Smail

Course Description: This course will describe the physiological process by which trees directly cool the environment around them. It will also demonstrate how trees can be selected and strategically placed to maximize their cooling benefit at the parcel scale. This course will then demonstrate how these cooling processes scale up to the urban forest canopy and provide microclimate refugia from urban heat islands. Examples will show how this information can be used in project design.

Education Session 4A

Title: Heads Above Water: Interactive Mapping Tools for Coastal Resilience Planning

Presenter: Ben Yahr, PLA and Janet Silbernagel, PhD, SITES AP

Course Description: Planning resilient Great Lakes shorelines is a complex endeavor! Extreme storms, changing lake levels, eroding shorelines, and heightened development pressures present unique design challenges. The ability to communicate and collaborate across diverse teams and stakeholders calls for novel approaches. We will share projects in Milwaukee and other Wisconsin coastal counties that leverage web-based GIS tools in new ways to deliver public facing platforms for collaborative design support and immersive user engagement.

Education Session 4B

Title: Nature Playspaces: Learning From the Past, Planning for the Future

Presenters: Tiffanie Sperling, CPSI

Course Description: We are seeing a trend toward nature-based play and play in nature in parks and outdoor spaces. We will discuss the history of dedicated play spaces for play in nature and play with natural elements, review current research on the benefits of nature and nature play for health and wellness and share ideas on designing a built environment that works with nature to support the benefits of active outdoor play.

General Session B / Keynote

Title: Unfinished Landscapes: The Endless Bloom of Potential

Presenter: Nahid Afsari, PE

Course Description: Nahid will share her story of transforming an entry-level structural engineer position into a dream of founding her own business, effectively turning blueprints into reality. She leads teams, builds trusted relationships, sets strategic plans, serves as a mentor, and is known for her creative approach to solving challenging problems. Her presentation promises to challenge your mindset, attempt to define potential, urge you to reflect on your past, and proactively plan for your future.

General Session C

Title: The Plants You Choose Matters: Genetics, Maintenance, and Function

Presenter: Ben French & Eric Magnes

Course Description: There's a hidden cost when selecting the wrong plant for a landscape. If you're not considering where that plant came from, how it survives in our soils, and changes over time then you're thinking too short term. The reality is at some point your masterpiece design will no longer get the care it needs to sustain its form. Will your plant selections lead to an ecological nightmare that future land owners have to fight or will it turn into a haven of biodiversity?

General Session D / Ethics

Title: Ethics: Professional, Social, and Environmental Considerations

Presenter: Andrew McAninch, Ph.D

Course Description: This course guides participants through a discussion of timely topics in professional ethics, with a focus on the social and environmental context in which individuals face ethically significant decisions. Topics may include the ethics of professional conscientious objection, the use of public resources for private enterprise, the environmental impacts of emerging technologies, and the challenge of resolving collective action problems.

Optional Off-Site Tour

Title: Firefly Grove Park: From Refuse to Recreation

Presenter: Alex Krutsch & Stephanie Wilson, PLA, ASLA, CPSI

Course Description: This walking tour explores Firefly Grove Park, a 100% grant-funded project emphasizing ecological resilience and inclusive play. Participants will examine features including a permeable-pavement, solar arrays, and regional stormwater management. We will also discuss the integration of Thomas Dambo's "Mama Rosa" troll as a tool for environmental stewardship and community engagement within a sustainable landscape framework.