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GRACE LA: From Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, this is *Talking Practice*, a series asking renowned designers to provide an inside glimpse into what they do, why, and how they do it, exposing the ways in which their design imagination is articulated through practice.

I'm Grace La, professor of Architecture and chair of the Practice Platform. Thank you for listening.

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Joining me today is Landscape Architect Gary Hilderbrand, founding principal and partner of Reed Hilderbrand and the Peter Louis Hornbeck Professor in Practice of Landscape Architecture at the GSD.

As a practitioner, academic, and writer, Gary works at the confluence of landscape architecture, infrastructural design, and sustainable urbanism. His projects range from university campus design to the intimate landscapes of residences.

And to the prominent landscape renewal and design for major cultural institutions, such as the American Museum of Natural History, the Dallas Museum of Art, the Clark Art Institute, and the Boston Public Library.

Gary is the recipient of the 2017 ASLA Design Medal, and is currently teaching a studio at the GSD entitled *Now Arriving*, a Manhattan Transit Landscape, which focuses on the redesign of New York City's Penn Station. Welcome, Gary.

**GARY
HILDERBRAND:** Thanks, Grace. Great to be here.

GRACE LA: Gary, I thought we'd start with a very broad question, zooming out at this particular moment in the discipline of landscape, can you define for us, what is intrinsic to landscape practice?

**GARY
HILDERBRAND:** There are a few things that maybe separate it from other allied disciplines in our creative fields. I guess I would say that the main one is that we work with living systems.

So every time we analyze something, every time we describe it, every time we intervene, something is there and it pushes back. We never make anything whole out of nothing. And so when I look at a site, I cannot see a blank. It isn't blank.

And so fundamentally, I sometimes say we're renovation people. It's never made new. It's always remade. And some of this, for me, comes from Robert Irwin's observations many years ago about what it is you see and how you call it.

This, I think, is quite central to landscape architecture. I also think it happens to be true for the best architects, that they also see a site not as a blank, but as a living and dynamic thing. So that, I think, at its root, that is probably the fundamental thing that differentiates our discipline from others.

There are things like health safety and welfare, lots of things that are encoded in the strictures that we practice within. But that's the main one for me.

GRACE LA: Managing living systems is an ideal that engages quite immediately the temporal landscape. And it always occurred to me that landscape architecture, in particular, is this discipline that understands time as a medium.

But at the same time, because it's ephemeral in that way, and it is cerebral in the way in which we might imagine it, what are the risks, when you're thinking of managing living systems, of having to predict or project a time-based medium?

GARY Yeah, this is important because we work with waves. We work with flow, surge, seasonal change, storms. And **HILDERBRAND:** everything gets affected by that. Some of these things are manageable.

And part of our work is, in fact, trying to bring them into a place where they can be curated in a way or managed. Some of them are out of our control. We are now able to predict storms, and we know that they come with increasing frequency.

And so we have to think a little bit differently about that, even than we did 10 or 20 years ago. And the news isn't very good on that front. So everyone in the landscape architecture discipline has thought of microclimate and climate and thermodynamics as long as they've been working.

But it's now so much more intensively a focus because the news isn't good and every year seems to be another record year for weather. So weather affects us entirely and it affects the things we make, the things we change, the things we alter. And so then you embrace it.

GRACE LA: It's a kind of active protagonist in that sense.

GARY It's a nice way to say it.

HILDERBRAND:

GRACE LA: So when you speak of flows, it seems to me that at least within the last decade, the landscape urbanism movement, characterized by very large scale planning efforts, aimed to reorganize our understanding of urban flows, both engineered and natural systems.

And also aimed to deploy tactical strategies to resuscitate many declining post-industrial cities. Has this thinking informed your practice?

GARY Yeah. I would say that my view of what you refer to as landscape urbanism is that it was an important

HILDERBRAND: conversation in a much, much longer trajectory of greater understanding of the idea that the surface of the city is where we act on the most.

And this could mean that what we build above the ground counts little at less than how we organize the ground itself, the biological resources that are affected are in it, and how people move, how people experience the city.

So it's affected our work in a lot of ways. And it's particularly affected the way that I teach and the reciprocity between teaching on subject lines like that and practicing, getting ever more complex urban conditions and really having to know how to deal with them, how to reorganize the living surface of the city.

So I do want to say that it was an important conversation, but it wasn't the beginning of thinking that way. It was a resurgence in a way. So I would not want us to be without it in a sense.

For me, an affirmation of things we learned in the 19th century city, that we had to deal with despoiled sites, with food production being further away from the city, people not having access to nature, typhoid and rheumatism and diseases that were airborne or borne by organisms in the soil or in the water or communicative diseases.

I sometimes think that the 19th century landscape architect was the kind of urban epidemiologist solving quite significant social problems through a reform movement we now call landscape architecture. It's a bit like where we are today.

We also have underserved populations. We have parts of our cities that are now finding the incursion of the sea where they'd never expected it. We have also food chain issues. We have supply chain issues. We have transport issues quite like we did in the 19th century. These are exacerbated again.

And so this is one of the reasons why I think in the last 20 years this conversation about landscape urbanism, having a strong voice in reorganizing the city has become like breathing, in a sense, one of the impacts of that.

And it's true for our firm and for a lot of the firms of my friends and colleagues that we now are leading projects that are built with quite large teams of many disciplines. And we're working with traffic engineers, civil engineers, hydrologists, biologists, ecologists, architects, especially with developer work and in revitalizing areas of the city that have been in decline for a long time.

And so again, I really want to stress that I see a deep linkage between the formation of an American landscape architecture in the 19th century coming out of urban problems, and a set of problems that we have today around equity and struggles with climate and all the things I just mentioned, very parallel. And landscape urbanism, I think, has put the big spotlight on that.

GRACE LA: So the conversation about landscape urbanism, when you hear the discourse, the concepts are intended to operate at all scales. And yet at the same time, the strategy has been sometimes criticized to operate best at a large, more abstract, and territorial scale.

And it has also been criticized to be prone to aesthetic fads, undetailed or highly mannerist. Do you feel that this is true? Do you feel that it's shaping discourse in both positive and other challenging ways?

GARY HILDERBRAND: I think some of that's quite fair. And one of the things that has changed for the field is that with digital media, we have really changed the capacity to draw the problem. And I have to explain that.

But when I was an undergraduate student and then later a graduate student, it was very hard to draw the landscape. It was hard to draw big systems. You couldn't get enough memory and a pencil and a piece of vellum or a sheet of Mylar.

A malign really couldn't help you very well to describe the city, and especially if you think of it through systems. But we were just getting punch card computing when I was in Graduate School in the mid '80s.

What's changed is that we have now amazing capacity for mapping and describing, and then using those tools also in analytical ways. That has opened up really something phenomenal, I think, for all of our fields, but most particularly for landscape architecture because I feel that it was for so long quite handicapped in its tools of representation.

The gloves have come off on that, so now it's actually facile. And I think this may be one of the reasons why it's vulnerable to criticism, some of that kind of work, because it's easy. It's easy to do it fast. Developers want it right away.

And you get things, people start calling boutique ecology, and so on. Some of that just happens too fast. And your question was a reference to whether this kind of thinking is applicable to small sites. I surely think it is.

We are taught and have been for, I think, all of time for landscape architecture that when you read a site, a site has a boundary, but we never read the site only within a boundary. I think this is true for architectural thinking as well. We go well beyond the boundary.

And I think that's because innately, one learns to have a sensibility that what you do on that site matters upstream and downstream. And so what is upstream and downstream, what's across and beyond always informs what we do. And it also gives what we do on a small site greater import.

There's a kind of ethic in that. I think it's true for our allied disciplines too, but it's very particular also to landscape architecture where we deal with land holdings and adjacencies, where we're working in one part of the city, or even on a small site in the city.

Our project of the Central Wharf in Boston is maybe twice as large as the room that we're sitting in. We were thinking in much larger terms than that. And that is, I would say, always the case.

GRACE LA: You gave me an early draft of your chapter in the Dumbarton Oaks book series, and your chapter is entitled "Reciprocal Narratives." And it's on issues of university campuses and the Olmsted brothers.

You make a simple yet profound statement in this writing. You say the enduring presence of the deciduous tree canopy is what shapes the character of the space most dynamically over time, and informs the specific memory of the place.

You go on to say that, secondly, the physical continuity of the campus canopy is a primary factor in defining and characterizing the ways that the campus meets its context. I'm paraphrasing there.

Both these statements inform the challenges of what I think you're beginning to describe here about negotiated boundaries between the campus and the city, between the city and the forest, between the forest and the region. Tell me how this is informing your thinking.

GARY HILDERBRAND: Well, this particular line of reflection, really, it's a reflection on a decade of work at Harvard Business School and a decade of work at Duke University, along with quite a bit of other work at MIT and Bennington College and now Williams College.

It's a little bit coming out of that recognition that the parcel of the land holding, in this case, the boundary of the Harvard Business School, defines a site, but we see the site as much larger.

Where I came to the idea that it's a negotiated boundary is in the recognition that over time, even over the past 30 or 40 years, the relationships that are seen across that boundary have changed significantly.

And in the particular case of the Harvard Business School, I learned, through discussion with one of the former deans, that in the '80s, when Harvard decided that it would put a set of fences and gates around the business school, there was a motive that I think the designers at that time, L'Oreal and Moshe Safdie, believed was a unifying idea to create a boundary that was like boundaries around the river houses at Harvard or even around the Harvard Yard, maybe originating there around 1900.

There was another reason why that boundary-making seemed important to them. And that's because they had physical danger. Because of social and economic conditions at the edge of campus in Allston, it was a bit rundown and there were some threats. And there were actually some incidents.

This made me understand that there had been a defensive policy. And maybe not stated so, but that the boundary was about identity, but also a little bit about safety. That place has changed a lot.

So among the things that have changed is that there's a vibrant community there, very much in dialogue with Harvard about what Harvard is doing in Allston.

There are more people crossing the river through the campus because of better housing situations, more commercial activity, and Barry's Corner in Allston, and so on. So it's a safer environment, let's say. But also there is going to be a larger Harvard community over there.

So in combination, those things made us begin to realize that you were going to renegotiate the boundary of campus. And then the question became, would that in some way impair the sanctuary quality that had been built there for a long time?

It is this very leafy, beautiful thing. And that's one of the ways in which we were able to think about the canopy as a very lasting presence, something that actually defines your experience on campus year round even, whether there are leaves on the trees or not. It's so pervasive.

And so then there's the reality of trying to build projects further to the edges of campus. That's where you expand campus on property that's either purchased or has been, let's say, greenfield or unbuilt parts of campus.

And the other thing that has changed is the planning environment has become one of real negotiation. So with the City of Boston, in this case, there's a long and arduous negotiation for the terms of a project.

And so it began to me to seem like a negotiated boundary. And the result is in a couple of projects over time. Now we've worked on many, many, many projects there. We have made the boundary permeable and porous.

We've actually brought the public path into the edge of campus in places. And so the overlap between the public realm of the city and the sanctuary of the campus has become an interesting interstitial space.

And in my view, as I write in the chapter, this hasn't diminished the quality of sanctuary. It's actually improved it. More people understand it in a way, and I think respect it.

GRACE LA:

That's very interesting. And especially when you think about our colleague Jay Wickersham, who used to say that design is one of the most highly negotiated art forms. You're referring now to negotiated boundaries.

And this notion that the negotiated art form requires a certain kind of both flexibility, but also disciplinary specificity to understand how one can create these multilayered readings of space, which is both private but also behaving publicly, that is both captured and porous.

These dichotomies lead to whole questions about the language of how you're working. I'm curious to know, as a result of this, if we think about the negotiated practice, what are your daily struggles? How are you managing all of this?

GARY Yeah, there are little struggles everyday. I think the biggest struggle for me, personally, would just be managing
HILDERBRAND: the number of commitments I have during the day. So I have long thought that what I do and what our senior people in the office do, what our project managers do is they manage relationships.

So I sometimes say I'm in the relationship business. I'm a designer. And I've committed my life really to designing places, to helping to alter gently or strongly and intervene and manage. But every time we do that, we are doing it through a relationship that has hopefully built up some trust.

So our project managers in the office are working with maybe three or four or five or even six or seven different project teams. And so they're managing that number of relationships. If those relationships aren't going well, then we can't really design well.

So the management of all of that occupies a lot of brain space. We have a pretty good structure in the office for managing all of that. But day to day, I think my calendar just has too many appointments and so on. So that's one of the struggles.

It's not really what you were asking about, but the first thing that comes to my mind is each day I try to get a little gap somewhere, and it's increasingly hard to do that. We also then struggle with building the trust, building the relationships.

And sometimes it has to do with the way a project is structured. I find now that about more than 2/3, I think more than 70% of our revenue and our practice is coming from projects where we are in the lead. We're the prime contractor.

That's flipped a bit, I think, when we were building the practice. And we were fortunate to build our practice pre-recession in a really great growth period. I just feel blessed about that. Since the recession, it's been harder.

The world has changed and maybe we can talk more about that. But the work of gaining trust and producing knowledge about a project or about a site, convening a team, building those team relationships, that's a lot of what we do.

I believe all of that is design. You're designing relationships, curating relationships, and then eventually, you're designing systems. So I think that's one way that I like to understand the work. There's a sociology to the work in that sense.

We're all people. We all have-- our clocks are ticking. We have to get home to do things, but we have to fit a lot of that into the day. And I think that day to day, those are some of the struggles. There are larger ones than that too.

GRACE LA: Then I would like to get a sense for the detail of how the practice is structured. You have a structure of principals and directors. Tell us about that. Because in conversation with Yvonne Szeto of Pei Cobb Freed many months ago, she said that her practice should not have more partners than can fit around a dining room table.

GARY Yeah.

HILDERBRAND:

GRACE LA: And I thought that was a very simple, yet very revealing way to understand how one collaborates and how one structures the office in order to manage the relationships that you described.

GARY Yeah. There's a lot of complexity in the question. We have five partners and then we have three associate

HILDERBRAND: principals, so we have eight in total. These folks have been with us for a long time, 20 years or down to about 12 years, I think, at the minimum.

So these are people who have committed a lot to the practice, who have grown up inside the practice. I don't think we ever made a principal by bringing someone onto the firm. There's something that feels whole about that.

And I like the dining room table analogy. We do sit around the table quite often around projects, but also around cultural issues in the office. And as Paul Nakazawa has told us for years, because he'd been advising us since we put this practice together 20 years ago, that the office is a cultural project.

And so we think pretty deeply about the culture of the office and try to get a good sense of where it is at any point in time. And one way to gauge that is how the principals get along, how they all feel alignment.

And alignment, I think, is probably the most important thing we can have. So far at eight people, it's working quite well. That's seven of us in Cambridge and one in New Haven.

GRACE LA: Do you think you'll grow?

GARY Yeah, I think it could be a little bit larger. I think we are at a place where both offices are at capacity, and we've
HILDERBRAND: been that way for quite a while. There is a little bit of turnover, so that sometimes feels a little bit like growth.

But on the workflow end of things, I think we're at a great spot. Another thing I should say about that organization is then we have to allow the younger principals, the newer principals to really build their own practice in a way, their own book. So that means supporting them.

But it also has meant allowing them to not be entirely bogged down in the running of the business. So in that way, we have some directors. You notice that on the website too, a director of finance, a director of culture, which deals a lot with our human resources and our physical assets.

Director of marketing, and then a director of practice, who is in charge really of workflow. We realized that for the principals to build their own book of business, they really had to be out on the road a bit, and either being the front person on a project or capturing new work.

And so that logically went to try to delegate some of the day-to-day things to people who were in the office nearly every day. That was, in a sense, a practical decision. It took us a while to recognize that we had that capacity.

That also meant taking people who were specialists, not designers, but specialists in what they do in finance and marketing, human resources, and elevate them. They'd been with us also for quite a while.

So there's two levels of management. One I would call more operational, and the other is really about the thinking about whether a project is a good idea for us, whether the project is going well, directing design on the project, reviewing design, and so on. That's what the principles are there for. And also to build a legacy.

GRACE LA: So practices of your scale and the way you've so carefully built this structure, it recalls for me an article that I read some time ago. I believe it was published by the Royal Institute of British Architects. RIBA had produced this report.

And they said that on the one hand, they suggested that very large firms, the AECOMs, they're on a growth trajectory and they're here to stay. And then we'll have these very small sailboats, nimble boutique firms that are able to respond quickly.

So you'll have two scales of practice, the *Titanic* and the sailboat. But every vessel in the middle is vulnerable to die out because you have to either become one or the other in the contemporary challenges of practice, what do you think about that?

GARY
HILDERBRAND: There's a little bit of gloominess in that for me because I think we need all scales of practice. And we are in a period where we're seeing lots of the larger firms buying lots and lots of the smaller firms.

And I understand it because my original partner, Doug Reid, and I have faced the question, how would we carry it on? We have built a bit of a legacy and a body of work and a set of relationships with clients that go back 30 years.

And for us, it seemed the best way was to look inside. We had incredible talent, people who had been with us for 10, 15 years. And so there is a way to do it internally. I have quite a few friends who have decided that they would sell their firms.

What I observe in those situations is they also give away a little bit of control, and we're not prepared to do that. You could dissect that one a bit, and then their identity shifts. And I think also quite often the quality of the work shifts or maybe the nature of the search shifts.

And they become connected to a larger machine that inevitably has very big machinations going on, pursuits and even more complex markets or more distant markets and so on. So I see a cycle where people will sell their firm.

They will realize some great value. And I think that's got to be rewarding because this is hard work. And I think it should bring reward without any doubt. And if you sell it, it brings quite a bit of reward if it's really made something significant as a body of work and a legacy.

But then I think it changes, and we certainly didn't want to have that happen. So I feel optimistic that there's still a lot of room for young firms, and I think they will last.

It pleases me to no end to see people that have graduated in the 25 or 30 years that I've been teaching, who now have really vital firms. And I don't want to see an end to that, and I think we can sustain it.

GRACE LA: So the mid-scale firm still has a role to play. It sounds as though what you're describing is in the mode of a closely-held practice. But at a structure which can support larger-scaled interests and have both the people power the office infrastructural platform in order to manage a series of greater demands in the discipline.

GARY Yes. These things come from both external sources and they come internally. What I mean by that is that if you
HILDERBRAND: retain people-- and Doug and I were fortunate really to have people of quite different character, but who really built beautifully or thought beautifully or spoke beautifully, all of these qualities.

And these folks, they stayed with us. And they stayed and they enabled us really to do what we do. They built the projects with us and for us. In order for those principles to thrive themselves, growth is needed.

So we can't be a firm of eight principals and four other staff. So we are eight principals, but 40 other staff. And that's actually slightly out of balance from what Jay Wickersham might say, or is the more traditional thing, a 6 to 1, 7 to 1 ratio.

And I recall that when we were 14 people, no one left and no one came for a three-year period. It was the most stable period in my life. But it was also early in the practice and we were really learning how to do the work.

And that is a really important benchmark for me. It's the point from which I measure how we are working now. And I still feel that we're able to get the kinds of commissions that we want, even more interesting and more complex commissions.

We're able to bring in young staff when people leave for circumstantial reasons. And so I think that it can cycle up. It must in a way. And then the external side is that when you get known for the work, more interesting and more complex commissions come your way.

And you find, I'm sure that you and James know this too, that sometimes you're asked to do something and you feel incredibly enthusiastic about it. And you say to yourself, do we really know how to do this? Or can we do this? Do we have the capacity for this?

We're currently working on renegotiating the historic district around the Alamo in San Antonio. This is a project that takes real guts. It's controversial. And you make an assessment about whether or not we really could sustain this at that distance. And we decided we could.

GRACE LA: So that leads to another very fascinating topic about risk and risk-taking. It seems that when one is in the mode of scaling up and you hit that question, the one that you're referring to precisely, can we handle this?

Do we have what it takes to do this kind of work, or this very unusual type of project? It represents a moment at which many practices actually falter, either for the structure of the practice or for other reasons scaling up. They just don't clear that hurdle.

And yet you know you have to take the risk, put things on the line financially. Really let yourself do that. At the same time, you have, of course, a fiduciary responsibility for your entire staff.

So if you think a lot about the durability of the practice, the care with which you've structured this, where were the bumps in the road? Because you're making it sound easy.

GARY Well, I would say it's been immensely pleasurable. I didn't really think that the organization of the firm would be
HILDERBRAND: something I spent a lot of time on in early days.

And I think Doug Reid was probably more oriented that way because he had a lot of clarity around the structure, even of his four-person firm when I joined first as a consultant and then when we reformed our firm.

And he said to me, well, you'll learn this. I was in admiration, really, of the fact that the day he started his firm, he hired a full-time assistant. Not a designer, but someone to manage his time and organize his calendar and make sure things got out the door on time and so on.

And we've always then had a business manager since that time. So I did learn maybe the hard way that I could do more if I had more capacity. So that is so empowering. I was a self-starter in a sense, but also someone who thought I just should do it all.

And so when I had a small practice of my own, I had one part-time person and I just did everything. And I thought this was really the way to do it. But I became convinced, working with Doug Reid, that no, I can do more.

I can actually enrich the projects and get more thinking, get more heads turning on a problem. And that set us on a course. As I say, we got to that place where stability internally allowed us to understand how to tackle greater complexity. That's kind of my beautiful benchmark.

And one of the things that was happening then was we were getting commissions that we wanted to do public work. We're all born to want to change the world for the better. And we naturally think students naturally think this.

It's true that doing work for the public has a greater good in it. The fortunate thing for us was that we got several commissions that were institutions that are public. So that meant that the work was privately organized with private resources.

It wasn't subject to the constraints that we have when we make a contract with the City of Boston or the City of Somerville or the City of Cambridge. But in effect, they were public places, the Christian Science Plaza, Mount Auburn Cemetery, the Arnold Arboretum.

And so that was empowering for us because we felt there was another dimension to that work. But we were also able then to cite those projects to get even more complex projects in the city, and that's when our urban work started.

Now here's a benchmark. About 15 years ago, I think we were going well. And we teamed up with Alex Krieger's firm, at the time, Chan Krieger and his wonderful, now deceased partner, Patrick Tedesco.

And we won a competition for a very small parcel owned by the Frog Pond Foundation next to the aquarium, next to the rebuilding of what we now as the Rose Kennedy Greenway, right in the heart of the city at the waterfront. And it was going to be a plaza.

And we went in saying, we should demonstrate here how you can grow a canopy of trees forever or for a very long time. Only we didn't actually know how to do that.

At this point, we are working with soils engineers and chemists, biologists to understand plant, soil, and moisture relationships in a deeper way than we had in the past because we had to get it right.

And this client was really committed, in a way, to going the distance and creating a demonstration of what it takes to do it well. So we planted 25 oaks of two kind, red oak and pin oak, in a sophisticated paving system with all kinds of monitoring and so on.

The best soil you could make. We don't buy soil. We make soil. And these trees have thrived. They have truly thrived. And they're twice the size they were 15 years ago. They were already big when we put them in. So the place instantly had a kind of identity to it. It was a shady place to stop and rest, very small.

But I think with that project, Eric Kramer, my partner now, and I and Doug realized that this work involved precise forms of knowledge that we needed to engage in order to really make good predictions, to not be at risk with the project.

And there were some trouble with it. There were some infestations. We had some scares, we do on a lot of projects. But I wanted to bring that up because at the same time we were struggling with how to make that project, I realized that I could turn my teaching towards similar issues.

And so Kristin Frederickson, another one of our principals, and I, seven or eight or nine years ago, started thinking about an option studio where we could get students looking at these very issues. What is the surface of the ground made of in the city?

And if we were to recuperate the surface of the ground in order to grow a vast canopy, which we know produces enormous environmental benefit, we call them ecosystem services, how would we do that in a way that wouldn't be wasteful, that wouldn't have the typical situation where trees die in the city between 7 and 13 years?

And so this was a long trajectory. I'm still on it. But it was a way to used the reciprocity between teaching and practice, the problems in practice and the resources in practice and problematization in school and the need for gathering knowledge, building knowledge, disseminating knowledge.

Not original knowledge, but built on the work of others, largely scientists and environmental sciences. And so this has been a trajectory that is unending for me now.

GRACE LA: One of my favorite spaces in the City of Milwaukee is a grove right outside the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts. And it was designed by Dan Kiley. It's a chestnut grove of trees. It reminds me of some of the aspirations that you're describing now for that project.

However, my criticism of it is that the grid of trees, which was so highly aestheticized, became a straitjacket to the potential of thinking about the trees and the likelihood that one or more would die or fail. And the system was so tight that it couldn't absorb that change.

So indeed, we've been working at the Marcus Center for some time. And one of this beautiful, precise, perfect grid of trees is failing. And now the entire project is vulnerable in that you lose one mature chestnut tree and the parterre falls apart. So the status of resilience in the project is simply--

GARY Not there.

HILDERBRAND:

GRACE LA: --not there.

GARY It's not there.

HILDERBRAND:

GRACE LA: And this is a kind of, to me, symptomatic of some of Dan Kiley's work. And while you love it, you hate it at the same time because it feels very tight and controlled in a way that is not necessarily flexible enough to manage contingency of the city, of the weather, of whatnot. How do you think about this in your work?

GARY Yeah. It's really true that highly distilled aestheticized geometry has an immense beauty, but it can't survive. It

HILDERBRAND: can't really last because trees are vulnerable. They're hard to grow. It's not an easy thing. It's a hard thing.

I would say that we, in our practice, I think it's well known, we've really learned a lot from Dan Kiley. He wrote a book about one of his projects, a house he did with Eero Saarinen for Irwin Miller in Columbus, Indiana.

I've always admired the work, and I've written quite a bit about it. And what we love about the work is that distillation, which somehow settles always into a site very beautifully. And we look for that. There's an invention in it, and then it's quietly figured out.

And it often feels just right, unless, as you say, you lose something, you lose a part of it, or it just gets old. We've been working at the Storm King Art Center to replace plantations from the 1930s and the 1960s, which really have been falling apart for a whole host of reasons.

We've done some forensics on it. We understand why they were failing. And we took two different approaches for two different plantations. And so we try to be pretty scientific about it. And we try to be sure that if we are going to plant a single species of something in a particular geometry, it must be the most adaptable plant you can find.

So in that case, we would choose *Nyssa sylvatica*, which will take the lowland condition. And the upland condition has beautiful qualities, quite different from the maples that we took down. But that's a very complex thing. It took us about a year to solve that.

So that is not an easy thing to decide. And we feel pretty confident about it after a long period of investigation and debate. When we have new plantations in the city, we have ways of making them not vulnerable to that problem of rigid geometry or single species.

GRACE LA: That's a quality that I think many architects could learn, an attitude, a strategy for resilience and for understanding how design plays such a critical role in reimagining futures.

It makes me think that we at the GSD really ought to be much more careful about the conscious blending of pedagogies across our two different disciplines here, landscape architecture and architecture.

I think it's one of the things that we're trying to imagine in our practice platform, but that you describe so beautifully here in the way that you're summarizing for us a mode of thought, which I find so helpful.

GARY I am trying to transmit this in my coursework, both in the seminar that I teach occasionally called Vegetal City,

HILDERBRAND: which is really all about those plantations around the world that might be able to be described in a way.

You suggesting the Milwaukee Grove is that they're singular. And they're in some cities, very, very important traditions. You think of all the London planes along the Seine or all the London planes along the Tiber River in Rome, and on the major avenues that were cut through in the late 19th century.

Think about this incredible avenue of ginkgos on a Memorial Boulevard in Tokyo, how are they going to be able to sustain those? But the seminar part in design studios, I do always get early to the definition of a project for a student.

And then I do insist that we talk in real depth about what you would plant, what are the specific characteristics of those plants? What do they require for growth? What are the urban systems of drainage? And even how to pave over top of a root ball.

So the students always get to that level of detail. And they always have species that work together, but not a single species. So that is completely reciprocal between practice and teaching. And I think, I have three architecture students in my current studio, and I think they're seeing something for the first time.

And they're, I think, really enjoying it. So we may not have always the chance to find these ways of integrating forms of knowledge for the students from the top down. But when we engage them in a class where they just decided to take a landscape architecture studio, they will do that.

And I find that the best sharing of this information is probably less in a classroom and really on the trays. This is the virtue of the trays at the GSD. Everybody's in the same room. They know each other. They talk.

GRACE LA: Yes. We are very lucky to have that space.

GARY Right.

HILDERBRAND:

GRACE LA: Gary, I want to thank you so much for being with us this morning. It's been a pleasure to speak with you and to have this chance to ruminate on the state of landscape architecture at large, but also in what you do and how you do it. Thank you so much.

GARY Thank you, Grace. It's really an honor to be a part of the series. I've enjoyed it. A lot of my friends are enjoying it
HILDERBRAND: too.

GRACE LA: Thank you. Thanks so much.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

I'm Grace La, and you've been listening to *Talking Practice* from the Practice Platform of Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. Today's episode was produced by Ronnie Serif and edited by Maggie Janek. Platform support and research was provided by Jihoon Ro and John Wang.

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