

Point of view *New York*

Landscape architect Sara Zewde on how she is designing for a changing climate and why Hurricane Katrina was a watershed moment.

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Landscape architecture is often viewed as a “nice to have” design discipline, one that’s focused on making projects look pretty once architects have finished their work. It’s a notion that Sara Zewde is turning on its head. The New York-based landscape architect’s work for Studio Zewde – the practice she founded in 2018 – merges her work with social and environmental causes.

The young designer has been earmarked as a generational talent thanks to projects such as the installation of temporary public spaces in Seattle and a winning commission to shape the gardens of the Dia Art Foundation’s gallery in Beacon, New York. Here she tells us about the importance of one of design’s lesser-heralded fields. — (M)

How did you arrive at the decision to practise landscape architecture?

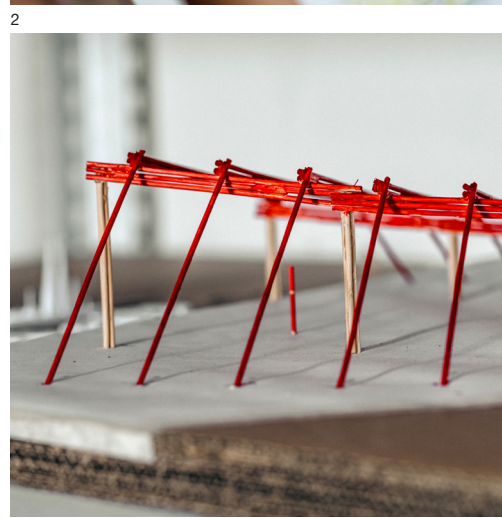
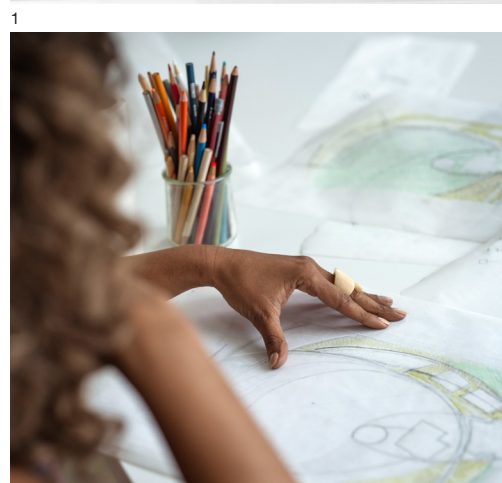
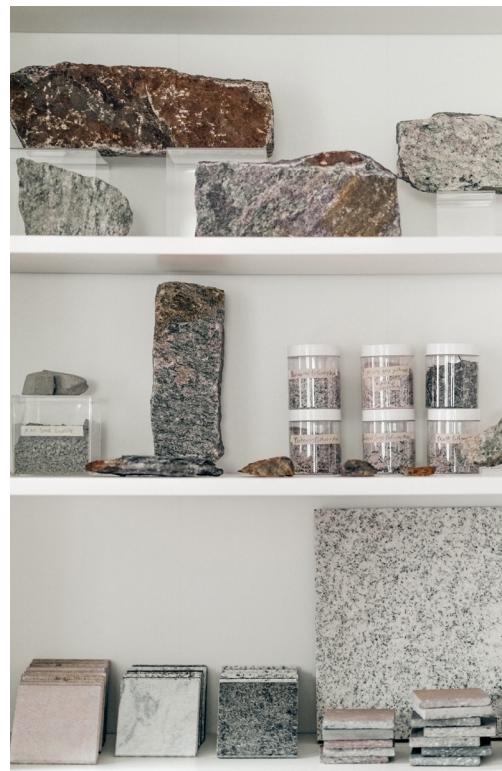
Architects often say, “I started drawing houses when I was five.” But landscape architects typically don’t have a straight career trajectory. I initially studied sociology, statistics and urban planning but landscape architecture emerged, for me, as a discipline that could take on some of the major challenges of our society and engage culture at the same time. I also cite 2005 as a shift in my thinking, when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, where I’m from. It affected me deeply and awakened me to the importance of design and urban planning.

What can the discipline do better?

Historically, landscape architecture hasn’t necessarily been practised to its full potential. It has been seen as a sub-discipline, as a new field relative to architecture. But people have been shaping land for all of history. There’s a lot of latent genius in indigenous histories of land design and management from across the planet that could lend itself to contemporary landscape architecture.

Tell us about your planned work on the Dia Art Foundation’s Dia Beacon site and why the museum approached you to redesign its grounds.

Dia Beacon is in the town of Beacon on the Hudson river. At the moment, visitors can’t access the eight acres [3.2 hectares] of land to the south of the gallery buildings, where there’s a flat lawn ringed by trees and a railway running past. This landscape needed to be addressed because when Hurricane Sandy hit in 2012 there was flooding on the site. Nothing disastrous happened to the collection but it showed just how



1. Stone samples
2. Sara Zewde sketching
3. Architectural model
4. The visionary designer

vulnerable it is to climate change. Before the railway was built, separating the site from the river, this property was a part of the floodplain. That is why the flooding happened – and will continue happening.

What can visitors expect when it opens in 2025?

We’ve designed sculptural landforms that highlight the historic pattern of water moving from east to west on the site. These landforms also serve as basins for water when it does rain or flood. Aside from relieving some of this environmental pressure, those basins are a way for people to engage with a changing climate. One hundred years from now, when we have very different levels of precipitation, the experience of visiting the site will be different. We’re also converting more than four acres [1.6 hectares] of lawn into native meadow. There’s an emphasis on seasonal expression across the

planting palettes of the meadow, so there will be a lot in the landscape in terms of texture, colour and seasonality.

Is landscape architecture as a field going in the right direction when engaging with social and environmental issues?

Frederick Law Olmsted, who’s often understood to be the founder of our profession, spent time travelling the southern states in the 1850s, where he was commissioned by *The New York Times* to write about conditions of slavery. He came back with strong views about the role that public space plays in a democracy. From there, he launched the profession of landscape architecture. So these aren’t new ideas; they’re the origin of the profession. We need to keep making progress in terms of thinking about the role of public space in a civic society.