

XtremeLA 2024: Morro Bay

Honoring the Past, Elevating the Present, Protecting the Future

By Ed Ball



THE CONTEXT

How can resilient design for the future address reparative actions for past and current generations?

This singular, critically important question captures the ambitious spirit and multidimensional challenge at the heart of Xtreme LA Morro Bay presented in partnership between Landscape Forms, the Landscape Architecture Foundation, and California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. An energetic and thought-provoking design charrette, 2024's Xtreme LA combines elements of restorative land justice, the elevation of Indigenous culture and Traditional Ecological Knowledge, vulnerable habitat restoration, and climate resilient design—some of the most compelling opportunities and pressing challenges currently facing landscape architects.

Located on the Central Coast of California, roughly halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, Morro Bay is

a culturally, historically, ecologically and economically significant location. But with such importance comes a unique set of challenges. These challenges are connected and intertwined, yet each will require a concerted effort and a creative set of solutions to address each piece most effectively.

Morro Bay and Cal Poly are on the traditional lands of the yak tit'vu tit'vu yak tiłhini (ytt) Northern Chumash Tribe of San Luis Obispo County and Region. Recognizing the ytt Tribe's documented presence in their ancestral homeland, Cal Poly's land acknowledgement reads:

“The yak tit'vu tit'vu yak tiłhini have a documented presence in this area for over 10,000 years. The tiłhini peoples have stewarded their ancestral and unceded homelands which include all of the cities, communities, federal and state open spaces within the San Luis Obispo County region. These homelands extend East into the Carrizo Plains toward Kern



County, South to the Santa Maria River, North to Ragged Point, and West beyond the ocean's shoreline in an unbroken chain of lineage, kinship, and culture.”

Moreover, the yak tit'yu tit'yu yak ti'hini Northern Chumash Tribe considers Morro Rock, the 576'-tall landmark volcanic plug at the entrance to Morro Bay harbor, a culturally significant site. Called Lisamu' by the Chumash, Morro Rock tragically faced violent destruction between 1889 and 1969 as it was quarried by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to provide material for breakwaters in Morro Bay and Avila Beach and the Morro Rock Causeway. After 80 years of quarrying and 250,000 tons of material removed, Morro Rock, now two-thirds its original size, was finally declared a California Historical Landmark and the destruction has ceased. In 2023, the USACE began extracting some of the quarried rock for return to its rightful home in consultation with yak tit'yu tit'yu yak ti'hini Northern Chumash Tribe and the Northern Chumash Tribal Council nonprofit.

Redoubling this site's significance, Morro Bay is also home to rare ecosystems and exceptionally high biodiversity in its shoreline, estuarine and marine environments. Designated as an Estuary of National Significance in 1995 and one of just 28 National Estuary Programs across the country, the Morro Bay estuary supports more than two dozen endangered species, several oyster farms, and locally celebrated species such as southern sea otters, leopard sharks, steelhead trout, shrimp and crabs. The proposed Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary aims to extend protections farther offshore, seeking to address the global biodiversity crisis through nature-based solutions and set a precedent for elevating Indigenous perspectives and cultural values in ocean conservation.

Despite these current and proposed restoration and conservation programs, Morro Bay's ecosystems still face destruction of a different kind, this time at the hands of anthropogenic climate change. Warmer air and water temperatures, drier conditions, more intense storms,

and sea level rise all threaten the range of coastal dunes, wetlands, intertidal mudflats, salt and freshwater marshes and eelgrass beds found throughout the Morro Bay estuary and surrounding area. Among the 54 climate change-related impacts identified by the Morro Bay National Estuary Program, half are listed as high priority, indicating a high likelihood of occurrence coupled with a high consequence of impact. These risks include but aren't limited to habitat degradation due to warmer air and water temperatures, higher levels of pollutant influx and sedimentation in the estuary due to increased storminess, and the erosion and landward migration of dune habitats due to sea level rise.



THE CHALLENGE

On January 30 - February 1, 2024, Landscape Forms, North America's leading designer and manufacturer of premium site furniture, structure, LED lighting, and accessories, sponsored its tenth Xtreme LA challenge at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. 2024 Xtreme LA was co-hosted by Marjorie Simmons, Chief Executive Officer of Landscape Forms; John Scott, Director of Marketing at Landscape Forms; Barbara Deutsch, FASLA, Chief Executive Officer of the Landscape Architecture Foundation; Kevin Dong, Interim Dean of the College of Architecture and Environmental Design at Cal Poly; Beverly Bass, ASLA, PLA, LEED AP, Department Head of Landscape Architecture at Cal Poly; and Lauren Hackney, PLA, ASLA, Lecturer in Landscape Architecture at Cal Poly. Honored guests included Kelsey Shaffer, a representative from yak tit'u tit'u yak tihini Northern Chumash Tribe who provided invaluable insight on the perspectives of the tribe and significance of Morro Rock and its surrounding lands; Bill Roschen, Chairperson of the Morro Bay Planning Commission; and Jen Ford, member of the Morro Bay City Council.

The fast-paced, 36-hour 2024 Xtreme LA challenge was designed to foster creativity, team building and facility of expression, and worked to bring fresh, innovative thinking to an issue of critical ecological and cultural importance to its community. Eleven emerging professionals from leading landscape architecture firms across the country and sixteen exceptional students from the Cal Poly San Luis Obispo landscape architecture program worked in three teams under the mentorship of two distinguished landscape architects: Sarah Kuehl, ASLA, Founder of EinwillerKuehl Landscape Architecture, and Maura Rockcastle, ASLA, PLA, Principal and Co-Founder of TEN x TEN Landscape Architecture. ytt Northern Chumash Tribe member Kelsey Shaffer joined the participants for the duration of the charrette, working in close collaboration with all three teams. Using data, maps, surveys, current planning studies, regulatory guidelines, direct inspection of land areas, and information provided by local officials, the teams crafted solutions to this challenge:

Design landscapes that are resilient for the future while also taking reparative actions for past and current generations.



The project site and location of focus for Xtreme LA Morro Bay is a diverse patchwork of culturally, historically, ecologically and economically significant landscapes. Flanked on one side by Morro Rock and the decommissioned Morro Bay Power Plant and proposed Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) site on the other, the project area included:

- The Morro Rock Vicinity: 26 acres of open spit and causeway space that includes a large underutilized parking lot, a two-way road to base of Morro Rock, a dune restoration area, and Coleman Park.
- The Harbor: 2,300 linear feet of shoreline and a sub-tidal channel that serves as the entrance to Morro Bay harbor.
- The Embarcadero: 5 acres of streetscape space that is a hub of economic activity and tourism opportunities. It overlooks Morro Bay's working waterfront, home of the region's historic commercial fishing and aquaculture industries.
- The Triangle Lot: A 2-acre sliver of land situated opposite The Embarcadero and in the shadow of the decommissioned power plant's towering stacks.

While teams were encouraged to fully engage their creativity and innovative design thinking, they were instructed that their proposed solutions must incorporate elements that:

- Enhance stewardship through reprogramming that elevates Indigenous knowledges, traditions and perspectives;
- Prioritize significant habitat restoration supported by stewardship, education and low-impact recreation on water and land;
- Consider shoreline change, the predicted flooding and erosion of Morro Rock Beach, and future impacts to the estuary and ocean brought on by climate change;
- And weigh the impact and benefits of continued public access to sacred spaces and sensitive environments.

Embracing these opportunities and creatively addressing these challenges, the participants embarked on a very influential project. By contributing passion, sharing expertise, and inspiring innovative solutions, they understood they were not only providing meaningful value and resilience to a region's ecosystems, but that they were also helping secure a future for landscape architecture that prioritizes righting past wrongs, elevates the voices of Indigenous and other marginalized communities, and aims explicitly to challenge—rather than reproduce—the significant structural inequalities that underpin design and development. Collaboration throughout the event with ytt Tribe member Kelsey Shaffer was highly impactful for the participants, who gained a deep understanding of the Challenge setting through the sharing of tihini culture, language, and Kelsey's own perspective on her homeland and community.



READY, SET, COLLABORATE!

Upon arrival, participants kicked off 2024 Xtreme LA with a site visit to Morro Bay, getting a feel for the lay of the lands and water with guidance from Lauren Hackney. “The challenge at hand is not just about the past or a future defined by climate change. It is grounded in our present moment,” said Hackney, “yak titʻu titʻu yak tiʻhini Northern Chumash Tribe is here and has been here since time immemorial. The rapid transformation of Morro Bay over the last two centuries through fishing and power generation is ever-present in the animated debate over the National Marine Sanctuary nomination, offshore wind, and the next life of the power plant site. The predicted flooding of 2100 is here—already the parking lot has flooded and access to Morro Rock has closed in 2023 and 2024. And Morro Rock Beach has been identified as a location that will experience severe coastal erosion over the next 75 years. The future is now, and it is changing quickly.”

While onsite, the group also delved more deeply into the cultural and historical significance at play with guidance from



ytt Northern Chumash Tribe member, Kelsey Shaffer. “Our village place in Morro Bay, tsitqawi, and Lisamu’, which is Morro Rock, is a place where people from all over would come to gather, to pray, and to have ceremony together. For this reason, the village here had a very large dancehouse where, as the homeland tribe, it was our responsibility to host the people that would come, to feed them, to protect them, to give them transportation, and to care for them. This is something that is so rooted in who we are and is a tradition that continues today. Lisamu’ is a place of prayer where people come to seek healing and have a sense of peace—and you don’t have to be Indigenous to feel this. Whether you come here to surf, kayak, fish, or just enjoy the beach, you feel an incredible connection,” Shaffer said. Planning Commission Chairperson Bill Roschen discussed with the group the regional significance of Morro Bay as a potential site for renewable energy, ongoing community debate surrounding future waterfront development, and the imperative to protect Morro Bay’s unique biodiversity and rich coastal environment.

Before officially dividing into the three teams, the participants held a full-group collaborative exercise in which each shared a key question and an accompanying photo from the site. The group then organized the questions into five overarching themes that would coordinate and guide the next phase of the challenge. “Rather than going to our separate rooms and just beginning this challenge, we wanted to set the stage for something more open,” said Team Leader and Principal and Co-Founder of TEN x TEN Landscape Architecture, Maura Rockcastle. “Our goal was to create as many ideas for these stakeholders as possible within this format and this amount of time.”

The five overarching themes the group identified emerged as:

- Ecology -- Nature Wins!
- Land Justice
- Local Power
- Change Over Time
- Public Access



With these key concepts identified and ideas organized, the group then divided themselves into the three teams, each with a tihini name given by Kelsey Shaffer that represents their shared objective. Team kʔitutʔinha, which translates as “we return to” or “we come back,” took on the themes of Ecology & Nature Wins! and Land Justice. Team kʔišnaqhiniwana, which translates as “we intend to know,” tackled Local Power and Change Over Time. And Team ʔqinatʔi, which translates as “the one who dances,” embraced the theme of Public Access.

Approaching the culmination of 2024 Xtreme LA, and with little time to finish researching, brainstorming, drafting and refining their plans, and assembling them into presentations, the teams were impassioned with creativity and enthusiastic collaboration. Finally on the morning of the third day of this fast-paced challenge, all three teams offered their concepts, sketches and solutions as narrated presentations to a full audience of local officials, interested citizens, peers and colleagues at the College of Architecture and Environmental Design at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. These were their ideas.

THE SOLUTIONS

TEAM KʔITUTʔINHA

“We Return To / We Come Back”

Ecology & Nature Wins! and Land Justice

Led by Maura Rockcastle, ASLA, PLA, Principal and Co-Founder of TEN x TEN Landscape Architecture

Team kʔitutʔinha’s thinking revolved around the four big questions—What?, Why?, Where?, and When?—to organize the group’s proposed plan. The team also identified three words, “Protect”, “Connect”, and “Return” to bridge their topics of ecological preservation and land justice and to inform the conceptual nature of their proposed solutions. Each word was paired with a critical question that their plan would need to resolve:

- Protect: “How might this landscape evolve if animals, birds, fish, climate resilience, and thriving ecological systems are our priority?”
- Connect: “How can storytelling and Traditional Ecological Knowledge weave through this landscape in an experiential and sensory way to inspire, educate, protect, and build deeper relationships?”
- Return: “How might Land Back and a co-management plan help to re-establish Indigenous care and land practices in this landscape?”

In terms of the “What”, Team kʔitutʔinha envisioned a Morro Bay revitalization effort that aimed to improve not only the park’s amenities but also its storytelling by focusing on these concepts of Protecting, Connecting, and Returning the land. They identified key threatened and endangered species, like the southern sea otter, the steelhead trout, the tidewater goby and the snowy plover, that the plan should protect, as well as invasive species, like ice plant and European beachgrass, that the plan should mitigate. They also outlined how the quarrying of Morro Rock and subsequent creation of the manmade causeway that connects Morro Rock to the mainland and shelters the harbor can exacerbate flood risk, pointing out that the water itself wants to “take back its original path.”

As for the “Why,” the team grounded their philosophy in terms of land justice, looking to movements like Land Back for how decision-making power can be redistributed back into the hands of Indigenous communities to restore self-determination and enhance environmental sustainability and economic justice. Specifically, Team kʔitʔinʔa looked to the local Sacred Diablo Canyon Lands Back, a proposed co-management partnership between the ytt Northern Chumash Tribe, the Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo, and Cal Poly San Luis Obispo that creates a collaborative framework for prioritizing natural resources, Tribal resources and public access. These ideas informed the foundation of Team kʔitʔinʔa’s plan, which states, “We envision a future for Morro Rock where stewardship and management are returned to the hands of the ytt Northern Chumash Tribe through collaborative action with local and governmental organizations. A gradient of access ranging from public

to Tribal-only will protect the cultural significance of the landscape, while educating the general public.”

The idea of a “gradient of access” leads into the “Where” portion of Team kʔitʔinʔa’s plan, detailing proposed land designations that range from no-access ecological restoration areas, Tribal-only areas, areas with full public access, to seasonal-access areas that welcome both Tribal and general recreation activities. The team employed a “light on the land” approach, designating much of the north side of the causeway as a dune restoration area, while also utilizing much of its existing infrastructure to reduce the plan’s impact. The proposal retained existing features like Coleman Park’s shoreline bicycle and pedestrian paths, electing to revitalize these areas as a Storywalk/ʔipiquuskiʔ including native habitat restoration, the incorporation of Indigenous storytelling elements, and an elevated connection to nature through



additions like stepped water access on the causeway's south side. The plan's more significant changes came in the form of a cut in the causeway that detaches Morro Rock from the mainland, reducing the impact of flooding and sea level rise and returning *lisamu'* to the ocean. The team also elected to relocate the existing parking lot from the base of Morro Rock to the Triangle Lot and area adjacent to the Embarcadero. This move not only allocates more land for dune habitat restoration, but also designates some of the most sacred spaces in the shadow of Morro Rock as a limited access area, restoring Tribal management of this significant site. Alongside the relocated parking lot, a new cultural center/*šaq'hinimu* would offer a wealth of opportunities for visitors to deepen their understanding of Morro Bay's Indigenous history.

Finally for the "When," Team *kʔitutʔinha* proposed a phased approach intended to minimize disruption to the local community and users of the site. Phase 1 sees the partial relocation of the parking lot, the completion of the cultural center, and the development of dune restoration and co-management strategies within the first 5 years. Phase 2 sees the revitalization of the shoreline paths, the creation of the channel between Morro Rock and the causeway, and the establishment limited access/Tribal-only lands within 10 years. Phase 3 finalizes dune restoration and parking location within 15 years, and finally at the 15+ year mark, the team sees the potential for full ownership and management of the land by the *ytt* Northern Chumash Tribe.



TEAM KʔIŠNAQHINIWANA

"We Intend to Know"

Local Power & Change Over Time

*Led by Sarah Kuehl, ASLA, Founder of EinwillerKuehl
Landscape Architecture*

Team *kʔišnaqhiniwana* opened their presentation with an insightful statement on the temporality of the site, contrasting the permanence of Morro Rock with the impermanence of its surroundings and revealing the power that this relationship lends to the sacred landmark:

"Before any of us arrived, before the Army Corps was in this space, before settlement happened in this area, there was Morro Rock. After all of us, Morro Rock will remain. Everything around it is impermanent, but Morro Rock itself is permanent. We found so much power inside of those words—or rather we saw that there was power, there is power, and there will be power. The recognition of how this power radiates over time from this central point outward is central to our premise itself. Entropically as energy radiates outward and inward, Morro Rock is and will remain the center."

Following this opening statement, Team *kʔišnaqhiniwana* detailed the site's change over time and the various modes of impermanence the Morro Rock vicinity has experienced. They contrasted the pre-settlement shoreline with the current one defined by human intervention and looked toward future changes brought on by the erosion and sea level rise of anthropogenic climate change. They recognized that, while Morro Rock is not immune to physical change, its powerful relationship to the ecology, culture and economy of site endures. This conclusion informed the three goals around which Team *kʔišnaqhiniwana* structured their plan:

- Facilitating international access to Morro Rock.
- Foregrounding temporality of the site and the permanence of Morro Rock.
- And respecting the sanctity of the site and rock.

Starting from the Embarcadero, moving across the causeway, and arriving at the base of Morro Rock, the team explored a series of interventions that would curate an international journey to the heart of the site—first slow, then communal, then immersive, then intimate. Pedestrian-centric improvements along the Embarcadero as well as a new recreation destination at the Triangle Lot would encourage a slow and thoughtful approach. New communal gathering spaces at the entrance to the causeway would offer visitors the opportunity to ground themselves and prepare both physically and spiritually for the experience of Morro Rock. Dune restoration and habitat revitalization along the causeway would create an immersive connection to nature, surrounding visitors in culturally and ecologically significant native flora and fauna. Finally, a reduction of the existing parking space and a reintroduction of dune habitat to this area would shroud the parking lot’s view on approach and offer a more enclosed and intimate experience upon arrival at Morro Rock. At the base of Morro Rock, Team kʔišnaqhiniwana proposed a series of tidal shelves that would give visitors a place to intimately connect with the water, observe temporal changes throughout the cycle of the tides, and help facilitate new eelgrass habitat in the event of sea level rise.

Reflecting the power and poignancy of their opening statement, Team kʔišnaqhiniwana concludes by saying:

“Morro Rock is the point of power, knowledge and center of our design. In the same way that the waves have always crashed and receded against the west side of the rock, humanity also crashes against the rock—but the difference is we never left. In our fast-paced world, we have failed to see what it wants us to see. By allowing Morro Rock to push back, inform the space around it, and lead our design, Lisamu’ has guided us in designing a healthy, slow and integrated environment, space and experience.”



TEAM ŁQINAT’I

“The One Who Dances”

Public Access

*Led by Sarah Kuehl, ASLA, Founder of EinwillerKuehl
Landscape Architecture*

Team łqinat’i opened by drawing attention to the missing connections that exist between the Embarcadero, the causeway and Coleman Park, and the site at the base of Morro Rock. Much like Team kʔišnaqhiniwana, Team łqinat’i team pointed out that, while these spaces are physically connected, the idea of a cohesive, experiential journey is lost. This observation informed the three central questions that guided their proposed plan:

- What if movement shapes space, rather than vice versa?
- What if the landscape changes over both time and space?
- And what if shared space becomes common ground?

Team łqinat’i considered the many different groups who need and want to access Morro Rock and, importantly, sought to enhance how that access takes place. They introduced a concept of “interstitial landscapes,” the idea of creating unique spaces along the route between the Embarcadero and Morro Rock that make this journey more interesting and more meaningful. Team łqinat’i also introduced a design theme of “Transitional + Transformative,” a focus particularly

on the smoothing of the transitions between land and water, between community space and personal space, and between everyday experiences and sacred experiences to transform the journey to Morro Rock.

The proposed journey begins with a new cultural center and willow grove situated within the Triangle Lot at the entrance to the Embarcadero. This threshold space would communicate to visitors that they are on culturally significant land and signal the intentional beginning of a meaningful experience. Along the Embarcadero itself and in the shadow of the power plant's



towering stacks, Team Iqinat'í envisioned a more pedestrian-centric experience, using native trees and new plantings to bring the site down to human scale, and reallocating space for a new pedestrian and cyclist promenade that would make this section of the journey safer and more pleasant. As visitors move from the Embarcadero out toward the causeway and Coleman Park, the team proposed a dancehouse pavilion/ qinat'í as the next interstitial space and central node along the journey to Morro Rock. This place to pause would also demarcate the point at which Indigenous communities historically would launch boats to access Morro Rock/Iisamu' prior to the construction of the causeway. Finally at the base of Morro Rock, Team Iqinat'í proposed the addition of a tidal theater, cutting into the existing parking lot to create terraces along a portion of the water's edge. The tidal theater would celebrate the day-to-day and season-to-season changing of the tides, enable a more intimate connection between people and water, and help accommodate for future sea level rise. The gradual incline of the tidal theater would also represent Morro Rock's original contour, calling attention to the damage done by quarrying and symbolically returning this form to the landscape.

Summing up their proposal and its inspirations, Team Iqinat'í concludes:

“We were inspired by the idea that it is not just Morro Rock that is sacred, but it is the entire landscape that is sacred. We wanted to represent the heart and spirit of all who come together to experience this amazing place—the ytt Northern Chumash Tribe, the dog walkers, the children and families, the residents and business owners. Rather than just creating a singular moment, we wanted to create an everyday place that people can enjoy and that can supplement and enrich their daily experiences.”

THE CLOSING

Following the presentations and beginning the closing remarks, Team Leader Sarah Kuehl thanked and congratulated the participants, making a special note to acknowledge the instrumental role that both representative from the ytt Northern Chumash Tribe, Kelsey Shaffer, and Cal Poly landscape architecture lecturer, Lauren Hackney, played in making 2024 Xtreme LA a success. Commenting on the inspiring solutions the teams presented, Kuehl said, “What’s fascinating about the designs you’ve seen today is partly what they have in common. Sometimes the problems of the past and the things that get broken bring about real ideas and opportunities. Just knowing where Morro Rock was before it got damaged seemed to hold a space for something else to happen, and I think that’s very powerful.”

Morro Bay City Council member Jen Ford and Planning Commission Chairperson Bill Roschen commented on the value of the Challenge to the City’s planning efforts, noting that the participants offered transformative new ideas about how to envision Morro Bay’s future waterfront.

In her closing statement, Beverly Bass, Department Head of Landscape Architecture at Cal Poly, added, “I just wanted to express gratitude on behalf of our students for what an amazing event this has been. It’s a very unique opportunity for the students to experience first-hand the real-world challenges landscape architects face today — climate change, squaring contradictory uses and, very importantly, respecting the cultures and the peoples who have histories with a particular site. While this has long been a consideration for our profession, today it’s absolutely critical we partner with indigenous representatives before we begin a project.”

Kevin Dong, Interim Dean of the College of Architecture and Environmental Design at Cal Poly, concluded by saying, “This was so refreshing to see. Everyone did such wonderful work—from the charrettes, to the graphics, to the presentations. And it all starts with Landscape Forms. This

format that they have provided is really inspirational, seeing how it ties the generations together, sharing experiences up and down, and between students, sometimes sideways. I hope your takeaway from this is not only the experience, but also an understanding of the importance of the work you’re doing as we face the future.”

For her conclusion, Landscape Forms Chief Executive Officer, Marjorie Simmons extended her congratulations and gratitude to all the participants, describing the proposals and presentations as “inspiring, simply amazing work.” She continued with a special gesture of appreciation for Beverly Bass, Lauren Hackney, Sarah Kuehl, and Maura Rockcastle, pledging charitable donations to non-profits of their choosing in recognition of the time and dedication each contributed to the 2024 Xtreme LA Challenge. In the final words of the afternoon, Marjorie Simmons concluded,

“For me, I have one key takeaway: The future of the landscape architecture profession is very bright. The founder of our company was a landscape architect, the late John Chipman, Sr., and I am absolutely certain he would be so proud of each and every one of you and for the work you’re doing. We are counting on all of you, and we wish you the very best. Thank you so much.”



XTREME LA: MORRO BAY PARTICIPANTS

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