

XTREME LA SAUGATUCK/DOUGLAS: TWO CITIES ONE VISION...CREATING ONE RESILIENT COMMUNITY

BY GAIL GREET HANNAH

In October 2015, a two-day charrette sponsored by Landscape Forms and dubbed Xtreme LA (Extreme Landscape Architecture), brought sixteen young landscape architects and two award-winning leaders in the field to Saugatuck/Douglas in Western Michigan. The event provided an opportunity for members of the next generation of design professionals to cast a fresh perspective on issues critical to the growth and future of the lakeside community. Top of the agenda were reinvigorating the waterfront, enhancing streetscapes, building better connections, and fostering a stronger year-round economy in a summer-season market – all within a frame work of sustainable principles. The team toured the towns, was briefed by city mayors and managers and returned to a local studio to brainstorm, create concepts, and develop proposals. This report provides highlights of the illustrated presentation delivered at a public meeting following the event.

Embrace what you are about to hear. Think of it as valuable, positive transformation. Be inspired. **Ed Greer, RLA, Principal, SmithGroupJJR**

That's landscape architect, Ed Greer, warming up the audience before a presentation of proposals for invigorating public spaces of two small Michigan cities pondering their futures, separately and together. The presentation to an audience that included city mayors, planners and local council representatives, business leaders, and interested residents of Saugatuck, Douglas and the adjacent township, was the culmination of an October 2015 design charrette dubbed Xtreme LA (Extreme Landscape Architecture). The intense 36-hour event in sister cities Saugatuck and Douglas, Michigan brought together

sixteen young design professionals identified by their firms as potential leaders, guided and mentored by two distinguished landscape architects. The seventh in a series conducted in communities and on campuses around the country, the event was sponsored by Landscape Forms and co-hosted by Landscape Forms President, Richard Heriford with Barbara Deutsch, Executive Director of the Landscape Architecture Foundation. Team leaders for the challenge were Ed Freer, RLA, Senior Urban Designer and Principal, SmithGroupJJR and Ernest C. Wong, FASLA, APA Principal and President, site design group, ltd.

THE ART COAST OF MICHIGAN

Saugatuck and Douglas sit nestled on the shores of Lake Michigan in an area of exceptional natural beauty. Separated by Kalamazoo Lake and the Kalamazoo River that feeds into Lake Michigan, the cities are united by their proximity and shared popularity as a resort and retirement destination. Settled in the 1830s by lumber barons, Saugatuck/Douglas emerged at the end of the century as a refuge for urbanites from St. Louis and Chicago seeking summer escape. In 1910 a group of Chicago artists established the Ox-Bow Summer School of Art on Ox-Bow Lagoon, drawing artists and architects to the region and establishing the area's claim-to-fame as "The Art Coast of Michigan." Today these 19th century towns boast pre and post Civil War Greek Revival and Italianate architecture as well as Arts & Crafts and Colonial Revival buildings. Both offer compelling attractions: beaches, marinas, 34 art galleries, numerous shops and restaurants and authentic small-town charm (no chain businesses permitted) that residents value and want to preserve. In 2015 Saugatuck was named by *USA Today* "The Best Coastal Small Town in America."

Saugatuck/Douglas have a combined population of about 2100 year-round residents that swells to four times that number in summer as seasonal residents and tens of thousands of

tourists arrive. Retirees make up a high proportion of seasonal residents — over 50% of property owners in Saugatuck are not principal residents. Some shops and restaurants stay open year-round but many close at the end of the season, with a spike in activity during the weeks around Christmas. The two cities, which are bordered by a township of about 9,000 residents, share a school and library. Saugatuck has the drugstore, Douglas the supermarket. To get from downtown Saugatuck to the city's celebrated Oval Beach one must cross a bridge and pass through Douglas, reentering Saugatuck on the other side. Although it is difficult for the uninitiated to tell where one community ends and the other begins, residents and municipal officials are acutely sensitive to their individual identities. And while the combined Saugatuck/Douglas business community works to promote policies and initiatives to better support year-round businesses, the two cities have separate governments and development agendas. Saugatuck has little available space for new residential construction and actively cultivates a retired population. Douglas has capacity for development and is considering ways to grow its year-round residential base by attracting a younger demographic of families and young professionals, but in a market where new affordable condos and houses are snapped up by retirees, accomplishing this may require deft policy and politics.

GETTING THE LAY OF THE LAND

Xtreme LA participants were given a brief tour of the two cities, stopping at selected locations along the way to explore key sites and take in the character of the community. Municipal officials detailed their specific challenges and goals but in the end agreed on the primary importance to both cities of enhancing waterfronts, streetscapes and parks for the benefit of residents, businesses and visitors alike. The landscape architects looked, listened and returned to a studio at the Saugatuck Center for the Arts where they brainstormed, developed concepts, divided into small teams, and set to work.

The teams looked at the challenges before them from five vantage points: connectivity, wayfinding, public open space, economic development, and sustainability based on *One Planet* principles (see sidebar). Their thinking was influenced by two key assumptions. First, that the natural features of the environment should play a much larger role in defining and enriching the sense of place and second, that attracting a new "active crowd" to the area was essential to ensuring the vigor and success of both cities going forward.

ONE PLANET

- Zero Carbon
- Zero Waste
- Sustainable Transport
- Sustainable Materials
- Local And Sustainable Food
- Sustainable Water, Land Use And Wildlife
- Culture And Community
- Equity And Local Economy
- Health And Happiness



The tour, the town and the team at the Saugatuck Center for the Arts



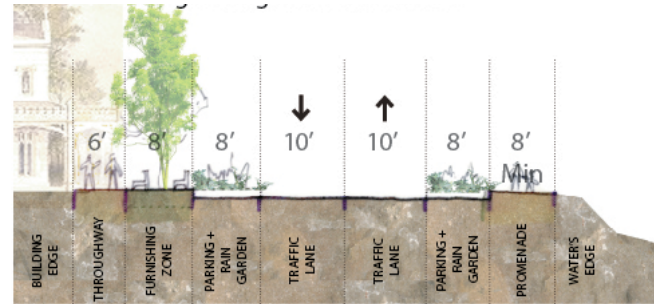
In the studio and on site

MAIN STREET FERRY

DESCRIPTION

A direct ferry connection between the Main streets of Saugatuck and Douglas will create a robust culture of shared economic activity.

Section through Saugatuck Waterfront



Future Ferry Dock Site, Douglas



THE PROPOSALS

Enriching Connections

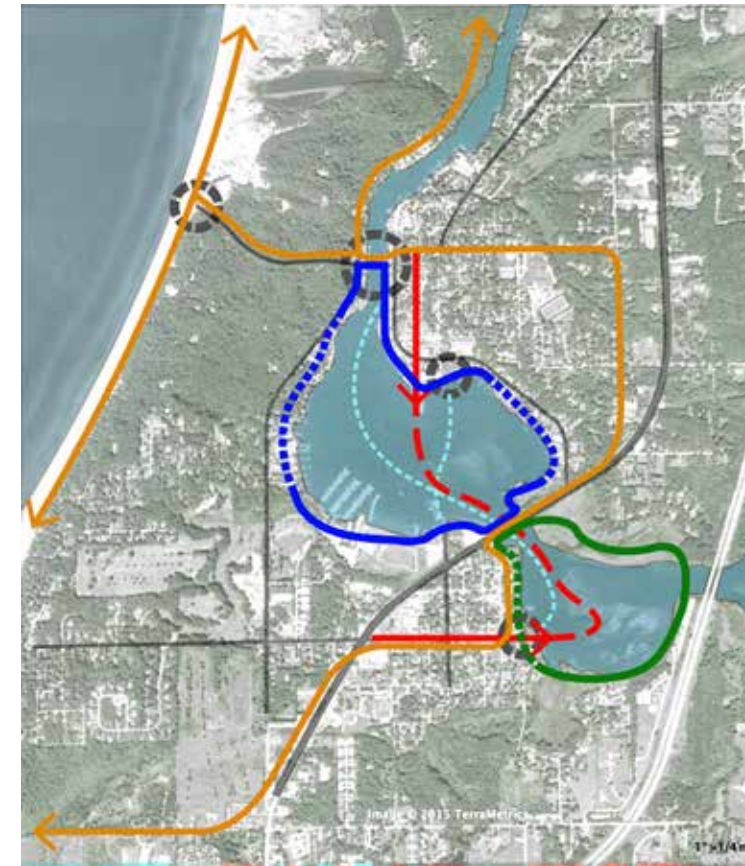
Greater connectivity quickly emerged as the necessary step toward creating “one resilient community.” Starting with the existing framework of connections within and between the cities, the small team outlined additions and enhancements. At the picturesque Chain Ferry in downtown Saugatuck, it proposed augmenting the historic attraction with a *small craft service* to transport people between Saugatuck and Douglas, enabling them to experience both towns without having to get back into their cars. To take advantage of the extraordinary waterfronts of both cities, the team proposed the *Saugatuck/Douglas Loop*, a 45-minute walk around the central bay, onto the boardwalk and to adjacent trails (noting that easements might be required). It advocated using “a light touch and small footprint” to attract new visitors interested in closer connection with the natural resources of the area by creating what it called the *Green Star Boardwalk*, a floating dock that would rise with the tides and take people over the marshlands where bird life is abundant. To enable people without privately owned boats to spend more time on the water it proposed increased water routes and connection points for small river craft, such as kayaks. Looking long term, the team recommended creation of the *Art Coast Trail*: an all-season trail for walkers and bikers that would connect beaches, riverfronts, the ecological preserve, the brewery and the downtowns via a “vibrant, multi-modal transit hub.”

SAUGATUCK-DOUGLAS LOOP



DEVELOPING NEW CONNECTIONS

- **MAIN STREET FERRY** ———
The cities of Saugatuck and Douglas exist on and because of music. The main streets can be connected and enhanced by taking opportunity of this natural resource.
- **SAUGATUCK-DOUGLAS LOOP** ———
People want to be on the waterfront, and we should enable that. The Saugatuck-Douglas Loop will allow families to experience the waterfronts in a 30 minute walk.
- **GREEN STAR BOARDWALK** ———
Taking advantage of the natural resources in the area, this path will connect you with the water and animals.
- **WATER ROUTES** ———
Activate both waterfronts at the same time with this cross waterway Kayak and human powered craft route.
- **ART COAST TRAIL** ———
This multi season trail will open up more areas of this sub-region to a diverse crowd of adventure seeking visitors and residents alike.

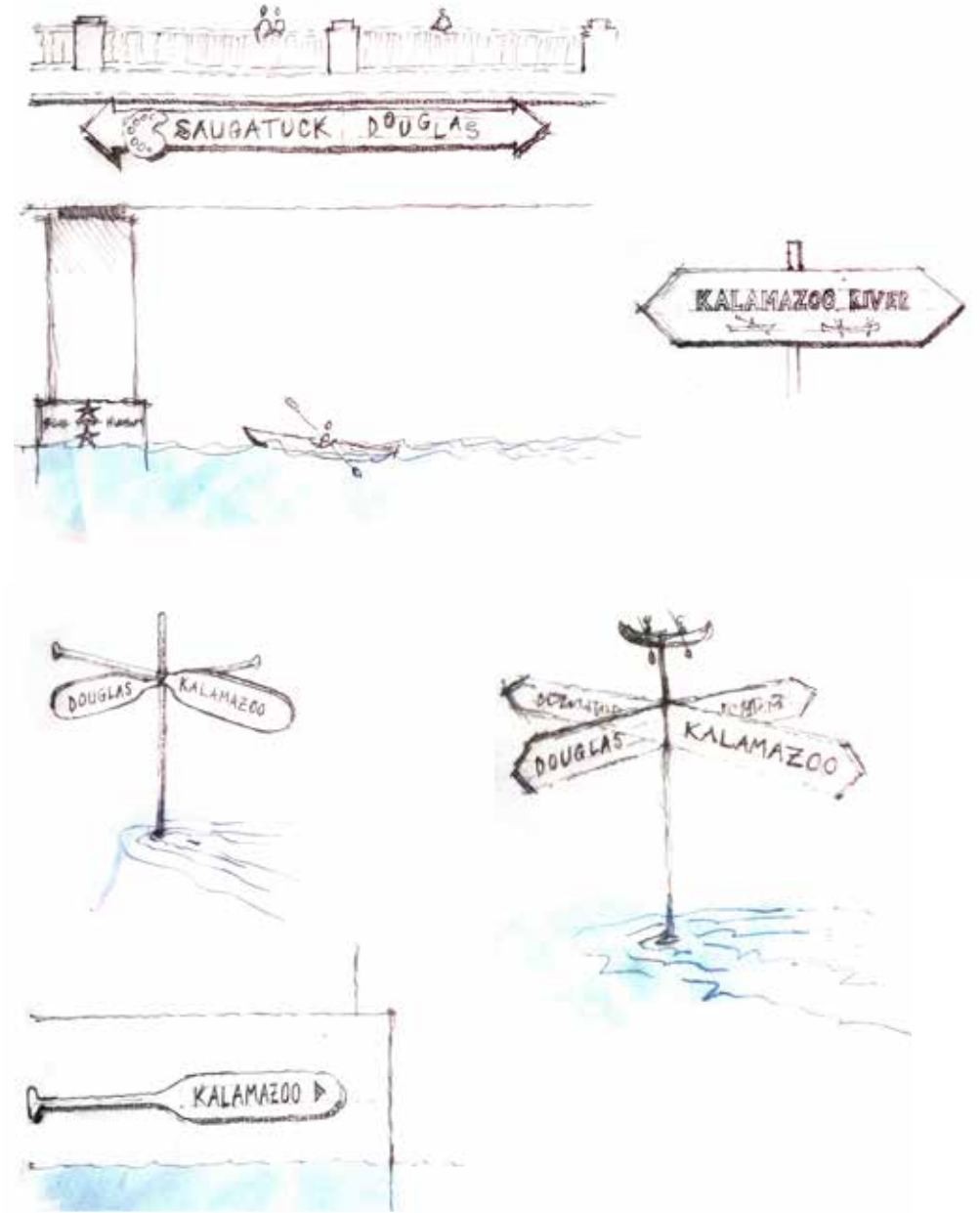


Strategic Wayfinding

This team looked at places of arrival where strategic wayfinding could be employed to raise the profile of the two cities. It advised “marking the moment” at three critical junctures. At the “primary arrival” from Chicago, Kalamazoo and St. Louis off I-96, it recommended signage that would celebrate arrival at a unique place. At the “secondary arrival” via the bridge between the two cities, the team proposed replacing a modest roadside marker with a bold overhead metal banner spanning the bridge at the Saugatuck/Douglas boundary to clearly identify the two cities and provide orientation. And it noted the rich opportunity to mark the experience of arrival by water and showed concepts for signage at water level telling people in large boats, small craft and people-powered canoes and kayaks where they are on the river and where they could go ashore.



BRIDGE CROSSROADS: FROM WATER



Proposed signage on water



Bright ideas

The team also looked at wayfinding within the two cities. In reviewing existing signage for businesses and sites it found lots of individual character but no core identity. Researching precedents from other places, it offered examples for coherent and community-relevant signage approaches: Georgetown in Washington D.C., with its vocabulary of simple classic signage appropriate to a historic town; and Portland, Oregon, which successfully employs art pieces as markers. “You have stories here,” the team declared, and recommended creating interpretative signage to share the history and lore of significant buildings and sites. And it proposed wayfinding strategies for the streetscape, including brightly colored and patterned street paving, to create a more vibrant pedestrian experience and better connect side streets and their restaurants and shops with the water.

Celebrating Local Culture

Saugatuck/Douglas enjoy a robust cultural legacy rooted in the arts and the natural setting. More than a century after its founding, The Ox-Bow School of Art continues to attract students and artists to year-round courses in disciplines ranging from painting and ceramics to sculpture, photography and film. For 25 years the LaFontsee Gallery in Douglas, with its Urban Craft Boutique, has been at the forefront of the art culture of West Michigan. The Saugatuck Center for the Arts, established in 2003 as “a robust art center to help create an even more vibrant community,” employs art education to reinforce and expand traditional learning and partners with schools, libraries, local government and business to nurture creativity and display the work of local artists. The Macatawa Bay Boat Works is nationally renown for its meticulous restoration of classic wood boats, some more than a century old. Its superior craftwork regularly garners top awards at premier classic boat shows. And Crane Orchards in nearby Fennville, Michigan, a family farm since 1917, has become one of West Michigan’s most popular U-pick orchards. Combining the DIY harvesting of apples, peaches and cherries with nature-based activities such a corn maze and hay rides, it brings thousands of visitors to the region each year for a taste of the land.

Looking at new opportunities for economic development, Xtreme LA team members identified two major ways in which

this existing arts and outdoor culture could be built upon to create lasting returns. First it proposed *cultivating craft entrepreneurship* by attracting and nurturing a year-round community of artists living and working in Saugatuck/Douglas. It showed concepts for artist housing and studio space that would support a live/work community and act as a business incubator: “A place where people can settle, secure grants, cultivate business ideas and generate economic activity, creating a sustainable cycle that brings people in and recreates a foundation for the region.” As an example of a “small idea” for an arts-based business, the team suggested an art salvage store that would repurpose items rescued from the residential and business waste stream to “create a ready source of materials and provide a community gathering space for residents and a fun place to shop.” And it proposed *creating an ecological destination* in and around Saugatuck/Douglas by expanding access to the area’s unique natural features and promoting recreational activities such as bird watching which would draw in untapped but potentially affluent new visitors to the area. Restoring wetlands and prairie, increasing access to the water at multiple points in both cities, extending the boardwalk and creating nature trails designed for year-round use were proposed to build the infrastructure for ecological recreation that has provided significant returns for many other communities.



Live/work spaces



Art salvage for sale

Reimagining Public Spaces

The future success of Saugatuck/Douglas will ride on the ability to attract an ongoing stream of visitors and residents. A big part of the challenge is preserving their unique, small-town character while providing attractions and activities with appeal to a more diverse group of people. The team conducted an inventory of open spaces, social gathering places and the connectors between them and in a presentation that showed existing and proposed conditions, offered design concepts for five project areas. In *Downtown Saugatuck* it proposed enhanced connections to the riverfront and more programmed activities such as markets and festivals along streetscapes, which might be closed to cars for those occasions. And at Wicks Park, site of the Chain Ferry, the team proposed turning the long, narrow waterfront space into an urban plaza, envisioning it as a vibrant place, day and night, with a “fun and funky” play area for kids and updated amenities including a shelter structure and restaurant. It recommended that Saugatuck make its large and grassy *Coghlin Park* the main events space for performances and other public events, keeping the space “light and airy” with more green infrastructure, including enhanced storm water management, an expanded sculpture installation, and construction of a large promenade and pier, enabling people to get onto the water and appreciate the view to Douglas. The team advised capitalizing on the *Blue Star Bridge* connecting Saugatuck and Douglas to “celebrate the convergence of the two communities” and remind people of how effortlessly and often they move between the intertwined places.

Existing



Wicks Park

Proposed



Wicks Park



Proposed traffic calming and green infrastructure at intersections

In *Downtown Douglas* the team considered the importance of the post office to the daily life of residents, proposing an intervention at the highway crossing that would make it easier and safer for residents to walk and pick up their mail as well as a place to relax outside the post office for meeting and greeting neighbors. It offered recommendations for enhancing down streets with a pocket park, more outdoor seating and outdoor dining. And it proposed storm water management in walkways. The team envisioned an ambitious scheme for Wade's Bayou designed to make it the magnet for reinvigoration of the

waterfront and all-season recreation. It proposed re-grading at the waterfront and pulling back from the water to create more space for people to enjoy the site, restoring the wetland and marsh to improve stormwater management and attract birds, and building a boardwalk to enhance experience over the water. And it presented concepts for a glass-walled boathouse: a gathering place that could offer kayak and paddleboard rentals in temperate seasons and ice skate rentals in winter. Lit up at night, the boathouse would provide a beacon, signaling the bayou as a welcoming community park and recreation space.



Proposed boathouse at Wade's Bayou

Creating Sustainable Solutions

In their intensive and productive work, Xtreme LA participants were guided by *One Planet* principles for achieving physically, socially, environmentally and economically sustainable solutions. Providing greater public access to the water, promoting healthy physical activity and reducing automobile use by encouraging walking, biking and water travel, supporting the local business economy with streetscape enhancements, expanding opportunities for people to live and work in the community, restoring wetlands, improving stormwater management — all were designed to ensure the sustainable future of these two beautiful cities joined in one resilient community.

These are the professionals who will take us to the next level of landscape architecture. We are going to see great things across the country coming from them in the future. It's been an honor to work with them.

Ernest Wong, FASLA, APA, Principal and President, site design group, ltd.

Proposed



Walkway in restored wetland

As the presentation came to an end, team leader Ernie Wong paid tribute to the designers who produced a serious and actionable body of work. Then team leader Ed Greer directly engaged the audience in the challenge going forward. "What are the next steps?" he asked. "Form a partnership between Saugatuck, Douglas and the township and prioritize your projects. Work together to identify private and public funding partners who can help you take it forward. But first and foremost, "Embrace the vision. Believe and be patient."

Following a question and answer period Landscape Forms President, Richard Heriford, closed the event by thanking participants, team leaders and people in the audience.

As a Saugatuck resident Heriford has a special interest in the future of the area. "Almost as important as the physical solutions presented here is the idea of creating a community of craft," he said. "That really resonated with me. Getting artisans to set up workshops and live in the community would provide dividends for years to come." And addressing members of the local community he added: "It will take champions. Find your champions and accept our best wishes for your success."

Existing



XTLA Participants

Brittany Blicharz	The Office of James Burnett	Houston, TX
Ivan Maranan	Littlejohn	Orlando, FL
Adam Bachtel	Forum Studio	St. Louis, MO
Jen Cross	RDG Planning & Design	Omaha, NE
Paul McGehee	CMG Landscape Architecture	San Francisco, CA
Robert Jackson	Studio Larrea EDSA	Ft. Lauderdale, FL
Drew Stangel	The Office of James Burnett	Boston, MA
David Armesy	Civitas	Denver, CO
Alex Forbes	Terraplan	Toronto, Ontario
Reid Fellenbaum	AECOM	Arlington, VA
Janet Broughton	Starr Whitehouse	New York, NY
Shaun Hicks	LandDesign	Charlotte, NC
Hogan Edelberg	AECOM	San Francisco, CA
Matt Walsh	Hitchcock Design Group	Chicago, IL
John Evans	Studio Bryan Hanes	Philadelphia, PA
David Ruiz	Melillo & Bauer Associates, Inc.	Brielle, NJ

Guests

William Hess	Mayor	City of Saugatuck, MI
Kirk Harrier	City Manager	City of Saugatuck, MI
James Wiley	Mayor	City of Douglas, MI
William LeFevere	City Manager	City of Douglas, MI
Jim Petzing	Director	Saugatuck Area BusinessAssociation

**The Xtreme LA Team**

BIOS

Ed Freer, RLA, Senior Urban Designer

Principal, SmithGroupJJR

Over the course of his 38-year professional career, Ed Freer has built a significant and award-winning portfolio in urban design and community-based planning throughout the U.S. A principal at SmithGroupJJR, he is highly accomplished at facilitating a consensus vision and broad community support for urban design and redevelopment initiatives. Mr. Freer has served as a resource member to many civic task forces and professional panels and as a member of national design juries. He has extensive expertise in planning and designing, working closely with members of the communities for whom he is planning and designing and has become a national leader in reconnecting communities to the historical and cultural amenities of their towns and cities. He has participated in national design panels and has been a resource to ULI Advisory Services, Mayors' Institute on City Design, AIA RUDAT Community by Design Program, and The Waterfront Center. Noteworthy projects include Davenport Veterans Memorial Park, Davenport, Iowa; Detroit Riverwalk, Detroit, Michigan; Dubuque Historic Millwork District, Dubuque, Iowa; Duncan L. Clinch Marina, Traverse City, Michigan; Frankfort Riverfront Development Plan, Frankfort, Kentucky; La Crosse Riverfront Master Redevelopment, La Crosse, Wisconsin; and prior to his work with SmithGroupJJR, Mashpee Commons, Mashpee, Massachusetts; Old Town Fort Collins, Colorado; and Canadian Naval Heritage Centre- Battle of the Atlantic Place, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Ernest C. Wong, FASLA, APA

Principal and President, site design group, ltd.

As the founding Principal and President of site design group, ltd., Mr. Wong has been instrumental in the success of the firm as well as the development of the landscape architecture profession in the City of Chicago. Since its founding 25 years ago the urban design and landscape architecture firm has grown to nineteen professionals, including LEED accredited and licensed landscape architects, planners and architects. Under Mr. Wong's direction, the firm has gained a reputation for creative design, providing thoughtful and beautifully detailed urban spaces, and improving the quality of life in various urban neighborhoods. An advocate of contextually appropriate open spaces and urban parks, Mr. Wong has directed numerous award-winning projects including The Park at Lakeshore East, Ping Tom Memorial Park in Chinatown, the State Street Lightscape, the West Loop's Mary Bartelme Park, and Henry Palmisano Park (formerly Stearns Quarry) in the Bridgeport neighborhood. Mr. Wong sits on the board of numerous public service organizations and professional juries including the Driehaus Award for Architectural Excellence in Community Design, Near South Planning Board and the Chicago Landmarks Commission and was named one of the 2010 Chicagoans of the Year by the Chicago Tribune. Mr. Wong was selected as 2012 Friends of the Park's Parks Ball honoree for his outstanding designs for new Chicago Parks.

