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Storytelling Is Essential to Placemaking, Building a Sense of Community

James A. Lord, FASLA, Posits Landscape Design Fosters Meaningful Connections

James A. Lord, FASLA, is a founding partner of Surfacedesign, Inc. He provides design vision to lead the firm's diverse portfolio of internationally award-winning landscapes, including masterplans and public open spaces for Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, Smithsonian Institute, Expedia, Bay Area Discovery Museum, and Auckland International Airport, in addition to private homes, hotels, and California wineries.

"Storytelling informs our understanding of where we are," believes Lord. "As people, we need to be attached to places to have a sense of groundedness. Otherwise, we lose touch with who we are and the people around us. In a global economy, design reminds us of the value of connecting with place, people, and culture."

Lord came from a family of structural, seismic, and civil engineers, which first led him to work in architecture. This personal and professional background contributes to smooth communication with all elements of the building team. His transition to landscape was spurred by the 1992 Los Angeles Riots. "During the LA Riots, it became clear that open space and park space was necessary for people's happiness living in an urban place," he says. "Landscape has the power to bring people together and heal the environment at the same time."

A theme that resonates throughout Lord's approach to landscape design is "evolving placemaking"—a main differentiator from architecture. "Architecture is all about controlling a static entity, but in landscape, we embrace the changes that will occur," he explains. "I'm fascinated when drive lanes and parking spaces get converted to bike lanes and park space. How we work with this transformation, rather than fight it, is what's really exciting."

Roberto Burle Marx is fondly remembered as one of Lord's mentors. "With Burle Marx, landscape was about liberation, plant material, and fun. He championed the modern aesthetic while grounding it in horticulture," Lord recalls of his days as a young designer visiting the older master toward the end of his life in Brazil. Lord's international experience working with George Hargreaves, FASLA, on the 1998 Lisbon World Expo and the 2000 Sydney Olympics masterplan benefit his extensive work in New Zealand (with his mother a "Kiwi," he is especially endeared to the area).

Lord received his Bachelor of Art in Architecture from University of Southern California in 1990 followed by his Master of Landscape Architecture from Harvard University Graduate School of Design (GSD) in 1996. Before cofounding Surfacedesign in 2001 with Roderick Wyllie, ASLA, Lord worked for Peter Walker and Partners and Martha Schwartz Inc., in addition to Hargreaves Associates. He is a professor in practice at Harvard GSD, a visiting professor at The Ohio State University, and a jury critic at California College of the Arts, University of California at Berkeley, and University of Southern California.

Lord has been active with the Alumni Council of Harvard GSD, The Cultural Landscape Foundation's Stewardship Council, San Francisco Urban Design Assistance Group, and USC Gamble House's Restoration Committee, among other design-focused endeavors. Outside of design, Lord's interests include cooking, travelling, art, and being active in charities and movements, such as Equality California and Destinations Foundation.

San Francisco-based Surfacedesign, Inc., is an award-winning landscape architecture and urban design firm that creates dynamic parks, plazas, waterfronts, civic landscapes, and private gardens. Partners James A. Lord, FASLA, Roderick Wyllie, ASLA, and Geoff di Girolamo, ASLA, Assoc. AIA, in collaboration with a multidisciplinary team of landscape architects, urban designers, and architects, provide innovative design solutions for a wide range of projects, working directly with institutions, architects, community groups, and city agencies. Winner of the 2017 National Design Award for Landscape Architecture (given by Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum), Surfacedesign focuses on cultivating a sense of connection to the built and natural worlds, pushing people to engage with the landscape in new ways. The firm's work is the subject of *Material Landscapes*, a monograph published by The Monacelli Press (2019).

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