

FOREGROUND

DETROIT

A drawing by Julie Bargmann, the inaugural winner of the Oberlander Prize, in *MINDS*, page 38.



THE STRANGER TERRITORY

JULIE BARGMANN, WINNER OF THE INAUGURAL OBERLANDER PRIZE, HAS SHAPED A GENERATION OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS.

BY TIMOTHY A. SCHULER

laureate, the Oberlander Prize seems poised to deliver on all counts.

“I’ve been amazed. I wake up in the morning, and there’s Neda Ulaby on *Morning Edition*,” talking about the prize, says Elizabeth Meyer, FASLA, the chair of the Oberlander Prize Advisory Committee and a longtime colleague of Bargmann’s at the University of Virginia (UVA).

Named for Cornelia Hahn Oberlander, the trailblazing Vancouver-based landscape architect who died this year at the age of 99, the Oberlander Prize honors a living landscape architect or landscape architecture collective whose body of work exemplifies the best of the discipline and is accompanied by a \$100,000 cash award and two years of public programming. Curated by the landscape historian John Beardsley, the biennial award was created by the Cultural Landscape Foundation (TCLF) following a campaign to save the Russell Page-designed landscapes at Manhattan’s Frick Collection. “We were talking about writing an editorial about why

we need a prize in landscape architecture like the Pritzker, and then I thought, we should just do this,” recalls Charles Birnbaum, FASLA, TCLF’s president and CEO.

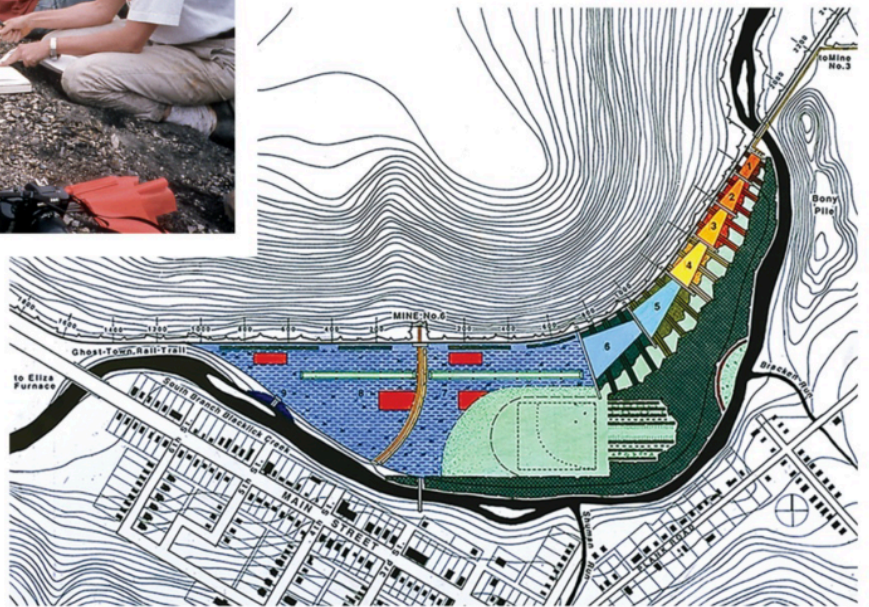
With the selection of Bargmann, the inaugural prize jury recognizes a singular career. Bargmann has been unapologetic in her devotion to little-loved landscapes and unrelenting in her ethic of reuse. She grew up in New Jersey and studied sculpture before attending Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design (GSD). She is the founder of D.I.R.T. (Dump It Right There) studio and a professor of landscape architecture at UVA, where she has become for an entire generation of landscape architects what the artist Robert Rauschenberg was to her: an icon and a true artist, someone who thought deeply about landscape processes and who, in Bargmann’s words, “had a ravenous appetite.”

She’s made a career out of a fascination with former industrial sites—old factories, toxic mines, products

When the Cultural Landscape Foundation announced the creation of the Cornelia Hahn Oberlander International Landscape Architecture Prize in 2019, an express aim was to elevate public understanding of landscape architecture and claim a place alongside other prestigious awards, including architecture’s Pritzker Prize. With the selection of Julie Bargmann, the influential and irreverent designer and educator who pioneered a method of working with poisoned, derelict, and otherwise scarred landscapes, as its inaugural

ABOVE

The educator and practitioner Julie Bargmann has stood apart from the profession for decades. Now it’s catching up.



of an American pattern of extraction and abandonment, followed by the glacially slow task of environmental remediation. In the former coal town of Vintondale, Pennsylvania, Bargmann worked alongside the artist Stacy Levy and the historian T. Allan Comp to pilot landscape-based strategies for detoxifying acid mine drainage. The result, 2004's AMD&ART Park, marked a sea change for the profession, altering how a generation of designers would think about toxic or degraded sites. "Julie realized that these sites are biodiversity reserves," Meyer says. "Thinking about other-than-human species was not a big thing in landscape architecture 20-plus years ago."

Throughout her career, Bargmann has pushed at the boundaries of the profession and found fertile, if unloved, ground. Early on, she recognized that folded into the creases of the American landscape were entire socioecological histories, and she has been at the forefront of acknowledging that even shattered landscapes have been made through the labor of hundreds of individuals and that to simply unmake them—no matter how remediative—is to

erase their stories as well. "Julie was looking at landscape as a series of layers, and some of them were invisible," recalls Lauren Stimson, a principal at STIMSON, who came across Bargmann's work as a student and later collaborated with her on the design of San Antonio's Hardberger Park (see "San Antonio Takes the Shot," *LAM*, April 2017). "Working with her—she's crazy, in a good way," Stimson says. "She'd fly up for a week, and [we'd work] till three in the morning. It was like being in grad school again. And that was all Julie. The intensity with which she goes for something is infectious."

STIMSON'S founding principal, Stephen Stimson, FASLA, has known

Bargmann since they were both students at the GSD in the 1980s. Even then, he says, Bargmann was unapologetically herself. "Julie was extremely creative in how she built her models," he recalls. "Most of us would be working in white foam core and cardboard, and Julie would have 25 pounds of clay and 30 pounds of lead. She was always a mess and doing these amazing works of art."

Meyer also first encountered Bargmann at the GSD (where she taught at the time) in a studio review led by Peter Walker, FASLA. She recalls Bargmann presenting her work wearing a black leather miniskirt, fishnet stockings, and "big old Doc Marten boots." Her model "was so

TOP LEFT

Bargmann on site in Vintondale, Pennsylvania, circa 1997, where she built an experimental landscape that cleansed runoff of heavy metals.

BOTTOM RIGHT

In Bargmann's scheme, a series of treatment ponds eventually drains into a restored wetland. A "litmus garden" told the story of the treatment through different tree species' fall foliage.

**"I REMEMBER THINKING,
'I DON'T KNOW WHO
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SHE HAS GUTS.'"**

—ELIZABETH MEYER, FASLA

big, she had to crawl on her hands and knees to piece it together on the floor. She totally played the jury. And I remember thinking, 'I don't know who that is, but I want to get to know that person. She has guts.'"

Years later, Meyer would be instrumental in bringing Bargmann to UVA. Bargmann was teaching at the University of Minnesota at the time, and recalls needing to be convinced not to bag on the interview. "Beth was like, 'Don't you do that to a friend!' So I came down, and they were like, 'We want you to experiment here.' Literally they said that: 'You can do anything you want.' And I was like, *whoa.*"

Since then, UVA has become a home base and a laboratory. She's inspired countless students, many of whom have become lifelong collaborators, mentees, and friends. "The second I met Julie, I was taken," says David Hill, ASLA, who served as Bargmann's research assistant at UVA and later joined her practice, even briefly opening a D.I.R.T. Deep South in Auburn, Alabama. "There's a couple things she would always say, at school and



at the office," says Hill, now a professor of landscape architecture at Auburn University. "One was, 'No sissy landscapes.' Meaning, we're not gonna 'shrub it up' to soften the edges. We've got no interest in doing that. The plants are an infrastructural component of the project."

"I liked the way she could talk about landscape architecture in a way that was so relevant and not academic jargon. It was about things in the world," recalls Ross Altheimer, a cofounder of TEN x TEN Studio in Minneapolis. Altheimer says he became a landscape architect because of Bargmann, later following in her footsteps to study at the American Academy in Rome and collaborating with D.I.R.T. studio on Mill 19 in Pittsburgh, one of his firm's first projects. Regarding the Oberlander Prize, Altheimer says he wasn't shocked to find out Bargmann had won. "The work she's doing and has done is so relevant and continues to be relevant," he says. "Through all the shifts and

changes that landscape architecture has gone through, she has charted a steady course."

Meyer, on the other hand, was "flabbergasted" by the jury's selection. "I assumed the jury would do something a bit more, I don't know, conventional," she says. "But then when I think about who has Cornelia's gumption"—she lets out an impish chuckle—"it's Julie."

In its citation, the Oberlander Prize jury describes Bargmann as a "provocateur, a critical practitioner, and a public intellectual" who "builds on the legacies of Cornelia Oberlander: in her commitments to the public realm, to advancing women in the profession, to the principles of ecology and regenerative design, and to engaging diverse, even conflicted social contexts." Bargmann met Oberlander only once, a few years ago in Vancouver. "She just had strength coming out of every pore," she says. "But also this fantastic ease."

TOP

As with many D.I.R.T. studio projects, the Urban Outfitters headquarters in the Philadelphia Navy Yard uses selective excavation to uncover layers of history.



TOP LEFT

In Detroit's Core City neighborhood, an existing parking lot concealed the foundations of a former fire station.

BOTTOM RIGHT

Opened in 2019, Core City Park is an 8,000-square-foot urban woodland rich in materiality.

“When we landed on the idea of Cornelia,” Meyer says, “what excited us was not only her body of work, but the fact that she was one of the first women to attend the GSD, that she was an immigrant, that she practiced outside of the United States—that there was a fullness to her life. And then, oh, by the way, she’s also a woman. So the fact that a woman is the first recipient of the prize is coincidental but also profound.”

That the prize’s namesake and its inaugural laureate are women stands out pointedly amid a renewed push for gender equality within landscape architecture. “From the 1980s, if we’re looking at recognition and awards, the metric hasn’t shifted,” says Samantha Solano, ASLA, an assistant professor of landscape architecture at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a cofounder of

the Visualizing Equity in Landscape Architecture project. “Thirty years later, we’re still recognizing the same percentage of women compared to men. So the fact that the Oberlander Prize is named after such an influential woman in our field is already shifting this alignment away from a male-centric place of recognition.”

For all the focus on Bargmann’s brownfield work—immortalized by magazine headlines like “Queen of Slag”—Meyer says Bargmann is equally wizard-like, and equally influential, in her approach to plant form and function. It’s one of Bargmann’s lesser-known legacies. “Julie’s courses on planted form have transformed how our alums think about plants,” Meyer says, describing field trips to plant nurseries and deep dives into horticultural techniques like coppicing. “Julie was re-

ally into ceramics, and you would not start shaping something unless you understood how that clay performed. Julie approaches plants that way. She just *revels* in her medium. And yes, it’s mud and dirt and soil, but it’s also plants.”

Bargmann isn’t finished with that reveling. Since 2018, she’s been working in the Core City neighborhood of Detroit alongside the developer Philip Kafka. She’s applied her signature alchemical process of material reanimation to at least four different abandoned sites, including what is now Core City Park (see “To the Core,” *LAM*, October 2020). “I’ve become really kind of obsessed with fallow land,” Bargmann says. She’s taken students back and forth across the Rust Belt, including Erie, Pennsylvania; Youngstown, Ohio; and Detroit. In a way, it’s a natural progression, from postindustrial site to postindustrial region. “There’s this strange territory that nobody has *any* idea what to do with, so of course I’m going there,” she says, as if in some ways it’s a creative burden, but one she gleefully accepts. “So yeah, that’s next. That’s where you’re going to find me. In the weeds.” ●

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