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Honorable Mention



MICHELLE LIN
Landscape Architecture
Graduate Student
University of Pennsylvania

The last place I imagined working for social change was in the dirt, pulling weeds. I was in a community garden, on my hands and knees, alongside dozens of youth of color in their Detroit neighborhood. These youth grew up in the shadows of Ford's River Rouge Plant, one of the dirtiest manufacturing complexes in the country. In the midst of an industrial landscape, urban community gardening represents a new approach to urban design and community development. Detroit, my adopted home, is a post-industrial city that has become an incubator of new strategies for revitalization, like urban agriculture, filling the void of ineffective traditional models. For the past five years, I have witnessed how urban gardens carry the potential to transform our cities towards sustainability and social change. This conviction, along with my academic and professional experiences, leads me to pursue a formal training in landscape design through a Master's program in Landscape Architecture.

My first exposure to the visionary activities taking place in Detroit was through Detroit Summer, youth-oriented organization founded on the principle that young people must be at the heart of rebuilding and re-spiriting the city from the ground up. Traveling across Michigan as a community organizer, I saw how neighborhood after neighborhood in urban cities lacked "green" amenities that other communities had, often because these neighborhoods were usually the last for consideration, or written off due to the high costs of cleaning up pollution. I saw the need for expertise on how to use plants and natural processes to restore degraded urban ecosystems, which could then increase the opportunities for sustainable growth and development. These techniques could beautify the more than 2,000 brownfield sites in Detroit, and landscape architecture can provide the platform for creative possibilities to flourish, promoting sustainable, equitable design in urban areas.



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Being Asian American, I had discovered the value of community and its power for developing self-identity and fostering public service. Carrying this sense of community into my life in Detroit, I co-founded the Detroit Asian Youth Project to engage Detroit's underserved Hmong refugee population. I collaborated with Detroit Summer and organized African American and Asian youth to establish community gardens on abandoned land, stimulating the transformation of neglected neighborhoods into havens of greenspace. Throughout the city, these gardens were connecting neighborhoods through a green infrastructure. The community garden became a rare forum for Hmong youth to talk about their experiences growing up and the impact of the Vietnam War upon their families. Sharing harvested vegetables with neighborhood residents, the youth also realized their capacity to create positive change and promote cross-cultural relationships. These youth demonstrated the transformative impacts that are possible when given the opportunity to have direct experiences with the land and environment. The success of these projects offers an imaginative potential for landscape design to transform urban areas in ways that are culturally affirming, child-friendly and environmentally sustainable.



I will use my design training to carry on my work in Detroit, whose current conditions and communities continue to inspire to me. My experiences with urban community gardening and community organizing fuel my determination to craft greener, more cost-effective and socially conscious solutions to the city's financial, environmental and social crises. Establishing a new trajectory for Detroit, I plan to offer creative, sustainable design projects, such as designing landscapes for the Detroit Public Schools that would beautify school grounds that enhance the educational experiences for Detroit youth. As a landscape architect, I will promote the kind of landscape design that includes championing the basic needs and rights of communities, and promote sustainable design practices to the rebirth of Detroit.

