

Ellen Neises Succeeds Randall Mason as Executive Director at PennPraxis

Philadelphia—Frederick Steiner, dean and Paley Professor at the University of Pennsylvania School of Design, has appointed Ellen Neises to be the executive director of PennPraxis, the center for applied research, outreach, and practice at the School. Neises is an adjunct associate professor in the Department of Landscape Architecture at PennDesign and principal at RANGE, a landscape architecture and public policy practice.

Randall Mason, associate professor of city and regional planning and chair of the Graduate Program in Historic Preservation, will remain active in the development of PennPraxis and its many projects as a senior fellow.

“Randy brought serious engagement with issues of equity and inclusion to our School, along with meaningful new research opportunities for students and faculty,” said Dean Steiner. “As he completes his term as executive director, PennPraxis is playing its rightful role as a catalyst and platform for the work and collaboration of the School of Design, and community engaged design.” He continued, “Ellen’s rich experience working on large-scale and large-scope design and policy problems will be a great asset as we continue to work in this vein.”

“I’m extremely proud of what PennPraxis has accomplished these past three years,” said Mason, “I look forward to working with Ellen as she expands PennPraxis’s advancement of social impact, collaborative practice, and cutting-edge research.”

Neises said, “PennDesign is unique among art, design and planning schools to have a platform to demonstrate the power of design to solve problems and advance the kind of complex, community-engaged projects that I’m excited about—ones where we begin by helping define the opportunity, convene the right mix of creative thinkers to engage the ongoing debate, and generate options that are both strategic and imaginative. Through PennPraxis, faculty and students can collaborate on live projects that open up potentials for discussion and evaluation by multiple means and audiences, and we can translate ideas and community agendas shaped in this way, into strong prototypes and built places, research and policy solutions with big effects.”

Neises begins as executive director on August 14, as PennPraxis launches A Year of Community-Engaged Design.

During Mason's tenure, working in conjunction with managing director Julie Donofrio, PennPraxis strengthened its ties to Philadelphia institutions while expanding the organization's reach globally. It published ambitious reports such as [*Civic Infrastructure: A Model for Civic Asset Reinvestment*](#) (funded by the William Penn Foundation, worked with numerous partners in the local Reimagining the Civic Commons initiative (funded by the Knight Foundation and William Penn Foundation, and organized by the Fairmount Park Conservancy), and a study of the inaugural Philly Free Streets event (with Open Streets PHL and the Knight Foundation). Praxis Dialogues convened policy makers, business leaders, and community organizers in a series of public events to encourage debate on civic issues with national implications (in partnership with PlanPhilly); student-led Social Impact Projects, funded by PennPraxis, supported PennDesign students' work with area nonprofits like North Philly Peace Park, the Please Touch Museum, and Southeast by Southeast to strengthen communities directly. Internationally, Mason led a conservation and training project on genocide memorials in Rwanda, and helped launch faculty-led projects in Italy and Kuwait.

A PennDesign alumna and member of the faculty since 2011, **Ellen Neises** specializes in areas where both physical design and policy design are needed to advance major initiatives: climate adaptation, sustainability of high-yield production agriculture, and quality of life and economic strength of industrial and environmental justice communities. Her firm, RANGE, and Philadelphia-based firm PORT Urbanism, were recently selected by the Regional Plan Association (RPA) to develop landscape infrastructure and design strategies for the 200-mile the rural belt around the New York City metro area. With Richard Roark of OLIN, Neises led the PennDesign/OLIN team's work on Hunts Point Lifelines, one of the six winning entries in the 2014 Rebuild by Design competition sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to develop contextual, scalable solutions to rebuild, protect and improve cities and towns hit by Hurricane Sandy. Neises's work in Pennsylvania includes an ongoing partnership with 10 municipalities and the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission to transform the 22-square mile Slate Belt through nature-based place making and economic development strategies.

Prior to coming to teach at Penn, Neises was an associate partner at James Corner Field Operations, where she helped Corner build an international landscape architecture and urban design practice. Before earning an MLA from PennDesign in 2002, she worked for nine years on economic development, criminal justice and labor policy in New York, Alabama and Delaware. She holds a B.S. from Carnegie Mellon University and a Master of Public Policy from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard.

PennPraxis will continue to be co-led by Managing Director **Julie Donofrio**. Also a PennDesign alumna, Donofrio assumed her role in July of 2015 and has been instrumental in shaping the current mission-driven direction of PennPraxis, leading several of its Philadelphia-based projects, overseeing the student-generated Social Impact Projects, and guiding all programming and communications. Donofrio will continue this role, working in concert with Neises, managing office operations, local

partnerships, and promoting engagement both within the School and with external partners.

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About PennPraxis

The mission of PennPraxis is to pursue projects that enhance the built and natural environment locally, nationally, globally and within the School by extending public interest design practice, research and scholarship outside of the classroom. To fulfill this mission, PennPraxis provides opportunities for multi-disciplinary student and faculty collaboration through partnerships with public, private and non-profit organizations.

PennPraxis engages in fee-for-service consulting, applied research, community convenings, and educational programs. In doing so, it draws on Penn's five departments and programs (Architecture, Landscape Architecture, City & Regional Planning, Historic Preservation and Fine Arts). As a 501(c)3 non-profit, PennPraxis is committed to educating the next generation of leaders in social-impact design and promoting the public good.

For more information, visit <http://www.design.upenn.edu/pennpraxis/work>.

About PennDesign

PennDesign prepares students to address complex sociocultural and environmental issues through thoughtful inquiry, creative expression, and innovation. As a diverse community of scholars and practitioners, we are committed to advancing the public good—both locally and globally—through art, design, planning, and preservation.

For more information, visit <https://www.design.upenn.edu/>.