

## **Q&A with Matthijs Bouw, Professor of Practice in Landscape Architecture at the Weitzman School of Design**

By Dorian Madden, MLA '22

**In the Netherlands, careful water management dating back to the 16th century has resulted in a deeply embedded cultural understanding of water. In the United States however, issues that could be looked at and designed from a collective point of view often are not. At what point do you think resiliency strategies will be implemented without the prodding of disaster?**

I am not sure if that will ever happen at a large scale. It is a real collective action problem. While we all know that one dollar spent on preparation saves six dollars that spent on recovery, it is often really difficult to think long term when there are so many issues that demand more immediate attention. In my course Design with Risk we spend one class discussing biases on decision making around disasters, and there we learn about the so-called 'availability bias', which makes people often take insurance only after a disaster. What is positive is that many places are starting to plan (and some, like Boston, are even taking some steps toward implementing without a major disaster happening). But large-scale implementation often requires a recent disaster, and accompanying funding.

**Rebuild by Design changed the perspective from disaster recovery to disaster prevention. From atomized solutions to integrated solutions, the level of inter-agency collaboration required becomes something quite political. Do you feel that the BIG U is a successful example of a collective reframing towards social infrastructure?**

The Big U and the follow-up projects have been trendsetting in reframing how we think both about disaster prevention and the benefits of thinking of these projects also as social infrastructure. It is also a project that shows, in its flaws, how much work still needs to be done to fully capitalize on the potentials of this approach.

**In your *From the Rooftop* lecture, you draw the connection between climate change and urban change. In one effort to involve the community, an education component was introduced at Harlem RBI, a non-profit youth development organization. How were the curriculum modules received and are they ongoing?**

It was really great to work with such engaged students (and staff), and wonderful to see that one of the outcomes were summer internships in the environmental field for the students. We were happy to continue the curriculum after the project.

**You make clear that these resiliency efforts are of rich and liberally governed American coastal cities. How are cities outside of highly resourced bubbles to adapt by themselves? How can we begin to integrate these areas into larger climate strategies?**

So far it seems that, in many places, disaster needs to strike first before real action is taken, especially when resources are strained, and cultural objections present. There needs to be a political conversation about directing resources to poorer communities: there is a real equity challenge in the adaptation space. In that context it is really great to see the environmental justice community vocally present.

**The issues surrounding climate change require an integration of design in which individual interventions are able to collectively activate much larger protection efforts. What shifts do you anticipate seeing within the field of Landscape Architecture in regards to approach and planning as a result of the types of integration that The BIG U demonstrates?**

I think Landscape Architecture (as taught at Penn) is well equipped with regard to integrated systems thinking, and the role design can play to facilitate this. Stronger emphasis will have to be given to the importance of social systems, not only to make equitable plans, but also to move plans towards implementation. A real challenge within Landscape Architecture in that context is to work through the politics that come with this. In the LA discourse, the need for (conceptual) purity works in two directions: either the somewhat autistic practices in which landscape architects work for the rich, or the academic practices that function as political statements. While both of these have great value (new forms, new ideas, new conversations), the scale of global challenges (like those related to the climate and biodiversity crises) are such that the profession needs to dare to get its hands dirty and operate at scale (for which the inevitable result is a very different control perspective).