

WED-C08:**Start with Yes: A Superpower for Small Practices**

Wednesday September 18, 2026

1:15 PM - 2:30 PM

Session Overview:

As small practices, we have the choice to “start with yes” - with our projects, operations, business development, and design culture. This mindset fuels creativity, research, and discovery. Three firms share how we “say yes” to projects and practice, and how success is measured through shared mission, values, and collaboration.

Learning Objectives

1. Critically reflect on how the “saying yes” mindset can drive project selection, enhance the design process, build collaborative studios, and encourage experimentation.
2. Learn how saying yes shapes firm culture and design identity, particularly in small, collaborative practices.
3. Identify operational strategies that enable small practices to support mission-driven work.
4. Discuss business development strategies and how to frame your small practice as a value-add strength during interview for larger projects.

Session Details:

In Improvisation, “Yes And” is a foundational rule, requiring performers to accept their partners’ premise (“yes”) and add new information to it (“and”). It fosters collaboration, ensures forward progress, and accepts that we all have something to contribute. As small practices, we have the freedom to say yes to projects that other practices might say no to. Sometimes this is born from mission, from flexibility to try new things, or from necessity. Saying yes opens our practices up to creativity by necessity, research, and inquiry. This panel is a reflection on how saying yes has framed our practices, design process, and culture and opened up opportunities as we look to the future of our firms.

The session will be structured as an open conversation. Our conversation will be organized into four acts:

Act 1: Project Work and Design Process

Act 2: Intentional Firm Culture and Design Identity

Act 3: Operations

Act 4: Business Development

During these acts, we will review the key projects and influences that have shaped our values around practice and leadership. The case study projects will showcase the design process and client considerations for key projects.

What happens when

We say YES to micro-scale sites?

We say YES to sensitive communities?

We say YES to experimentation?

Project work and design culture directly impact the business of practice. This panel will also discuss the behind-the-scenes decisions for small practices: day-to-day operations, business development strategy, and developing and nurturing design culture that bridges generational perspectives. The panel content builds transparency as we navigate working and leading small practices.

Throughout the panel, we’ll offer insight on how our studios have reconciled with the flip-side of YES.

Is there a cost to saying YES?

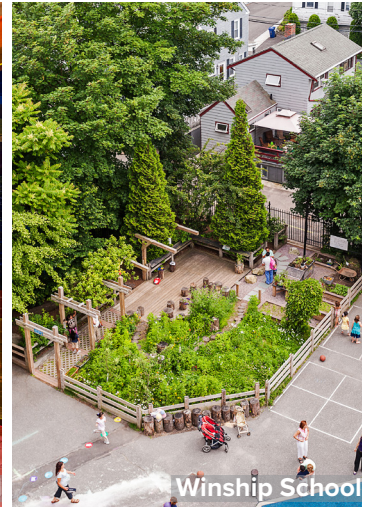
How do we measure success?

How do we create foundational design culture?

PROJECT CASE STUDIES

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE SAY YES TO

... MICRO-SCALE SITES?



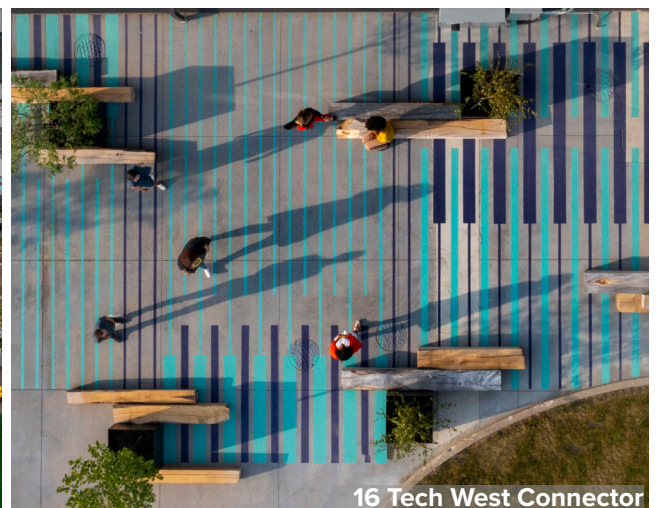
kmdg

... SENSITIVE COMMUNITIES?



PLURAL

... EXPERIMENTATION?



Merritt Chase

SPEAKERS:



Jennifer Ng, ASLA, RLA
Senior Associate, Klopfer Martin Design Group

Jennifer is a landscape architect who defines successful and inspiring designs as those that speak equally to place-making and place-keeping. The consistent theme in her projects is to create a sense of home. Through her practice, stewardship of the environment and culture become an everyday, every project opportunity. Jennifer was raised equally in rural New York and Chinatown, Manhattan. As such, she has a deep appreciation for the lifestyles and landscapes that accompany rural and urban environments. Prior to joining KMDG, she worked with Sasaki, CMG Landscape Architecture, and Hargreaves Associates.



Haley Waterson, ASLA, RLA
Founding Principal, Plural

Haley brings vision, teamwork, and integrity to her practice, creating award-winning designs while building strong community support. A strategic thinker, she leads with clarity and purpose, transforming ideas into impactful built work. Her projects reimagine public spaces with invention, vitality, and playfulness, grounded in community voice. Throughout her career, she has contributed to multiple winning competition entries and design awards. A founding partner of Plural, Haley is reimagining studio culture – advocating for a model that prioritizes health, vibrancy, and long-term resilience while fostering connection, shared belonging, and design excellence.



Danica Liongson ASLA, RLA
Associate, Merritt Chase

Danica Liongson is an Associate and landscape architect at Merritt Chase. Her work advances the integration of ecological and social systems in the urban realm and she approaches each project with curiosity and openness to explore new possibilities for vibrant, equitable public spaces. With experience in California, the Northeast, and Middle America, she brings a broad perspective on how people inhabit and shape cities. Across practice, teaching, and service, she cultivates collaborative, values-driven processes that encourage experimentation and connection. She serves as President-Elect of INASLA and holds degrees from UC Davis and Harvard University Graduate School of Design.

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