

Reflection on Teaching Landscape Performance

Hongbing Tang, ASLA, PLA

As the new school year begins, I am reflecting on my experience teaching "Sustainable Landscape Performance" during Spring 2024 at the Boston Architectural College (BAC). This course, newly introduced to the curriculum, attracted 6 MLA students, who were very enthusiastic about studying landscape performance.

Last year, the BAC research team, led by myself and our former dean, María Bellalta, FASLA (now department head of Landscape Architecture + Environmental Planning at NC State), conducted a landscape performance case study on the Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital. Sponsored by a LAF CSI grant, this project provided valuable insights and practical lessons on applying landscape performance metrics in real-world settings, enhancing our understanding of the tangible benefits and challenges of sustainable landscape design.

My landscape performance course includes lectures on research methods and hands-on case study projects. I found the [LAF Case Study Briefs website](#) and LAF landscape performance evaluation [Guidebook](#) are very valuable resources for teaching. My hands-on experience from the Spaulding Rehab Hospital CSI study was also very helpful. I guided students to use Boston as a city lab to conduct their own case studies. Each student selected a project site in Boston, including parks, urban plazas, mixed-use development, and university campus. By the end of the semester, they produced six case study reports on diverse locations: Christian Science Plaza, Harvard Science and Engineering Complex, Boston Chinatown Park, The Wharf District Parks, Fan Pier Park, and Pier 4 Phase 3. A variety of methods were used by students to assess environmental, social and economic benefits, including field observation, behavior mapping, hydrologic modeling, document reviews, surveys, interviews, social media study, etc.

Teaching this sustainable landscape performance class at the BAC has been a rewarding experience. The course enhanced learning through real-world application of sustainable design principles in our city. It helped students develop critical skills in performance assessment and gain networking opportunities. I assisted students reach out to the design firms and invite lead designers from several firms to talk about their projects in class. A student also visited their firm liaisons in the design office to gain more insights. Our class, as a whole, conducted multiple field trips to visit the projects and meet with the designers on-site. One of the most fulfilling moments was seeing students apply performance metrics to assess their projects, showing a better understanding of the ecological and social benefits of sustainable landscape design.

Students were very enthusiastic throughout, hoping their studies would provide valuable insights to the participating firms and support their future work.

One of the challenges in our landscape performance class is the considerable time commitment it requires. Moving forward, I plan to address this by organizing students into teams, allowing them to work on fewer projects but carry out more in-depth studies. It will make it easier for them to manage their time and focus. Additionally, we will incorporate more tools and resources to facilitate the assessment of landscape performance, streamlining the process and enhancing the learning experience. This approach will help students achieve deeper insights without overwhelming them with extensive time commitments.

Another challenge for this course is collaborating with design firms, which is essential for its success. This collaboration demands proactive engagement from the instructor, as design firms are often very busy. For instance, we once reached out to a firm that took two months to respond. We ended up not working with them. Additionally, coordination with firms can be complex. For example, in order to use photos from a firm website, we need to obtain authorization. I suggest starting the process early and planning the course ahead of time to fit guest talks, designer-led site visits into the class schedule.