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Peak Performance

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How do you rate how well a landscape is performing?

Jessica Canfield looks at the environmental, social and economic benefits.

“A nicely designed, well-manicured landscape does not mean it’s performing well; beauty does not equate to being environmentally beneficial. A nicely kept lawn is not necessarily environmentally or economically responsible,” said Canfield, an assistant professor of landscape architecture and regional and community planning.

“On the other hand, a ‘messy,’ wild looking landscape may be more environmentally beneficial but not necessarily beautiful.”

Somewhere in the middle is a landscape that meets both needs.

“There’s this fine threshold,” Canfield said. “How do you balance what looks good while making it work environmentally, socially and economically?”

Canfield has twice been awarded Landscape Architecture Foundation fellowships to create case studies of high-performing landscapes, employing a student researcher each time.

“If you get students to think about how landscapes can be designed to perform, they can implement those tools when they begin their careers,” she said.

She’s produced three case studies. The first project studied a restored stream in Denver’s Stapleton mixed-use development. The second examined a Southern California site pursuing LEED certification for water conservation. And the third looked at a regional park in Wimberly, Texas.

Canfield now has a grant to further analyze these, and other cases, for trends in social and economic benefits that can inform design firms.

“It’s exciting because I can now step back, evaluate what’s been done so far, and find better ways to calculate the performance benefits in future projects,” she said.

By Erinn Barcomb-Peterson,
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