“SYSTEMS THINKING” IS ALIVE AT THE EXPO

The Miami Beach exposition will enable designers and vendors to identify solutions together – in the exceptional, spirited nature of ASLA

BY RUSS KLETTKE

Executive Summary

• “Systems thinking” sets the ASLA EXPO apart

• Explore the Floor and Learning Labs are exceptional opportunities

• Exhibitor creativity in sponsorships is encouraged

To be clear, exhibitors who participate at the ASLA Conference on Landscape Architecture and EXPO have products and services to sell. This is commerce. But those companies that return year after year understand that to be in the EXPO is to be part of a two-way learning community, where vendors and designers share and collaborate on ideas and solutions.

This is a defining characteristic of the ASLA EXPO, making it unlike most other trade expositions in several respects. Michelle Mobley, ASLA’s show manager whose meetings and events firm works globally, remarks how the educational and interactive components at the ASLA event make it stand out. “This creates a community,” she says. “The educational events and programs on the floor bring exhibitors and attendees together in ways you don’t see at other trade shows.”

This idea of a learning community melds well with an ethos based again and again among landscape architects: they find solutions. A number of books and business classes created since the 1990s – e.g., “The Fifth Discipline, The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization,” by Peter M. Senge (1990) – lay out the benefits of what is called “systems thinking.” Applied to environmental challenges, for example, it engages participants in objective conversations that question assumptions, participate in team learning (“thinking together”), and build a shared vision.

Learning Labs and Explore the Floor

Systems thinking arguably happens on the EXPO floor, particularly through Explore the Floor and Learning Labs programs. Katie Riddle, ASLA, PLA and Director, Professional Practice overviews these programs, which have been increasing in popularity over the past three years.

Explore the Floor sessions gather attendees interested in a topic – examples include parks and recreation, water conservation or ecology, and restoration – who then visit booths of four participating exhibitors with a direct connection to that topic. Each vendor has about ten minutes to present on what they know and produce, sharing nuances learned from project experience. Each stop on the hour-long tour includes a Q&A segment.

“We have exhibitors who repeat their participation in Explore the Floor every year because they want to be seen as industry leaders and benefit from making connections with our attendees,” she says. “Presentations that include best practices in sustainability solutions and services will be most appealing.” Exhibitors must be a LA CES provider, and there is a $9,000 sponsorship fee.

Do Learning Labs allow for presenting product characteristics and benefits? Yes they do – as long as those features are integral to the projects in which they are used. Comments made by past years’ attendees show a clear benefit in how it helps them in their respective practices:

“It was a good mix between detail, practicality, and application of design.”

“All practitioners who deal with shoreline interventions should know this.”

“This was a great value for the hour on the EXPO floor.”

Build interactive experiences – with a splash of color

Mobley compliments ASLA EXPO exhibitors for both design quality and elevated user experiences.

“Something smart the Corporate Sponsors do is they make it interactive, making use of ‘the many touch points with attendees,’” she says. The coffee station and photo booth sponsors, for example, had reps at those attractions to meet attendees. “We are open to exhibitor creativity on all sponsorships. The Alumni Tailgate party is a great example of how it creates communities of exhibitors, attendees, and emerging professionals.”

Her advice for 2020 exhibitors in Miami Beach is to factor for the vibrancy of the location – “think bright colors, local park landscapes, and the newly renovated convention center” – to infuse it into their marketing plans. Systems thinking at this EXPO should be anything but dull.

Who to contact

• For more information about Explore the Floor and all other EXPO-related questions, contact Michelle Mobley at mmobley@asla.org

• For more on Learning Labs, contact Katie Riddle at kriddle@asla.org

• For more on Corporate Sponsorships at the EXPO, contact Kathleen Thomas at kthomas@asla.org

Continuing Education System criteria. Previous years’ topics include “Fountains 101,” “Designing with Architectural Concrete,” “Applying Principles of Reconciliation Ecology in Urban Waterfronts,” “Residential Stormwater BMPs,” and “Innovative Natural Stone Landscapes.”

Riddle invites exhibitors to offer ideas for the 2020 EXPO, which is limited to five such sessions. “Our attendees have a strong interest in sustainability,” she says. “Presentations that include best practices in sustainability solutions and services will be most appealing.” Exhibitors must be a LA CES provider, and there is a $9,000 sponsorship fee.

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