

Almost There

An Emerson Collective Podcast

The surprising abolitionist history of America's public parks

Dwayne Betts:

Recently, I was in a prison, you know I build libraries in prison, which essentially means that I'm returning with what I feel like is this beauty. And for the first time in my life that I'm in Virginia, I looked down at the ground, and I did time in five, six different prisons in Virginia, and there were never clovers on the ground. And I looked down on the ground and I see this patch of clovers as soon as I walk in.

I started looking for a four-leaf clover, and somebody asks me what I'm doing and I tell them and they say, "You might not find it." And I'm thinking of "Maybe."

And then as we leave, and we're finally leaving, and I look down and I swear, I look and I see what is a four-leaf clover, and I pluck it out of the ground. And I think about it because Sara Zewde reminds me of why I do this, which is just to say, how can you get a little bit of joy from a landscape no matter how harsh it is?

Sara Zewde:

That is why I do what I do, which is... I think there are so many pressing issues that our society faces. And in the mix of all of that, what about the small moments of joy? Your four-leaf clover? What about a place to sit in the shade? What about a place to hear kids running around? I think all of that is also important to social movements.

Dwayne Betts:

My guest is Sarah Zewde, the founding principal of Studio Zewde. It's a design firm practicing landscape architecture, urbanism and public art in a way in which the people are at the center of what she's making possible through her design. She's also an assistant professor at Harvard's Graduate School of Design. And maybe most interestingly to me is that she is revealing something really fascinating about the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. He invented the practice, but more importantly, he was also a journalist. And his invention of the practice, which started with Century Park, had a connection to what he learned by doing journalism about the Antebellum South.

Sara Zewde:

I grew up in the South and I studied landscape architecture, and learned all the facts about Olmsted, but I only heard in passing that he had this chapter in his life where he traveled the slave states. And as historians tell it, he's actually the most cited witness of 19th century slavery. So I was like, "Wait, hold on, hold on, hold on. Let's take a step back here."

Dwayne Betts:

My name is Reginald Dwayne Betts, and this is Almost There from Emerson Collective.

I was a kid that did backflips. So in that way, the landscape I remember from my childhood is really the fields that we played ball football on and the basketball courts and those places where all you wanted was enough space to do 15 backsprings in a row, and do it and be safe.

Sara Zewde:

Well, that's my job is I give everybody, as many people as I can, space to do backflips. That's my job, my full-time job.

Dwayne Betts:

Hold up, okay. Now, everybody's going to want that job, but what people are going to want to know is, how do you describe what that means? Now we got the shorthand version. You bring people like me joy who are looking for places to do backflips, right? But what is the sophisticated version for the folks who are like me now, who I can't do a backflip to save my life?

Sara Zewde:

Well, I view landscape architecture in a very expanded sense, because there's the profession of landscape architecture, and then there are the reasons why I do it and the ways that I use the skills that landscape architects have. And so those two things are very different.

In some ways, you could think of it like, architects do buildings. They are building architects. Landscape architects do everything else. So everything that's not in a building, sidewalks, parking lots, parks of course, plazas, memorials.

Dwayne Betts:

I don't know if you meant it this way, but the architects are going to take that as a diss. You basically was like, "You guys, architects are one of the members of Voltron, but landscape architects, we Voltron."

Sara Zewde:

It was supposed to be a sub. It was supposed to be subversive, but you caught me. It's true. I feel like they're missing a qualifying word, an adjective there. They are building architects. We are not a subfield of landscape architecture. We have our own history as a profession that's distinct from architecture. And there are reasons why we call ourselves landscape architects. There was a decision by the man that people call our founder, Frederick Law Olmsted.

Dwayne Betts:

Oh, I know who he is. Can you please tell everybody else listening who Frederick Olmsted is? I know that they don't know like we know, but can you tell them?

Sara Zewde:

Yep. So Frederick Law Olmsted is probably most known for being the founder of landscape architecture. His firm would go on to design 5,500 sites around North America, over 1100 public parks. No one person probably shaped the way America looks more than Frederick Law Olmsted. I mean, every park that we know of, you could say has some sort of tangential influence, but if not actually designed by him or his firm or his sons, largely influenced by the tradition of the American public park project that he set forth. But he's done a lot of things. He started The Nation, this publication that's still around today, the magazine.

Dwayne Betts:

What? He started The Nation?

Sara Zewde:

Yeah, he did. He's the founder.

Dwayne Betts:

But also, you know Olmsted did the first national park, the Niagara Falls?

Sara Zewde:

Yeah. Yep.

Dwayne Betts:

It's so funny that I'm acting like... Of course you know.

Sara Zewde:

I mean, he started the American public park project. I'm writing a book about him right now. I'm writing about a period of his life that is under-historicized, where he was hired by the New York Times to travel the slave states and write about the conditions of slavery.

Dwayne Betts:

You talking about Olmsted, the landscape architecture?

Sara Zewde:

Correct.

Dwayne Betts:

Was hired as a journalist.

Sara Zewde:

Correct, yes.

Dwayne Betts:

You guys are Voltron.

Sara Zewde:

And I heard this, I grew up in the South and I studied landscape architecture and learned all the facts about Olmsted, but I only heard in passing that he had this chapter in his life where he traveled the slave states. And as historians tell it, he's actually the most cited witness of 19th century slavery. And so I was like, "So wait, hold on, hold on, hold on. Let's take a step back here." So he did all of that.

Dwayne Betts:

That just blew my mind.

Sara Zewde:

Right? So he did all of that. So what's the relationship between that and this profession he founded? And I asked a lot of scholars about this and they said... I was like, "Point me to the book. I want to read the

book about the relationship between what he saw in the South and his practice of landscape architecture." And they were like, "Well, there is no book."

So I always say, if that book existed, I would've read the book and I would've moved on with my life. But then I couldn't shake the desire to want to know more about it. So I spent four months going through his personal archives to just see how he was maybe articulating for himself and his diary and his letters, what the relationship was. Then I retraced his steps all through the South.

Each location was a project, trying to figure out exactly where he was, but he described everything so vividly that I ended up finding descendants of the people he spoke to. He mostly was speaking with enslaved people. So I was able to track down the descendants and find the sites. And every site was a whole nother story about what has happened in the last 165 years.

And the interesting tie with landscape architecture, one of the interesting ties is, in a lot of those places, Olmsted was documenting very meticulously how slavery was working in the landscape. And if you fast-forward 165 years, when I went back to those places, the irony is that landscape architecture was the tool, over the last 165 years, of un-telling the story about slavery that Olmsted wanted to tell. So this profession that he founded ended up the weapon for un-telling the story that he wanted to tell about the American landscape.

Dwayne Betts:

But when you say revisiting those sites, do you mean you actually went to the sites?

Sara Zewde:

Yeah, I rented a car. I spent four months on the road from DC to Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. There were a lot of discoveries along the way.

Dwayne Betts:

I was going to ask what that was like for you, but maybe you'll tell me what it was like by telling me about one particular discovery.

Sara Zewde:

One example is in Richmond, Virginia, where Olmsted describes a very moving scene of a young black child being buried. And he describes a terraced landscape that's an entire burial ground. He describes the songs that were sung by the people and the sheer emotion, you could tell from the writing that he was taken emotionally by the ritual around death, around black death.

So I try to find this burial ground in this location in Richmond, and he describes the intersection of 5th and Hospital. So I go there and I'm at the intersection and I see this casino billboard, I see a vacated auto shop, and I see an underpass, and I'm lost and disoriented trying to find where this burial ground is. And then I realize that that is the burial ground. It is this underpass. There's no marker.

I would come to learn that there's thousands of people buried here. And on top of that, the state of Virginia, Virginia DOT, wants to actually expand the freeway where these people were laid to rest. And so people are fighting against it. So some of the work that I've been doing and that my students have been doing around it has been feeding the activists around that one woman in particular, Lenora McQueen, who is a descendant of somebody interred there.

So it's shameful that thousands of people buried there is not enough, but when you say Olmsted visited it, people are like, "Oh, well, this might be worth saving." It's like, "Okay, well..." And so part of that is, I'm conscious of that, and part of why I talk about Olmsted so much is because he's saying things that if I

just say them, they don't hit as hard. But Olmsted, this person that's celebrated for all of these other things, also says the same things. So he's this kind of puppet for me to say the things that I want to say, but they will be more meaningful if they come out of his mouth 165 years before me.

Dwayne Betts:

Can you tell me a little bit about what it means to be a landscape architect? What's your first job? You know what I mean? And then, what's the first time that you get to do something that's you putting all of these things into practice to make something exist in the world that didn't exist before?

Sara Zewde:

I mean, my first job, I went to go work for a black landscape architect. We're a very small number of people. They say I'm one of 13 black women in America that's licensed in landscape architecture. My first job... Well, among my first jobs in landscape architecture was working for a black landscape architect named Walter Hood. Because there were no... When I was in school for landscape architecture, there were no references to black people at all.

They were referencing slave owners un-problematically as shaping our conception of the American landscape, but there weren't any site references to black designers, no historicization of black people on the American landscape, nothing, none of that. So I took a year off, actually, from school, because I was so disillusioned and thinking this wasn't maybe the field for me. And I went to go work for this man named Walter Hood, who has a firm in Oakland.

But that's my personal journey. One's traditional first job in a landscape architecture firm, it is similar to architecture in that there's that high conceptual narrative framework and spatial design that happens early in a project, and then we go to construction documents. So for me, in my practice, what I really try to do, and I think what makes our work distinct, is dialing in very specifically on a people and a place. Everybody has their rhythms and their rituals. Every community does, every neighborhood does, every block does.

And so what are the ways that this block or this neighborhood or this community, how do they move? How do they fellowship? Where do they get together? Do they hang out on a street corner? Do they go to a park? Landscape architecture has a lot of spaces of joy, as you mentioned. So there's a sociological dimension to the work that I do, which is to just be there, be present, be a participant, observer, and then translating those ideas and that analysis into something that gets built.

Materials, how are the materials going to come together? What plants with what spacing? What are the forms, what's the spatial configurations that help people feel like they belong in this place, and help the place feel like it belongs in its context? In a lot of the places that we work, there's a threat of displacement as development pressure encroaches on the urban core. The people that have historically been in the urban core of America's cities are under threat of major displacement. And so how do we design something that anchors people in place, more than not wipe their rituals away, but to actually fortify them into the future? And it's a tool for wealth generation.

Dwayne Betts:

So to me, this all sounds like... It sounds like poetry, and it sounds like the way that poets talk to each other. And sometimes I find myself talking to the world like that, and my wife would be like, "You know, they don't care as much about iambic pentameters as you and what they do to the interior of a person's soul." And she'll tell me "They just want to hear the poem."

And part of what I'm hearing from you is I'm like, I'm so enjoying this that I want to go back to school and become a landscape architect, or just start saying I'm one anyway. But now I'm motivated and I'm pushed to do it, right, because of the ideas. But what is the actual thing that I'm going to build? What is the kind of work that feels like that, that's actually doing more what you just described to me?

Sara Zewde:

Yeah. I mean, in our office, we do a lot of parks, a lot of plazas, a lot of memorials. We do school landscapes, museum landscapes. I mean, it's funny. People think Central Park is just this rectangle where buildings weren't... They didn't put any buildings, and that's nature.

Dwayne Betts:

You always be like, "Yo, so how did New York get so lucky?" I wish we had a park where I grew up at. But New York, they just got lucky.

Sara Zewde:

And people really think it's just like, "Oh, don't put buildings there," and that's nature. That is not nature. That is a complete fabrication. It is a work of art. There was more dynamite blasted to make Central Park than was at the Battle of Gettysburg. It's a complete reshaping. The only thing... Every single tree, everything that's there, is a function of design. It's as architected as the buildings that line it. The only thing that's natural is the bedrock that pops up. But other than that, it's a complete function of design. And the thing about designing landscapes that's different than designing buildings or designing other things, is the authorship isn't clear.

It's not like fashion where you're like, "Yeah, I'm wearing a blah blah." People walk around Central Park, people walk around in landscapes, people walk around sidewalks and street corners and don't realize that they are living in somebody's design. Every single tree, every single path, all the topography. It's a complete work of fiction. It's largely based off of the English picturesque landscape.

It was a swampy, really rocky landscape. It was actually home to a, historically, it was a black neighborhood. Part of it was a black neighborhood called Seneca Village, which is another tangent. But there were African Americans and Irish people living on the land, generally considered undesirable land because it was so rocky and swampy. But it was completely recast into what we know as Central Park today.

Dwayne Betts:

But how does this happen, though? Does somebody say, "We want you to recreate this landscape and make a park"? And literally make a park?

Sara Zewde:

Yeah, there were no public parks in America before Central Park, so it wasn't even that common of a thing. But what happened was... I mean, the idea of a park, a big major park, predates Olmsted's involvement in the whole thing by about a decade. There was a decision made between whether this park would be on the East River or in the center of the island. So it almost went the other way. And Olmsted would've preferred that it went the other way. He did not like this location.

It did displace a significant land-owning 19th century African American community. Those decisions were made before he came. But what happened was what was known as the Central Park Commission was

formed, and they had an anonymous design competition. There were 33 entries. Olmsted's was the 33rd, and it was actually late by a few minutes, but the submission was still accepted, and it won.

And what I think is interesting, what I'm writing about in my book, is this happens after he comes back from the South. He comes back from the South and he is determined that everything that he does is about what he calls "fair play for the Negro." That the North should basically create a society that demonstrates the values of a free society, and that's the way that they'll win over the South.

So he comes to New York and he sits down with Vaux and translates his reflections on slavery in the South into landscape design and landscape theory, encoded into the Central Park design. Now, you could critique all of those elements, but we have to acknowledge that that was a major driver for him in the work. And that, to me, has been filtered out of his history and has been filtered out of the history of landscape architecture.

But if we return to this origin story of the profession, it puts the pressure on this profession to live up to that. And more broadly speaking, not to resign itself to being a small-minded field, but this is a field that was literally created to think about the biggest issues of the society.

Dwayne Betts:

Now, I remember going into the prison this week on Tuesday, I saw the clovers in the grass when I walked in and I was like, "Damn, I'm going to find me a four-leaf clover." I said it to myself. And so I would occasionally just stop and be looking. And somebody said, "What you doing?" I said, "I'm looking for a four-leaf clover." They said, "Man, you don't think you're going to find one, do you?"

And we were leaving. And so the word sort of got around, and some of my friends were with me, so they were like, "Yeah, Dwayne does stuff like that, man. Whatever, Joe, just ignore it." And so we leaving, and I look down and I find one and I pick it up, and the dude couldn't believe it. And I wonder, in designing the sidewalks, did the person design the sidewalks with the intention that grass patches would be able to grow in the places that the sidewalk wasn't?

And so that when you leave in a place, it just has this possibility of, you know, whatever. But the fact that I was able to find a clover there, a four-leaf clover at that, meant something to me. And not that I'm praising the designers of prison, I'm just saying even maybe they make some eloquent mistakes too, right?

But you said you guys build a lot of different things. So you do parks, but you do museums, you do schools. Of those things that you do, what do you find the most appealing that you would want to just tell us about some design element that we wouldn't even recognize? But I wonder what you would say. What was the space that you loved to design and to build?

Sara Zewde:

Well, the point about the four-leaf clover is an important one, because that is why I do what I do, which is... I think there are so many pressing issues that our society faces. And in the mix of all of that, what about the small moments of joy? Your four-leaf clover. What about a place to sit in the shade? What about a place to hear kids running around? I think all of that is also important to social movements. So I see our work as being in parallel with the work of advocates and activists. And it may not be entirely obvious from the outside, but for me, this is why I do it.

I grew up in Louisiana, and when Hurricane Katrina happened, I had no idea what I was going to study. And it was learning about urban planning and architecture and landscape after Katrina that made me really start to hone in on a kind of work that I wanted to do. And so the kind of work that makes me happy is your four-leaf clover moment multiplied.

What that means in terms of project types, there's so many. I mean, one of the things that I'm most excited about that we're starting to do more of is... So for instance, we're doing work in North Tulsa, which is a historically black portion of Tulsa where a lot of the people that were living in Greenwood, or what's known as Black Wall Street, they were displaced further and further north. And so there's an inequity of parks, among many things. But we've been working with a foundation who is funding the design and construction of two new parks in North Tulsa.

Now, what does that mean for everybody living around that park who owns their homes? That means a major opportunity to generate wealth. So that makes me excited. We also do a lot of vision planning for historically black neighborhoods. We worked with Greenwood, with Black Wall Street, we worked with Africatown in Seattle, we worked with the Hill District in Pittsburgh. We're starting to kick off a project now in New Orleans, too.

And so thinking about landscape architecture holistically, that it can be the kind of glue for envisioning what a black neighborhood is and can be. I live in Harlem, and there's a reason why, and it's because traveling around the world and working on these projects, people would always say, "I'm from the Harlem of..." Whatever city they come from, or "This is the Harlem of the West" or "The Harlem of the South." And it really made me think about the value of a neighborhood. So for me, the projects that really matter are the ones that add up to more than the sum of its pieces.

Dwayne Betts:

All of that's really, really fascinating. How do you think about books and literature in particular? Because you said something earlier, you said that the authors of the landscape architecture are unknown. So I wonder what you think about books and literature and then the stories that we tell, and how they sort of maybe even intersect with some of this work that you're doing, which is using landscape architecture to tell some stories that have also been buried in the same way that the authors of that work are buried. And one of the other connections between Olmsted had me thinking about Malcolm X.

Sara Zewde:

Most people come to architecture and to landscape architecture drawing. The kids who were drawing since they were little, and they're like, "I need a job where I can draw. I'll be an architect." I had not drawn since I was six years old, like most people, but I love to read. And so I found myself reading a lot about design. So I read my way into design. I did not draw my way. And that remains a big part of my process.

Learning about the places that we're working in, particularly in places whose histories are mis-told, I like to engage in a lot of different forms of research, sitting there and observing, talking to people, getting to know people and reading kind of what's out there as well. But there's a lot of layers of understanding a place that I like to go through, because I just want to hear, think about it, from a lot of different perspectives.

But then when you think about Olmsted's legacy, which again, I think about a lot because I'm writing a book about him, that's one of his major contributions is a book, this book that's thousands of pages of documented dialogue with enslaved people. As a historical document, that's important. But then Malcolm X, you mentioned Malcolm X, in his autobiography, guess who he read while he was in prison and who he cites as awakening him to the quote "horrors of slavery" in the United States? Take a wild guess.

Dwayne Betts:

At this point, listeners know the answer, and it's like, "The answer's Olmsted."

Sara Zewde:

The answer is Olmsted. And guess where I live? I live at the intersection of Malcolm X and Central Park North, which to me is symbolic. I reread Malcolm X's autobiography once every couple of years, probably, since high school, and his masjid is right here, and he's just very foundational, formational for my own thinking. But to have that connection between him and Olmsted feels like... I don't know. Yeah, I have to find signs where I can get them, you know?

Dwayne Betts:

But look, though, for me, when I went into that prison, I was looking at the grass. I did eight and a half years in prison, and I did eight and a half years in prisons that had no grass. I had six months in one place that had grass. We used to walk the yard. And now I think about how the landscape was different because of how it was designed, and how it had this grass and it had these fields.

Sara Zewde:

Interesting.

Dwayne Betts:

I was moved from there to a place that had no grass anywhere, and you stayed inside 24 hours a day. And I wonder was... I found a four-leaf clover when I left that prison, but my point is, I think that it's not just that we take our signs from where we get them, but it's that willingness and that desire to look for them that really matters. So now I'm going to take one. The first place that we built the library, a Freedom Library, this one was made out of bamboo plywood, it was in MCI Norfolk, the prison where Malcolm X served time.

Sara Zewde:

Wow.

Dwayne Betts:

And a lot of the times I think about the work as trying to do something to transform a part of a landscape that, if it has to be here, it can't be here as it is. And so anyway, I think about all those as being signs, and how we try to keep pushing to get to somewhere.

Sara Zewde:

Yeah.

Dwayne Betts:

But that leads me to this question that I was trying to get to, which is, this podcast is called Almost There, and I listen to people's work. And whether I ask them about their struggles or not, they find a way of telling me. And whether I ask them about how hard it is to do what they do, they find a way of telling me.

I want you to know, you haven't told me yet. You've hinted at it, you've suggested it. I want to ask you, what keeps you going when you dealing with the fact that if you're one of few landscape architects in the country, you have to be one of fewer professors of landscape architecture that are black in this country. I may be talking to the only one.

Sara Zewde:

There's certainly more than me. I am the first black faculty member at Harvard in the Department of Landscape Architecture in its history, and it's the oldest landscape architecture department in the world. I always tell people, "That's not something to celebrate. Nobody should pat themselves on the back. That's really sad."

And for a field... I mean, it's a small field in general. I think it should grow, but I think it can only grow if it is honest about its history and it expands itself to take on the things that really matter right now. It's not just about putting shrubs around buildings and making corporate parks. It actually has... I mean, listening to you talk about the grass while you were incarcerated, this has a real effect on people that's meaningful. And we have to own that. We have to acknowledge that.

And the other thing is, we're largely trained to basically drop European aesthetics onto everything, to a degree that we don't even know what nature looks like, because we just have these visions of basically what an English picturesque landscape. Our minds are colonized, basically, all of us, not just landscape architects. Our minds are so colonized, and a lot of that has to do with how we view land.

What keeps me going, though, is the small moments. Your four-leaf clover moment is exactly the kind of moment that keeps me going, because going to a project site and seeing one kid do a backflip, that kind of thing means a lot to me. It can be overwhelming to think about all of the challenges that we all face, and I feel like my little piece in that is to design places for these people and for the people impacted by their work.

It feels like there's a lot of smart people working really hard, and we're all just running as fast as we can in our short little lifetime to make a dent on things. But my little dent, I think, is just the very small moments of joy that give people the endurance and resilience to keep going. That's all it means to me.

Dwayne Betts:

Does that come from having experienced Katrina and having experienced it as a Louisiana native?

Sara Zewde:

Well, I was actually in college in Boston, so I wouldn't say that I experienced Katrina, but...

Dwayne Betts:

Well, see, me personally, I count phone calls. Now, it's different if... I would never say I experienced Katrina, but if I was from Louisiana and my mama called me... So I actually think that you have a relationship to Louisiana, and I mean, I think that if anybody's going to say they experienced it that wasn't there, if your mama was there or your aunt was there, or one cousin, shit. If you had to have one drop of black blood to be black, if you had a play cousin in Katrina, you could say that you experienced it.

Sara Zewde:

Well, I will say this. I will say my childhood in Louisiana broadly did give me that, because there was so many crawfish boils on my block. There was carnival every year. There was second lines under the bridge. There were so many moments of joy in a context that, looking back, was harder than I was registering as a child.

But those are the moments that keep everybody going. So just to amplify that and protect that is my motivation.

Dwayne Betts:

And what do you think about that word "almost there"? I ask a lot of people this just because it's the title of the podcast, but it's one of those things that we bring meaning to it. And I wonder what meaning you bring to it when you hear that term, particularly in the context of your work and these moments of joy, and chasing something that's just over the horizons.

Sara Zewde:

I can't wait to hear other people's answers to that question. Because me, I'm a pessimist. So I'm like, "Are we almost there? Where are we?" To me, it was almost like, "Is it 'Almost There?'"? Is it 'Almost There!?' Where are we going? Where is there? 'Almost' suggests we've gone a long portion of the journey, so what was the journey? How did that go? Let's take stock of that." It prompts more questions for me than answers. And so I would probably think of that more in the context of the small wins, which are important to celebrate.

Dwayne Betts:

I mean, which is its own kind of cool thing that I hadn't thought about, how "almost there" prompts questions, and the answers to those questions are sometimes those four-leaf clovers.

Sara Zewde:

Yeah, exactly.

Dwayne Betts:

I shall never forget finding a four-leaf clover on a prison wreck yard, and the only reason I found it is because I've returned to a place that gives me nightmares.

Anyway, it's been a pleasure having you on. This was delightful. Thank you.

Sara Zewde:

Thank you for a wonderful conversation that didn't feel like an interview. It felt like a conversation, which is way more enjoyable, hopefully enjoyable to listen to, but definitely enjoyable to be a part of.

Dwayne Betts:

Almost There is produced by Jesse Baker and Eric Nuzum at Magnificent Noise for Emerson Collective. Our production staff includes Eleanor Kagan, Paul Schneider, and Kristen Mueller, along with Patrick D'Arcy, Alex Simon, and Amy Lowe from Emerson Collective. Special thanks to Nia Elliott. I'm Reginald Dwayne Betts. Thank you for listening.