



RADICAL OPTIMISM

SETTING UP SHOP JUST AS THE SKY FELL, MARCEL WILSON TOOK AN UNORTHODOX APPROACH AND BUILT A HIGH-MINDED PRACTICE.

BY JONATHAN LERNER

Marcel Wilson, ASLA, is politely bored by many conventions of the landscape architecture trade. But he seems too curious and resourceful to let boredom trouble him much. As a kid working in the Indiana lumber mill that had been owned by his family for three generations, he got “interested in machines and their agency in landscape.” Later, he became intrigued by the emergent synthesis of “physical computing and digital controls with this analogue world.” Now 42, Wilson, who stands tall and sturdy and has a boyish look in eyeglass frames with a cool citrus-green outline, is just young enough to be a member of the first generation for whom information technology and its relentless shape-shifting constitute a country of origin and a native tongue. He also has a robust

disregard for traditional boundaries—between professions, between issues, between the present and the possible—except for what the convergence of those factors can produce.

Wilson’s projects range widely in both scale and scope. Among the more conceptual are art installations with environmental subtexts. He once proposed placing sculptural fog generators in subway stations during San Francisco’s foggy Indian summer to bring the outdoor atmosphere underground. A temporary installation he designed to give identity and visibility to the entryway of the San Francisco Museum of Craft and Design was a glowing topography of electroluminescent wires and rods, powered by rooftop solar panels.

Some of the conceptual work is conspicuously practical, too. A proposal for a reconfigurable modular bike lane system is in development as a product; it would pack flat and include units that could be variously deployed as barriers, planters, data-collection points, or bike-repair stations and would come complete with stick-on signage. A design for generating solar power along an urban rail right-of-way in Sacramento, for which funding is being sought, aims also to establish optimal site conditions for the California quail: Resource efficiency meets habitat restoration. “Your standard solar installation is a chain-link fence, gravel, and a solar array way the heck out in the middle of nowhere,” Wilson says. “It’s ripe for a more inventive mode of thinking—and squarely in landscape architecture’s capacities.”

ABOVE
Marcel Wilson, at work in his studio, Bionic, in San Francisco.



ABOVE
Wilson's conjectural Estuary Services Pipeline would ring San Francisco Bay with facilities for stormwater treatment, aquaculture, energy production, materials transfer, and recreation.

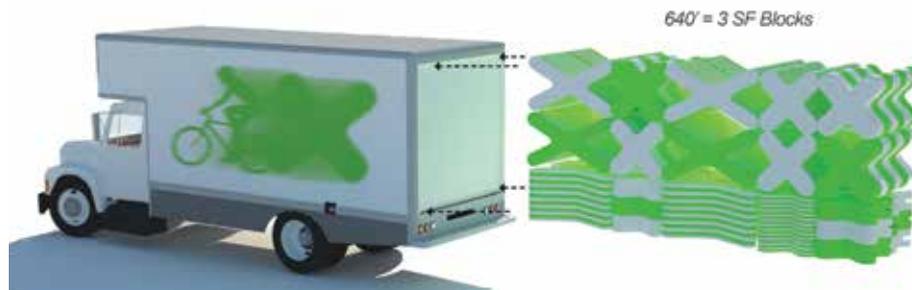
Wilson also has large-scale urban designs in the works for redevelopment zones. Several of these schemes address regeneration along San Francisco's vast southeast bay front, which has been neglected in its postindustrial period. They integrate residential and recreational uses with ecosystem restoration and services. An even more ambitious Wilson proposal is for a 170-mile "Estuary Services Pipeline" that would ring the shoreline of San Francisco Bay with a partially floating, modular infrastructure system capable of transporting materials, managing spills and invasive species, supporting aquaculture, and providing civic spaces, among other functions. "It's a convergence of a dense metropolitan area, a natural disaster happening in slow motion,

and an invention to mediate between the two," Wilson explains.

Wilson also has several large rural residential commissions that represent a kind of 1 percent "second-home program, which is amazingly repetitive"—but also offer conditions, and clients, that allow intervention "on an ecological scale that you can't do in a public context" because of budgetary and bureaucratic restraints. He approaches even small residential spaces as opportunities for systematic thinking and demonstration. One such space is his own: Urban Spring, winner of a 2012 ASLA Honor Award and designed

with his wife, Jennifer Wilson, who is also a landscape architect, reroutes the roughly 100-gallon daily flow from a natural spring beneath their house away from the storm sewer and into water features and wetland habitats in the backyard. It "challenges the widespread convention of suppressing [natural] urban water systems," the ASLA citation notes.

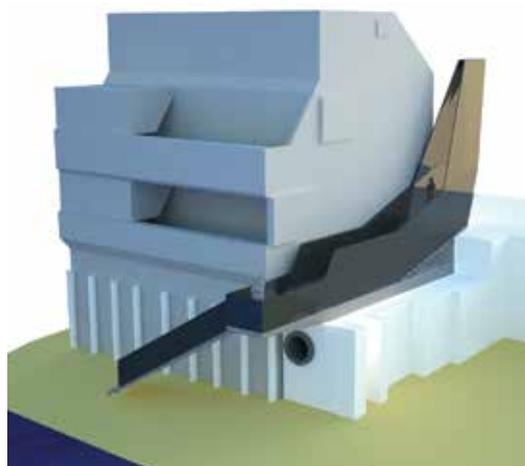
At the moment, Wilson's firm, Bionic—the name suggests something both constructed and alive—which consists of six people, not all full-time,



TOP
Fast Lanes is a portable, modular, flat-pack system for establishing bike lanes.

LEFT
Rooftop solar collectors power a temporary installation called Solar Terrain.

BOTTOM LEFT AND BELOW
A path in Malibu, California, cuts past houses that block access to the beach.



KYLE JEFFERS: PHOTO ON RIGHT; COURTESY BIONIC; ALL OTHERS



LEFT
Wilson's firm, Bionic, consists of just six people, some part-time. Right now they have 17 projects on the boards.

has 17 projects going. “All have some form of substance,” he says. “What we don’t tend to attract is the service level of practice that the vast majority of the industry is bound to.” He doesn’t mind. Most of the profession, he thinks, is “traditionally concerned with five materials, and reusing them, and with beauty—when the real profound environmental and spatial issues of our time are being determined by other technologies, materials, and industries.”

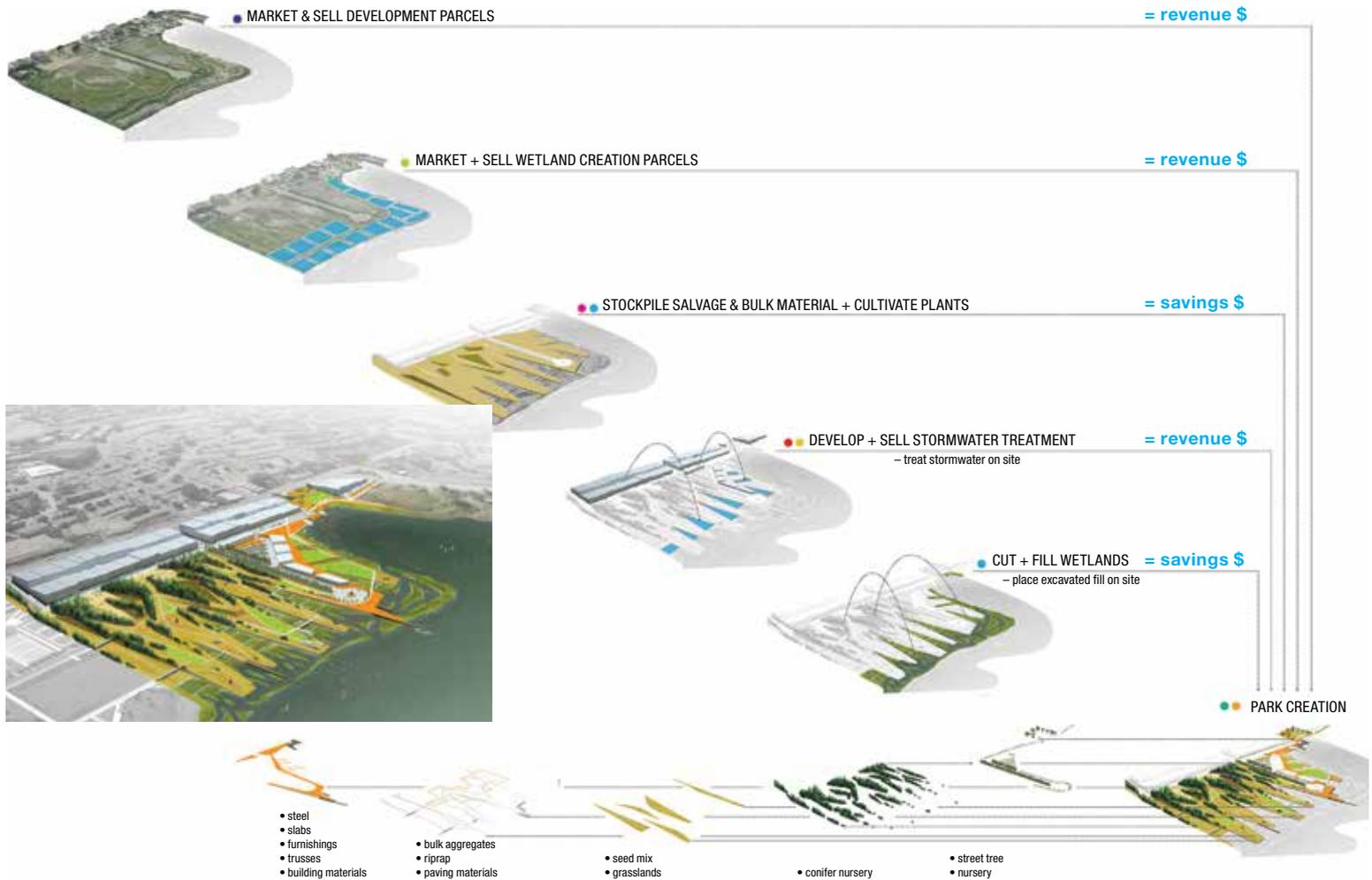
Wilson claims to have been all but born with a sense of how places “are made and changed.” Lumber milling was a “disruptive, extractive industry, with chain saws and skidders and feller bunchers, semis on tiny roads, and a mill that is a giant contraption—originally powered by steam, even,” he recounts. “The places that we would go to fell logs were severely disturbed. You’d go back two years later and you could see the resiliency of things, the way places react.”

When he graduated with a bachelor’s degree in landscape architecture from Colorado State University in 1997, private practice seemed “interminably service oriented,” Wilson says. “And that seemed like such a dim future.” So he worked for a year in the design department of the New York City parks department. Best perk? “You could take one of these little green trucks and go anywhere. I loved seeing the guts of New York and how it works.” He went on to Harvard’s Graduate School of Design, where his obsession with technology as applied to landscape led him to investigate such subjects as assisted migration, artificial snowmaking, and the monitoring of river systems. Before he finished, he was on staff at Hargreaves Associates in Cambridge, and in 2000 he moved to the firm’s San Francisco office, where he eventually became a principal. It was “an immersion in a much more interesting version of practice” than he had perceived before, de-

signing and managing high-profile projects on several continents. In 2006 he led Hargreaves’s winning entry in a competition for Los Angeles State Historic Park. He recalls thinking, “I’m either going to do this project for the next 10 years, or I’m going to downshift.”

In 2007, he started his own practice. “And then the sky fell.” He remembers, soon after the economic crash, a pre-RFP meeting for “a tiny little park in an unglamorous corner of the Bay Area” that was mobbed by 115 landscape architects. “I realized that I needed a different approach to finding work.” (As it turned out, that L.A. State Historic Park project, also paralyzed by the recession, is only this year going into construction.)

Like many who confronted that reality, Wilson pursued the logical alternatives of entering competitions and doing pro bono work, especially for clients with environmental briefs.



ABOVE
The plan for India Basin Waterfront Park proposes ways to finance and construct the project that respond to environmental needs and opportunities in the region.

His view is that although many environmental organizations invest in litigation as a strategy, some are willing to accept “design as a tactic for negotiating”—that is, developing an expansive vision as opposed to fighting for adherence to or enhancement of existing regulation. In his experience, it is possible to work with such groups to address one problem and at the same time push them to see beyond it, through design. “They’re inherently positive thinking,” he notes, and correctly, given that cynics are seldom drawn toward saving the planet. “Environmental groups tend to be focused on a grouping, a legacy of issues that they’re responsible for. Once you satisfy those, it’s an open field as

to the way you animate it and build additional purpose into it.” If an issue, or a place, needing a solution “has one redeeming quality, we’ll take this approach to practice, and take the most radically optimistic view, and test its effectiveness.” Wilson describes this way of developing client relationships and winning jobs as “growing a project,” and he credits it with his current load of interesting work, work he wants to do. One such project, for the California Coastal Conservancy, consists of designs for a series of public access points to beaches in Malibu, inserted sliver-like through the almost impenetrable wall of private houses that currently renders the shoreline inaccessible.

Will this sustain a practice over time? “It’s speculative financially as well as intellectually. And he’s uncompromising,” says Cheryl Barton, FASLA, who has known Wilson since his days at Hargreaves. (Jennifer Wilson worked in Barton’s office.) “He may need to partner with others so that he can continue to stretch. Or he may just get that right client who says, ‘Why not?’ A lot of billionaires are walking around San Francisco these days. It’s a very fertile environment for what he’s doing.”

A good illustration of Wilson’s “growing a project” comes from his work on San Francisco’s southeast bay front. Since 2000, he has been involved in efforts to revive the area,



ABOVE
Wilson says, "All types of industries are influencing cities in ways that dwarf the planning and design arts."

"such a loose and rudderless planning idea at the beginning that it was below the radar and pay grade of anybody." This involvement eventually led to commissions by the Sierra Club and Arc Ecology to produce a design for a 700-acre redevelopment of the area that includes the defunct Hunters Point Shipyard and disused Candlestick Park stadium, and from the San Francisco Parks Alliance to design a 15-acre park at nearby India Basin. The concerns addressed in these plans are probably shared by any landscape architect who is concerned about the challenge of sustainable urbanism, and the tactics proposed should be equally familiar: reconstructed wetlands and restored habitats, mixed-use development, an integrated open space with multiple programs, urban densification and affordable housing, environmental justice.

But taking things further, in a good illustration of "building additional purpose," is Wilson's complex of

ideas for funding and constructing the India Basin park. The conventional financing mechanisms are such public ones as park budgets and tax-increment districts, and such private ones as philanthropic grants and amenity leases. In addition, he proposes several strategies to leverage the potential of the place in the context of the environmental pressures on the greater Bay Area. The site's ability to absorb impacts could be commodified and sold, as in a cap-and-trade scheme, for wetland mitigation, endangered-habitat preservation, and carbon offset. Materials for park construction could be procured from other infrastructure projects; for example, San Francisco is "demolishing a stadium; we're taking down a bridge; we're digging a subway—and this site is a strategic location for depositing and reshaping that material," he explains. Development parcels could be sold off, and stormwater-treatment capacity built into the park could be marketed to developers of adjacent properties.

This mode of thinking integrates a site with its surroundings not just on the ground—by extending green pathways from a park into nearby existing neighborhoods, for instance—but also as part of larger environmental processes, changes, and needs. "More than half the world's population now lives in cities. That shift inherently puts more pressure on less area to do more. It's naive to think that conventional landscape architecture practices and materials are going to be able to rise to those forces. There are all types of industries that are taking a very specific and studied interest in cities, especially tech companies, and influencing cities in ways that dwarf the planning and design arts," Wilson says. "It's one of the reasons why I'm convinced that there is so much territory for spatial and environmental invention."

Time will tell whether all of Wilson's ideas work out. Maybe he's too optimistic. But he is applying considerable intelligence to thinking the connections through and addressing them through design. Barton says, "We all have so much education to do with potential clients, and it helps all of us when someone is willing to put it out there beyond the realm of what people consider on a daily basis." What would she hope to see coming from Wilson in the future? "More provocation, please." ●

JONATHAN LERNER WRITES ON ARCHITECTURE, PLANNING, ART, AND DESIGN FOR NATIONAL MAGAZINES AND FOR PROFESSIONALS IN THOSE FIELDS. FIND HIM AT WWW.URBANISTCOMMUNICATIONS.COM.