

THINKING AHEAD

SWA GROUP'S XL LAB HAS DESIGNS ON THE FUTURE.

BY MAGGIE ZACKOWITZ



Call it the nonproject project. XL: Experiments in Landscape and Urbanism is the new landscape architecture think tank at SWA Group, and it's a way, says the designer Anya Domlesky, Associate ASLA, to "experiment with ideas and preposition the firm to work on projects that don't quite yet exist." XL co-leads Domlesky and Emily Schlickman, Associate ASLA, who is also a designer, were inspired earlier this year while working on a competition in Portland, Oregon. "It got us thinking about how to do research at SWA and focus on innovation in a non-project-oriented space," Domlesky says.

The pair first did their homework, surveying different companies in allied fields as well as landscape architecture. "We thought it was interesting that a number of architecture firms, like LMA and KieranTimberlake, actually had this separate kind of research, innovation, and experimentation arm," Domlesky says. "But there really isn't a precedent in landscape, and we felt like there should be."

They discovered that other firms' research, if it does occur, is mostly specific to one project in one condition. Firms also often rely on research that comes out of academia. Domlesky believes that research performed in a practice context can offer insights that academic research cannot, as well as make it easier to address larger, complex issues such as climate change, developments in technology, and possible future conditions.

"We don't necessarily want to be confined to the gardenesque type of projects," she explains. "We want to work on larger urban scales, bigger problems—whether they're social or they have to do with these long-term changes like sea-level rise, or how a city adapts over time to new populations." One example: XL's plan to deal with the San Francisco Bay Area's dual problems of sea-level rise and housing scarcity. Titled "Mega Margin," their proposal calls for an inundation-friendly bayside buffer zone that serves as a recreational space when not underwater. Housing in areas prone to floods is

moved to higher ground, where the new construction maintains a much higher resident density.

A recent morning found the Sausalito-based Schlickman and Domlesky in San Diego, demonstrating the use of immersive environments to colleagues there. "These are tools that are developing. They're traditionally used for the gaming industry and increasingly in real estate, but we wanted to see how we could use them. We did everything from environments that you can view on your phone or desktop to Google Cardboard. And then we had two headsets that people were sketching in, and walking around in their own models and sort of teleporting. So it was about trying out the tools."

XL—funded by SWA's Patrick T. Curran Fellowship, which honors a late designer at the firm—is actually a side job for the pair. "We would love for it to be our full-time gig," says Domlesky, "but at the moment we are sort of splitting our time between this and built work." ●

ABOVE
SWA Group's Anya Domlesky (at left) and Emily Schlickman (right) do fieldwork for "Mega Margin," an XL project addressing both climate change and housing shortages in the San Francisco Bay Area.