

The background image shows a scenic view of the Washington Monument in the distance, reflected in the water. In the foreground, there are cherry blossom trees on the left and a concrete walkway along the water's edge. The sky is blue with some light clouds.

Tidal Basin Ideas Lab

Key Themes

Taken together, this work is an expansive body of research and a profound set of design ideas for how to save a cultural landscape in peril.

Introduction

The Tidal Basin is a public place like no other in the country—indeed, in the world. Adjacent to the National Mall in Washington D.C., the Tidal Basin is an extraordinary cultural landscape that plays an important role in crafting the collective memory and legacy of United States history. It is home to iconic landmarks and traditions in the Nation’s capital, including memorials to Thomas Jefferson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as the beloved blossoming cherry trees. Yet, despite its storied place in the national imagination, the Tidal Basin is very much at risk. The instability of the land underneath, daily flooding, limited interpretation, dying cherry trees, and crumbling infrastructure threaten its future.

To address these challenges, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Trust for the National Mall, and the National Park Service initiated the Tidal Basin Ideas Lab, presented by American Express. Unlike a conventional design competition, which selects one winner, the Tidal Basin Ideas Lab brought together five leading American Landscape Architecture firms in a collaborative process. Working together, and individually, each team addressed the complex challenges facing this extraordinary cultural landscape and embraced the opportunity to envision a better future—one steeped in tradition, grounded in history, and inspired by possibility. Their work illustrates new ecological landscape systems, enhanced social spaces, enlightened interpretive experiences, and deeper narratives that expand our collective understanding of how public landscapes can evolve and adapt.

Participating Landscape Architecture Firms

- DLANDstudio
- GGN
- Hood Design Studio
- James Corner Field Operations
- Reed Hilderbrand

Tidal Basin Ideas Lab Online Exhibition

The design ideas have been curated into a virtual online exhibition www.tidalbasinideaslab.org that launched on October 20th 2020. The exhibition adds a narrative perspective, bringing to life the various histories of the Tidal Basin, both told and untold, inviting the public to share feedback on design ideas, and raising awareness of the pressing needs for critical repairs and improvements for the evolution of this important part of America’s landscape.

Now we must focus on an exchange of these ideas and meaningfully engage the public and stakeholders in the process to ensure a wholistic, inclusive, and interconnected future for the Tidal Basin.

NPS Guidelines for Treatment at The Tidal Basin

In June 2020, the National Park Service (NPS) published a Cultural Landscape Report with the following findings and guidelines for the Tidal Basin:

- **All the features and systems within the cultural landscape are tightly interwoven, complicating short- and long-term treatment.**
- **The treatment for the Tidal Basin recognizes that preserving current conditions is not a sustainable option, given the intense threats to the landscape.**
- **Treatment focused on preserving historic resources while building resiliency, sustainability, and accessibility. Broad flexible guidelines for managing landscape change are required.**



left and right: Sam Kittner

Ideas Lab Key Themes

Key themes that emerged from the Ideas Lab submittals are presented here to inspire discussion for a long-term vision to address challenges at the Tidal Basin.

1 Adopt New Ecological Systems

Engage with tidal cycles and embrace occasional flooding.

Restore the Tidal Basin's capacity to flush the Washington Channel.

Consider dredging the Tidal Basin to create an aquatic shelf (wetlands) along the edge.

Identify and plant new areas of cherry trees, restore the diversity of the original plantings on higher ground, and introduce new tree species for diversity and resilience.

Plan and transition to new ecological landscapes such as meadow clearings, tidal marshes, shrublands, and horticultural plantings.

Leave room for the unknown and plan for future planting strategies through test beds and nurseries.

top: Reed Hilderbrand
bottom: GGN



2 Rebuild Outdated Infrastructure with a Phased and Flexible Approach

Phased implementation strategy including grading changes, fixing broken tidal gates, and stabilizing collapsing seawalls, with a wholesale transformation to take place gradually through the century.

Plan for the integration of functional landforms such as a jetty, an earthwork levee, and/or new elevated overlooks; consider the bold and large-scale idea that the reconstructed edge of the Tidal Basin becomes new flood protection for Washington D.C.

Plan for a new pedestrian circulation network that will improve accessibility, reduce bottlenecks, enhance experiences, and better engage with the water (elevated boardwalks, floating platforms, overlooks, etc).

Create new and diverse recreational and educational opportunities with a focus on ecosystems.

top: Reed Hilderbrand
bottom: James Corner Field Operations



3 Establish a New Model for Collaboration and Interpretation of Memorials

Continue design collaboration with stakeholders, partners, and design teams; and incorporate public feedback.

Challenge the notion of memorials and memory-making as static and idealized; and allow them to accrete new forms and meanings over time.

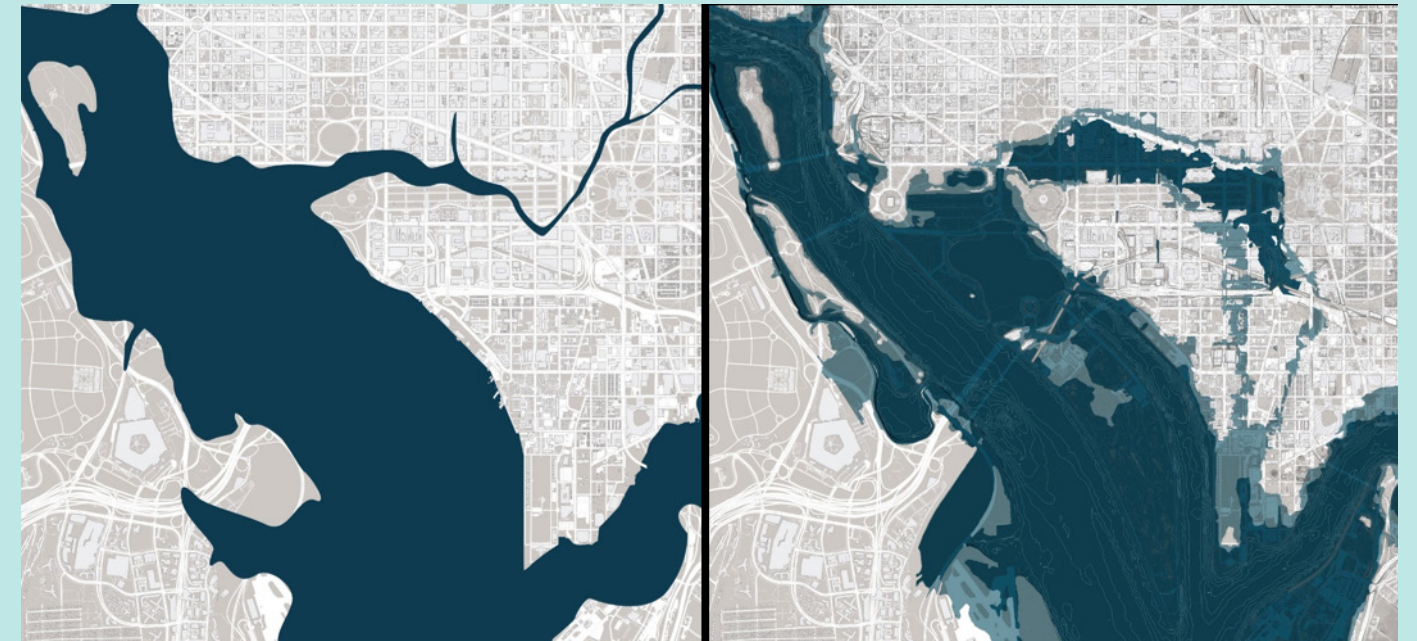
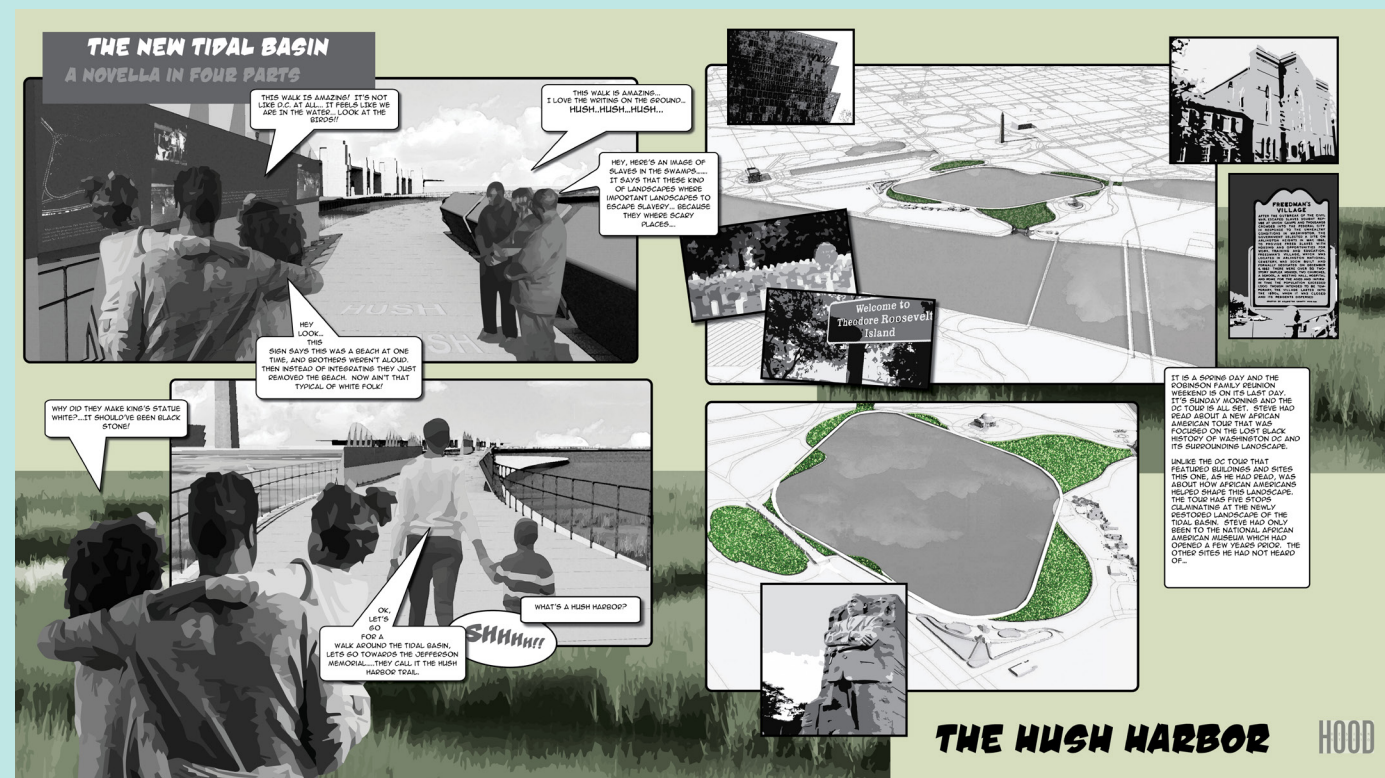
Interpret new origin stories through a multiplicity of narratives and design that gives equal voice to the marginalized and unheard.

Develop interconnected and holistic interpretation of memorials and sites.

top: DLANDstudio

middle: GGN

bottom: Hood Design Studio



4 Identify Policies and Guidelines that Govern Implementation and Change

NPS and partners monitor climate change effects at the Tidal Basin and apply to management and policy decisions.

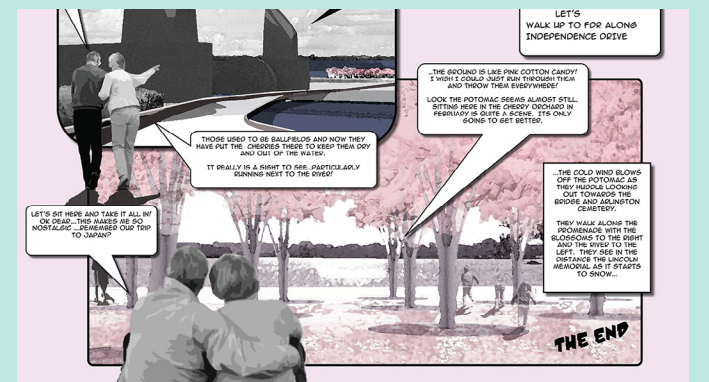
Review and Update Historic Preservation Policies and Guidelines to consider impacts of climate change at the Tidal Basin.

Consider solutions that have a positive regional benefit and value, especially for flooding, stormwater management and transportation.

top: 1793 Waterline and Projected Flood Zone 2019, DLANDstudio

middle: James Corner Field Operations

bottom: Hood Design Studio



For more information visit <https://tidalbasinideaslab.org/>

front and back cover images: Sam Kittner

Contact the National Trust for Historic Preservation at info@savingplaces.org / Phone: 202-588-6000 and the Trust for the National Mall at information@nationalmall.org / Phone: 202-407-9408.



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