BLA Outcomes Assessment Plan

Bachelor of Landscape Architecture Program  
Department of Landscape Architecture  
SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry

Background and Introduction
The Bachelor of Landscape Architecture (BLA) Program at SUNY-ESF is a first professional degree; it is unique within the SUNY system, and recognized by the NY State Department of Education. As a professional program, the BLA is accredited by the American Society of Landscape Architects and the associated Landscape Architecture Accreditation Board (LAAB, similar to ABET accreditation for professional engineering programs). The specialized nature of a professional program like the BLA makes the assessment of learning outcomes relatively straightforward, yet still critical to maintaining a high quality educational program. Assessment of learning outcomes in some form has always been a central component in the professional accreditation process for the department. In recent years, the documentation and reporting requirements have evolved to become more explicit and transparent, but the underlying need to provide accountability to the profession we serve has provided a consistent theme in the LAAB review process undertaken by the department every 5 years. In addition to the formally documented process of assessment required by accreditation, the Department of Landscape Architecture has long fostered a less formal but no less important process of assessment to periodically review and revise our courses, curriculum, and teaching methods. Central to this process is the use of end of semester critiques and portfolio reviews for all studio courses. Teachers from across the department are invited to participate (as well as practitioners from the local professional community), in a collaborative review of the work of students, providing summary critique and feedback on projects to students, as well as insights for future course and curriculum revisions or adjustments to teaching emphasis and general pedagogy.

As we approach the end of the current accreditation cycle for both LAAB and Middle States Commission on Higher Education, formal documentation of assessment activities is obviously a priority for ESF. This document is intended to help illustrate the importance of outcomes assessment as a tool within the Department of Landscape Architecture, and in particular to clearly and methodically document efforts to define and measure learning outcomes within the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture program.

Rationale
As a method of ensuring compliance with various external standards, the process of outcomes assessment is often seen as little more than distraction from the real business of teaching and learning. Assessment is valuable, however, when an academic program or faculty can realize tangible and useful results, without becoming an additional administrative burden to an already overtaxed teaching faculty. Any method developed should be conceived within the existing structure of the educational program, embedded within existing coursework if possible without adding new tasks or layers of additional bureaucratic recordkeeping. Additionally,
the outcomes to be measured, whether quantitatively or qualitatively, need to be considered in a manner which will provide valuable feedback to teaching faculty and thus provide insight into improving teaching and learning.

The plan outlined below is intended to formalize and institutionalize on a more regular and ongoing basis an activity that currently has only seen structured documentation every 5 years with the preparation of the LAAB Self-Study Report for accreditation. A significant part of the preparation of the self study is the statement and clarification of programmatic mission and desired learning outcomes, and a corresponding demonstration of the program’s ability to meet the standards of the profession through the delivery of coursework and other educational experiences explicitly tied to these objectives. The primary means of demonstrating our proficiency is through the use of broadly defined portfolios of student work. For past accreditation reports and site visits, student work has been collected across an array of courses, each contributing individually and/or collectively to capture a “snapshot” of materials from each course assessing all of 13 learning objectives prior to graduation (see Mission Statement below for listing of learning outcomes/objectives). Outside professionals representing three major constituent groups (an academic administrator, a practicing LA professional, and a professional LA educator) act as the independent evaluators of the program. The mission and objectives used to define and articulate the learning outcomes for this process are outlined in the following section.

Mission and Objectives of the BLA Program

The mission of the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture Program is “to provide an educational setting and curriculum which cultivates in our students the knowledge, skills and values of the profession of landscape architecture, with the unique signature of ESF’s Department of Landscape Architecture.” This specific mission is derived from that of the College, which encompasses education, research and public service. The mission is focused on the sensitive design of our environment, considering a wide array of human uses and cultural expressions, an understanding of fundamental ecological systems, structure and functions, and the range of landscape settings from urban to wilderness. The curriculum of the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture Program is structured to foster an understanding of the ethics, standards and body of knowledge embraced by the profession of landscape architecture. The program provides students the opportunity to develop a broad background of substantive knowledge and theory, a working understanding of the creative nature of the design process and problem solving, and proficiency with the practical skills and craft required in the profession. Site design and site planning is used as the primary vehicle for developing and applying knowledge and theory, exploring the design process, and developing the range of skills required by the profession of landscape architecture.

The objectives of the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture Program, specific to achieving the mission, have three main areas of concern: knowledge, skills, and values.

1. Knowledge

Students are encouraged to value scholarship and learning as continuous processes which are integral with professional and personal growth. Knowledge to be acquired is focused in four major substantive areas, including:

- Social and Cultural: liberal and fine arts, and social and behavioral sciences
- Biophysical: physical, biological, and earth sciences
- Context and Place: design history and theory; built form, organization, and pattern
- Landscape Architectural Technology: design communication & visualization, site engineering & structural design, design materials, sustainable systems, and construction processes
This knowledge is intended to provide students with a broad and firm foundation on which to build future specialization.

2. **Skills**

The skills essential to the professional education of students of landscape architecture are those which will allow them to be responsible for design projects at a variety of scales from inception to implementation. Fundamental to this is competence in decision-making, derived from effective use of holistic design and planning processes; soundly based on theory, and leading to effective choices of methods, technologies, and materials. At all stages, the importance of the development of an array of graphic, oral, and written communication skills is emphasized.

3. **Values**

The values which will guide each student's future work and education are implicit in the content and progression of the program, and are presented by examples, problems, and discussion. A primary objective is the development of an historical perspective concerning the designed environment and the philosophical, practical and theoretical issues related to landscape architecture. Students learn to value the landscape as both a physical and environmental asset, as well as a visual and cultural expression of time and place. A final major concern is the goal of ethical service to society through design and planning in the landscape, particularly with respect to the sustainable stewardship of landscapes and the environment.

Specific outcome oriented objectives for the expression of particular knowledge, skills, or values include the following:

1. BLA graduates should be able to consider, assess, and incorporate a broad range of social, cultural, and behavioral factors into design and planning of the land.

2. BLA graduates should be able to consider, assess, and incorporate a broad range of natural factors and processes, including climate, ecology, geology, soils, hydrology, and physiography into design and planning of the land.

3. BLA graduates should be able to consider, assess, and adapt to a variety of political, legal, and regulatory contexts for design.

4. BLA graduates should be able to consider and draw upon the precedents and typologies developed over the course of the history of art and design.

5. BLA graduates should be able to consider and assess the design context of a particular site, place, or region, and identify important design forms, patterns, and organizing structures.

6. BLA graduates should be able to observe, record, and visualize the form and character of 3-dimensional spaces.

7. BLA graduates should be able to select, apply, and communicate an appropriate and defensible design process to address and solve a wide range of design and planning problems.

8. BLA graduates should be able to incorporate significant technical considerations necessary for the implementation of site designs, including site grading, drainage and stormwater management, erosion control, soils design, design of pedestrian and vehicular circulation systems, parking design, incorporation of ADA/universal design requirements, incorporation of sustainable systems, and design of ecologically suitable/sustainable plantings.

9. BLA graduates should be able to consider, assess, and select appropriate materials and structural systems to implement design ideas.

10. BLA graduates should be able to effectively communicate design ideas using appropriate methods and techniques (to clients, the public, and contractors), from concept development through construction documentation.

11. BLA graduates should be both aware of, and comfortable adhering to the ethical standards of the profession of landscape architecture.
12. BLA graduates, upon entering into professional work, should value the interests of the communities in which they practice, and society as a whole, as well as their individual clients.

13. BLA graduates should feel a professional obligation to act as stewards of the land itself (considering all its ecological and biophysical complexity) in the course of their professional work.

Methods of Assessment

Like the outcomes assessment components included in the LAAB accreditation process, the following methods will rely substantially on the utilization of portfolios or other selected examples of student work to assess student learning outcomes. Two distinct methods will be utilized in this process, each incorporating a strategy of embedding an assessment tool within an appropriate required course (or courses) in the curriculum.

Method One:

Over the past 5 years, all BLA students have been required to prepare a portfolio of student work during their final semester in the program as a component of LSA 455 – Professional Practice (a required course for BLA students). This year, we intend to formalize the use of this requirement as an embedded outcomes assessment tool for use in both our Middle States and LAAB accreditations. The project brief for the portfolio assignment is attached as Appendix D.

Data Collection and Assessment Analysis:

Each student will submit a digital copy of their portfolio for permanent documentation on file with the Department of Landscape Architecture; these files will be maintained on an active basis for a minimum of 5 years, and in archival form indefinitely. On an annual basis, the DLA Undergraduate Curriculum Committee will convene to review a random sampling of portfolios and perform an internal learning outcomes assessment, reviewing the selected portfolios utilizing criteria addressing each of the learning outcomes noted above. Each learning outcome will be assessed using a 4 level evaluation rubric (Appendix B) establishing thresholds for the following levels:

- Level One: Exceeding Standards
- Level Two: Meeting Standards
- Level Three: Approaching Standards
- Level Four: Not Meeting Standards

The rubric will define the criteria and illustrative indicators necessary to assess levels of competency or student achievement for each learning outcome. To enable a more manageable assessment process, all 13 of the outcome objectives will not be addressed each year; a selected subset of 3-5 objectives will be reviewed each year, with the complete range of objectives covered in its entirety over not more than a three year span. Every 5 years, all 13 objectives will be assessed by external evaluators as a part of the LAAB accreditation process.

Method Two:

Since 1972, the BLA Program has included a major, semester long synthetic experience occurring during the 1st semester of the 5th year: the Off-Campus Program (LSA 460). The Off-Campus Program (OCP) provides a unique learning opportunity for each BLA student as they apply the skills, knowledge, and values acquired during 4 years of traditional lecture and studio based instruction in a unique, independent, and self-described design thesis project. Students travel to various locations within the United States and abroad, and each conducts an independent research project focusing on a specific topic uniquely suited to the place they have chosen.
addition to a major “design thesis” project, each student is required to keep a journal/sketchbook to record their reflections on design, place, and culture; a study notebook or daily log to record field observations and to document their decision making process throughout the undertaking of their thesis project; and weekly correspondence with their advising professor summarizing their progress with each course component (a course outline is attached as Appendix C). The nature of the OCP, as a holistic and synthetic “capstone” experience suggests that the physical products resulting from each student’s work will express many, if not all of the learning outcomes described above.

Data Collection & Assessment Analysis:

Each student submits final documentation of their OCP work for review by their faculty advisor. The design thesis project and other components are each graded (using a traditional A-F nominal grading system) as a part of the student’s performance evaluation for LSA 460. While grades themselves imply a form of outcomes assessment, the BLA Committee will conduct further assessment analysis using the associated grades by applying a 4 level assessment rubric similar to that used for method one and thus placing them into context with the same outcome standards established previously.

In the future, it is intended that the BLA committee will develop further methods of outcomes assessment that examine the curriculum on a course by course basis, particularly the studio sequence, in an attempt to identify specific weaknesses in teaching or leaning and then more precisely target or develop corrective measures.
## Curriculum: Bachelor of Landscape Architecture

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Objective</th>
<th>Where Addressed in Program:</th>
<th>How Assessed: Goals &amp; Methods</th>
<th>Data Collection Plan</th>
<th>Assessment Results</th>
<th>Response to Assessment Results</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>1. BLA graduates should be able to consider, assess, and incorporate a broad range of social, cultural, and behavioral factors into design and planning of the land.</td>
<td>LSA 220, LSA 312, LSA 226, LSA 227, LSA 326, LSA 327, LSA 422, LSA 460, LSA 470</td>
<td>Capstone Project (Off-Campus Program), Cumulative Professional Portfolio</td>
<td>Data to be collected annually at the completion of the fall semester of the 5th year for OCP projects, and at the completion of the spring semester of the 5th year for the professional portfolio</td>
<td>Assessment will result in qualitative evaluations of student learning outcomes, with specific identifications of shortcomings and recommendations for improvement</td>
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<td>2. BLA graduates should be able to consider, assess, and incorporate a broad range of natural factors and processes, including climate, ecology, geology, soils, hydrology, and physiography into design and planning of the land.</td>
<td>EFB 101, EFB 320, GOL 105, LSA 220, LSA 311, LSA 226, LSA 227, LSA 326, LSA 327, LSA 422, LSA 433, LSA 460, LSA 470</td>
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<td>3. BLA graduates should be able to consider, assess, and adapt to a variety of political, legal, and regulatory contexts for design.</td>
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<td>4. BLA graduates should be able to consider and draw upon the precedents and typologies developed over the course of the history of art and design.</td>
<td>LSA 220, LSA 205, LSA 206, LSA 226, LSA 227, LSA 312, LSA 326, LSA 327, LSA 405, LSA 422, LSA 460, LSA 470</td>
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<td>5. BLA graduates should be able to consider and assess the design context of a particular site, place, or region, and identify important design forms, patterns, and organizing structures.</td>
<td>LSA 220, LSA 205, LSA 206, LSA 226, LSA 227, LSA 311, LSA 312, LSA 326, LSA 327, LSA 405, LSA 451, LSA 422, LSA 460, LSA 470</td>
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<td>6. BLA graduates should be able to observe, record, and visualize the form and character of 3-dimensional spaces.</td>
<td>LSA 182, LSA 226, LSA 227, LSA 300, LSA 326, LSA 327, LSA 422, LSA 423, LSA 433, LSA 460, LSA 470</td>
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<td>8. BLA graduates should be able to incorporate significant technical considerations necessary for the implementation of site designs, including site grading, drainage and stormwater management, erosion control, soils design, design of pedestrian and vehicular circulation systems, parking design, incorporation of ADA/universal design requirements, incorporation of sustainable systems, and design of ecologically suitable/sustainable plantings.</td>
<td>LSA 227, LSA 326, LSA 327, LSA 333, LSA 342, LSA 343, LSA 422, LSA 433, LSA 423, LSA 460, LSA 470</td>
<td>Capstone Project (Off-Campus Program), Cumulative Professional Portfolio</td>
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<td>9. BLA graduates should be able to consider, assess, and select appropriate materials and structural systems to implement design ideas.</td>
<td>LSA 343, LSA 422, LSA 423, LSA 460, LSA 470</td>
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<td>10. BLA graduates should be able to effectively communicate design ideas using appropriate methods and techniques (to clients, the public, and contractors), from concept development through construction documentation.</td>
<td>CLL 190, CLL 205, CLL 290, CLL 410, LSA 182, LSA 226, LSA 227, LSA 300, LSA 326, LSA 327, LSA 410, LSA 422, LSA 423, LSA 433, LSA 460, LSA 470</td>
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<td>11. BLA graduates should be both aware of, and comfortable adhering to the ethical standards of the profession of landscape architecture.</td>
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<td>12. BLA graduates, upon entering into professional work, should value the interests of the communities in which they practice, and society as a whole, as well as their individual clients.</td>
<td>EST 200, LSA 220, LSA 226, LSA 312, LSA 326, LSA 327, LSA 422, LSA 423, LSA 451, LSA 455, LSA 460, LSA 470</td>
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<td>13. BLA graduates should feel a professional obligation to act as stewards of the land itself (considering all its ecological and biophysical complexity) in the course of their professional work.</td>
<td>EFB 101, EFB 320, GOL 105, LSA 220, LSA 311, LSA 226, LSA 227, LSA 326, LSA 327, LSA 422, LSA 460, LSA 470</td>
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Appendix B: Sample Assessment Rubric for Learning Outcome #1: Social, Behavioral, and Cultural Factors in Design

SUNY-ESF Department of Landscape Architecture Learning Outcomes Assessment
Undergraduate Knowledge, Skill, or Value area Outcome #1: Social, Behavioral, and Cultural Factors in Design

Learning Outcome(s):
BLA graduates should be able to consider, assess, and incorporate a broad range of social, cultural, and behavioral factors into design and planning of the land.

Assessment Method(s):
Student learning will be assessed using a cumulative portfolio of student work consisting of design and planning projects developed over the course of the program, and compiled as a requirement of LSA 455 – Professional Practice. An internal self-assessment by a collection of DLA faculty will be conducted annually using the objective specific rubric defined under “assessment criteria.” An independent external assessment performed by teams from ASLA-LAAB will be conducted in 5 year cycles.

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<th>Learning Objectives:</th>
<th>Course(s):</th>
<th>Assessment Criteria Rubric, including Illustrative Indicators:</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| 1. Demonstrate understanding and knowledge of human social and cultural behaviors through the development of site scale landscape architectural designs | LSA 212, LSA 326, LSA 327, LSA 422, LSA 423, LSA 460, LSA 470 | 1. Exceeding Standards: Projects convey clear understanding of the various social, behavioral, and cultural characteristics of a particular place, population, or community, including facility with complex multicultural or international settings. Projects reflect a strong command of concepts of human scale, defensible space, ergonomics, and the range of associated legal codes and standards (such as ADA). Projects illustrate exceptional facility with methods of user analysis and space programming, including evaluative techniques such as post occupancy evaluation and participatory methods for analysis and design.  
2. Meeting Standards: Projects convey clear understanding of the various social, behavioral, and cultural characteristics of a particular place, population, or community. Projects reflect a working knowledge of concepts of human scale, defensible space, ergonomics, and the range of associated legal codes and standards (such as ADA). Projects illustrate facility with methods of user analysis and space programming.  
3. Approaching Standards: Projects convey recognition of the various social, behavioral, and cultural characteristics of a particular place, population, or community. Projects reflect some knowledge of concepts of human scale, defensible space, ergonomics, and the range of associated legal codes and standards (such as ADA). Projects illustrate familiarity with methods of user analysis and space programming.  
4. Not Meeting Standards: Projects convey only basic rudiments of various social, behavioral, and cultural characteristics of a particular place, population, or community. Projects minimally incorporate concepts of human scale, defensible space, ergonomics, and the range of associated legal codes and standards (such as ADA). Projects do not illustrate a use of various methods of user analysis and space programming. |
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<th>Demonstrate understanding and knowledge of applicable human social and cultural behaviors through the development of community and/or regional scale plans and public policies</th>
<th>LSA 212, LSA 326, LSA 422, LSA 451, LSA 460, LSA 470</th>
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<td>1. <strong>Exceeding Standards</strong>: Projects convey clear understanding of the various social, behavioral, and cultural characteristics of a particular place, population, or community, including facility with complex multicultural or international settings. Projects reflect a strong command of concepts of imagability, placemaking, and the range of associated legal codes and standards (such as traditional or form based zoning). Projects illustrate exceptional facility with methods of demographic and associated geospatial analysis, and/or participatory methods for analysis and planning.</td>
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<td>2. <strong>Meeting Standards</strong>: Projects convey clear understanding of the various social, behavioral, and cultural characteristics of a particular place, population, or community. Projects reflect a working knowledge of concepts of imagability, placemaking, and the range of associated legal codes and standards (such as traditional or form based zoning). Projects illustrate facility with methods of demographic and associated geospatial analysis.</td>
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<td>3. <strong>Approaching Standards</strong>: Projects convey recognition of the various social, behavioral, and cultural characteristics of a particular place, population, or community. Projects reflect some knowledge of concepts of imagability, placemaking, and the range of associated legal codes and standards (such as traditional or form based zoning). Projects illustrate familiarity with methods of demographic and associated geospatial analysis.</td>
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<td>4. <strong>Not Meeting Standards</strong>: Projects convey only basic rudiments of various social, behavioral, and cultural characteristics of a particular place, population, or community. Projects minimally incorporate concepts of imagability, placemaking, and the range of associated legal codes and standards (such as traditional or form based zoning). Projects do not illustrate a use of various methods of demographic and associated geospatial analysis.</td>
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Appendix C: Off-Campus Program Description

Off-Campus Program

The Off-Campus Program has been a requirement of the undergraduate program since 1970. It is based upon the premise that a more insightful and mature graduate can be developed through exposure to and observation and study of physical and cultural environments other than one's own immediate and familiar environment. Expanded understanding, objectivity, and compassion toward human capabilities with regard to the potentials and limitations of the physical and socio-cultural environments and design form are central to the program.

The Off-Campus Program provides the opportunity for direct contact with different cultures, life styles, value systems, and physical environments which sharpen the individual student's awareness of the environment and culture in which the student will practice. The experience of each student allows the individual to engage environmental challenges with a heightened sense of perspective and a depth of historical awareness. Thus, there is a greater realization of the unique need for designed environments to be a product of the people, place, time, and value system concerned. The general purpose of the Off-Campus Program is to optimize and enhance the learning of professional knowledge and skills. The actual environment and community is the location of the learning experience and, thus, is a complement to the formal environments of the classroom. The potentials of the specific location are engaged by the student through an individual study which is pertinent to professional, educational and personal goals. Thus, the program more fully accommodates the individual's ideas, intentions, capabilities, and interests. Additionally, the personal capacities of self-confidence and motivation, inventiveness, and resourcefulness of the student are enhanced.

The program is a four-semester sequence which begins with LSA 424 - Preparation for Off-Campus in the fall of the 4th year, during which study locations are identified, student groups formed, and faculty advisors assigned. In the spring of the 4th year, LSA 425 - Orientation for Off-Campus Experiential Studio, each student, under the direction of their faculty advisor (usually 4-7 students per advisor), develops a study proposal that thoroughly documents, in written and graphic form, all aspects of the proposed study, including academic intention, study methodology and procedures, documentation, location research, physical arrangements, and scheduling. The program culminates in the 5th year, with LSA 460 - Off-Campus Design Thesis Studio, and LSA 461 – Off-Campus final Presentation Seminar.

There are three basic study types available to the students during the off-campus semester:

1. **Self-Described Study.** In the self-described study, the student identifies a study subject and location, and designs the complete study research method. This type of study has the following characteristics: 1) independence of activity; 2) wide choice of study subject; 3) wide choice of study locations; and 4) research/study experience.

2. **Directed Work Study.** In the directed work study, the student selects from a group of prearranged possibilities that have been described in terms of both location and general “work” responsibilities. This type of study has the following characteristics: 1) program and responsibilities planned; 2) greater possibilities for professional contacts; and 3) a “working” experience. The directed work study allows the student to work under supervised conditions in providing analysis and design services to communities, large or small, that otherwise might not be able to obtain such services.

3. **Faculty-Described Study.** In the faculty-described study, the student has the option to join a team working with a faculty advisor on a research project of particular interest to the faculty member. This type of study has the following characteristics: a) topical area generally defined, but flexible, according to student interests, b) research methodology described by faculty advisor, c) balance of theory and practical concerns, and d) possible publication of results.

The required three-semester sequence of the Off-Campus Program is unique and distinctive among undergraduate programs throughout the United States. It offers to the students a wealth of opportunities not normally available to students in landscape architecture.