



2023 OBEL AWARD Winner : Adaptation

Living Breakwaters

SCAPE Landscape Architecture



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Press release

'Living Breakwaters' wins the OBEL AWARD 2023

Oysters are design collaborators in a visionary green infrastructure project off the shore of Staten Island in New York. SCAPE and founder Kate Orff receive the fifth OBEL AWARD architecture prize for the radical breakwaters design and community and ecosystems-driven approach to adaptation.

Living Breakwaters, the 2023 OBEL AWARD winning project, is a half mile linear necklace of near-shore breakwaters along the south shore of Staten Island in New York. A mix of stones and carefully designed ecologically enhanced concrete units are placed strategically to calm the water, reduce erosion, and rebuild onshore beaches, but also to support oysters, fin fish, and other marine species. The oysters will form part of the design of the artificial reef formation. As they reproduce, the breakwaters grow denser and able to provide more protection of the shore.

Beyond the breakwaters, the project has involved nearly a decade of educational and engagement-related programming designed to advance community stewardship, citizen science, and recreation along the water's edge.

The Living Breakwaters concept was developed by a large, multi-disciplinary team led by SCAPE as part of a winning proposal for Rebuild By Design, the design competition launched by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) after Superstorm Sandy.

A visionary green infrastructure project, 'Living Breakwaters' reduces risk, revives ecologies, and connects people to the shoreline. Thus, the project tackles the full task of adaptation according to Chair of the OBEL AWARD jury, Martha Schwartz:

"Breakwaters is an ancient idea for how to protect shorelines – and the people who live close to them – by building underwater seawalls to defend a harbor or a beach from the force of waves. Kate has designed an extraordinary, modern-day interpretation, the Living Breakwaters, which will not only protect humans and revitalize the coastline of New York City, but also restore lost marine biodiversity. This is a visionary project that tackles the full task of adaptation, and which has the capacity to inspire and to positively impact vulnerable shorelines worldwide."

*** The OBEL AWARD, which honours architectural contributions to people and planet, has chosen the project Living Breakwaters in New York as its fifth winner and the best response to 'adaptation' – the OBEL AWARD focus of 2023.**

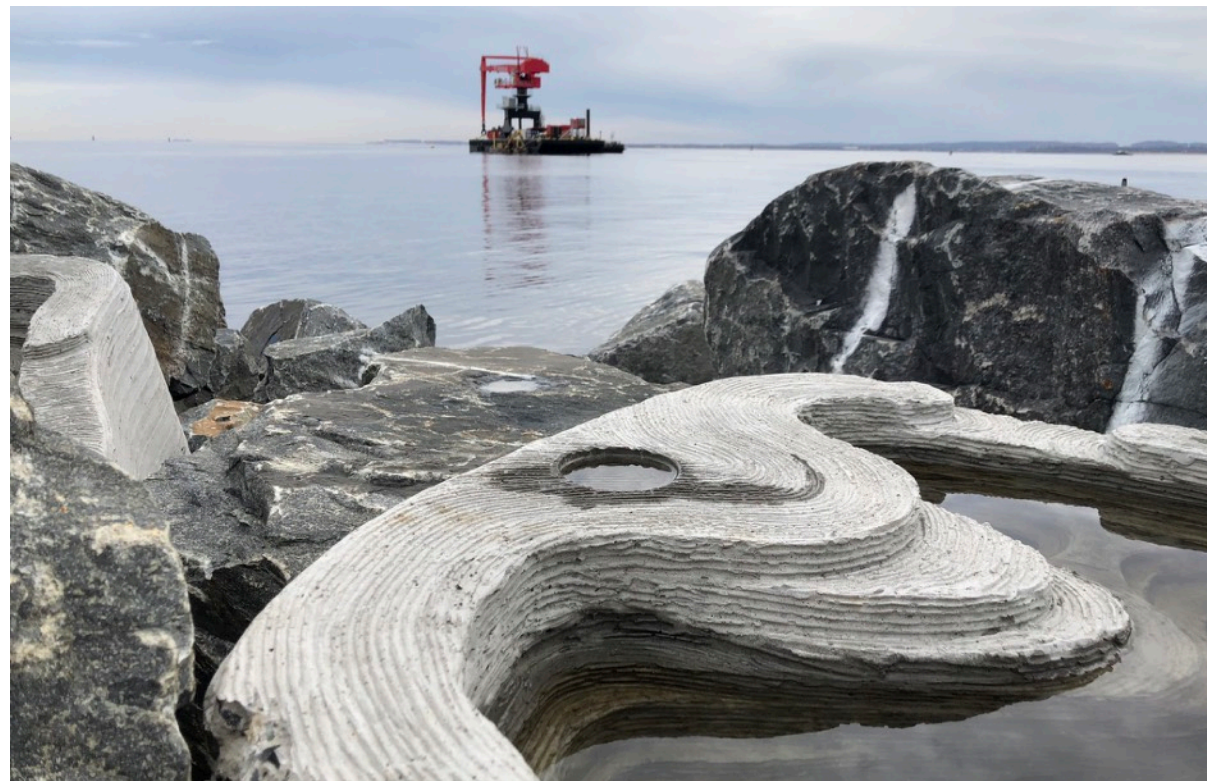
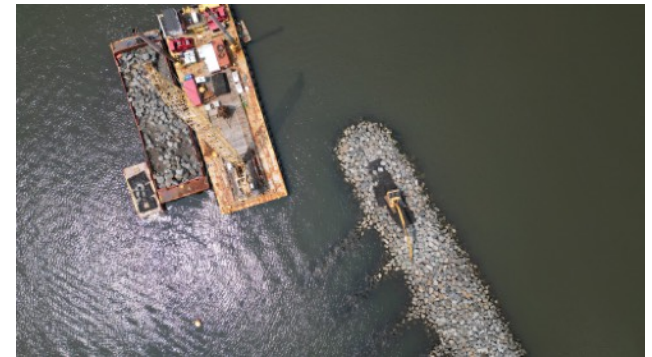
*** Living Breakwaters primarily consists of 2,400 linear feet of near-shore breakwaters – structures built of stone and ecologically-enhanced concrete with a variety of features such as "reef ridges" and "reef streets" that will provide diverse habitat space for marine species.**

*** The green infrastructure project is developed by landscape architecture and urban design studio SCAPE for Rebuild by Design – a design competition led by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) after Superstorm Sandy.**

On receiving the prize, Kate Orff, landscape architect and Founding Principal of SCAPE, says:

“Winning an architecture prize is really important for a project like this which involved so many different people working together with a shared purpose. It is a true encouragement for community members, elected officials, landscape architects, ecologists and engineers, to come together and develop coastal adaptation projects wherever they are. It’s also an acknowledgement of the importance of thinking about design at a holistic, planetary scale. Our protective natural systems are in various stages of decline globally, and in order to repair them, we have to think and design systemically to tie the pieces back together. And that is an incredibly bold, creative act. Hopefully, this award can emphasize this point : that nature is a matter of design now and that we have to work fast and work together.”

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Jury's statement

The ecological and social responsibilities of architecture have been a major focus of the Obel Award since its founding in 2019. The theme established by the jury for 2023 is **ADAPTATION**, which refers to the necessity and possibilities of architecture to adapt to a world in flux. The ecosystems, landscapes, and human structures and systems that were once intertwined with architectures of permanence can no longer be taken for granted. Instead, adaptation calls for an architecture that confronts uncertainty and acts through time so that both human and non-human life can continue to survive and even thrive.

The 2023 winning project, *Living Breakwater*, provides a real alternative to the walls, levees, and barriers so often built in our coastal waterways and oceans seeking to defend us from the ravages of human-induced climate change.

Living Breakwaters adheres to a different worldview in which natural systems are valued for their protective benefit. With the project, SCAPE and its founding principal Kate Orff put forward a drastically different concept of adaptation in the built environment that operates on several scales, increasing both physical, ecological, and social resilience, and which activates both human and non-human life in the design process.

The physical design of Living Breakwaters is an ingenious mix of natural and carefully modelled artificial elements that mimic naturally occurring reef formations in order to support marine life. It is a strongly science-based approach, an attempt to design to stimulate and collaborate with nature. With time, oysters and other underwater organisms will adhere to the designed structures and strengthen them and their ability to protect the shore, thus blurring the lines between nature and design.

Living Breakwaters also acknowledges that climate adaptation requires people to be on board. Humans have an active role in the adaptation process in Living Breakwaters, and Kate and her team are especially adept at motivating people and communities to become stewards of their local environment.

Architecture must recognise its ecological and social responsibilities. Living Breakwaters does exactly that. As such, this relatively low-cost, low-tech response provides a seminal example of how to design not against but with nature in adapting to the changes that lie ahead.

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2023 Jury Members:

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Martha Schwartz (chair of the jury)
MARTHA SCHWARTZ PARTNERS

Kjetil Trædal Thorsen
SNØHETTA

XU Tiantian
DNA _DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE

Dr. Wilhelm Vossenkuhl
Prof. em. Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

Sumayya Vally
COUNTERSPACE

Louis Becker
HENNING LARSEN ARCHITECTS

Aric Chen
NIEUWE INSTITUUT

The Project

Living Breakwaters is a post-Sandy project off the South Shore of Staten Island designed to break waves, reduce (and eventually reverse) erosion of the shoreline, and provide a range of habitat spaces for oysters, fin fish, and other marine species.

Living Breakwaters primarily consists of 2,400 linear feet of near-shore breakwaters—structures built of stone and ecologically-enhanced concrete with a variety of features such as “reef ridges” and “reef streets” that will provide diverse habitat space for marine species.

Beyond the breakwaters, the project has involved nearly a decade of educational and engagement-related programming designed to advance community stewardship, citizen science, and recreation along the water’s edge.

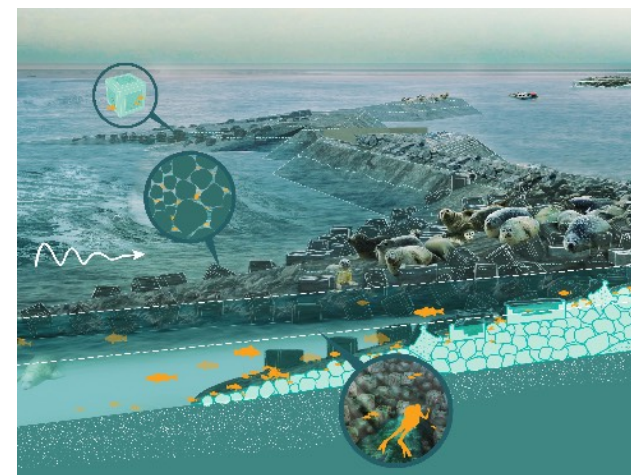
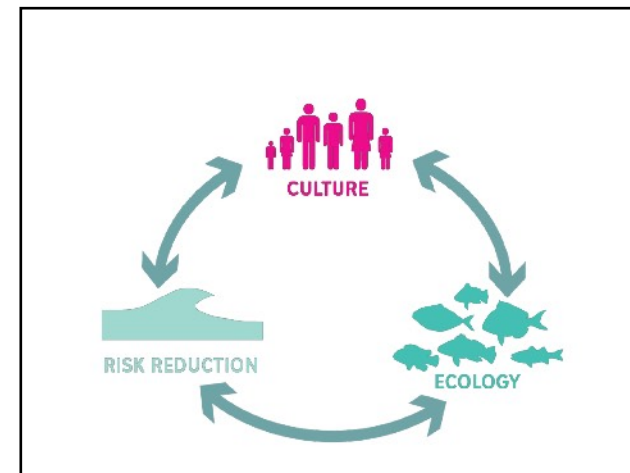
The project was initially developed by a SCAPE-led team for Rebuild By Design—a design competition led by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) after Superstorm Sandy. The project’s implementation is led by the NYS Office of Resilient Homes and Communities (RHC). The project is expected to be completed in 2024.

The “Breakwaters” are physical structures partially submerged in water, they function as a model for climate-adaptive green infrastructure:

- Reduce risk. Supported by years of iterative modeling and robust scientific analysis, the breakwaters are designed to attenuate wave energy, lessen the effects of coastal erosion, and generally reduce physical risk for on-shore communities.
- Enhance marine ecosystems and habitat. Incorporating a wide range of habitat-supporting features, the breakwaters are designed to foster biodiversity for a range of species.
- Promote social resilience. Beyond the breakwaters, the project has involved nearly a decade of educational and engagement-related programming designed to advance community stewardship, citizen science, and recreation along the water’s edge.

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* A more in depth version of the description on the project can be found at the [Downloads link](#)



Photographs



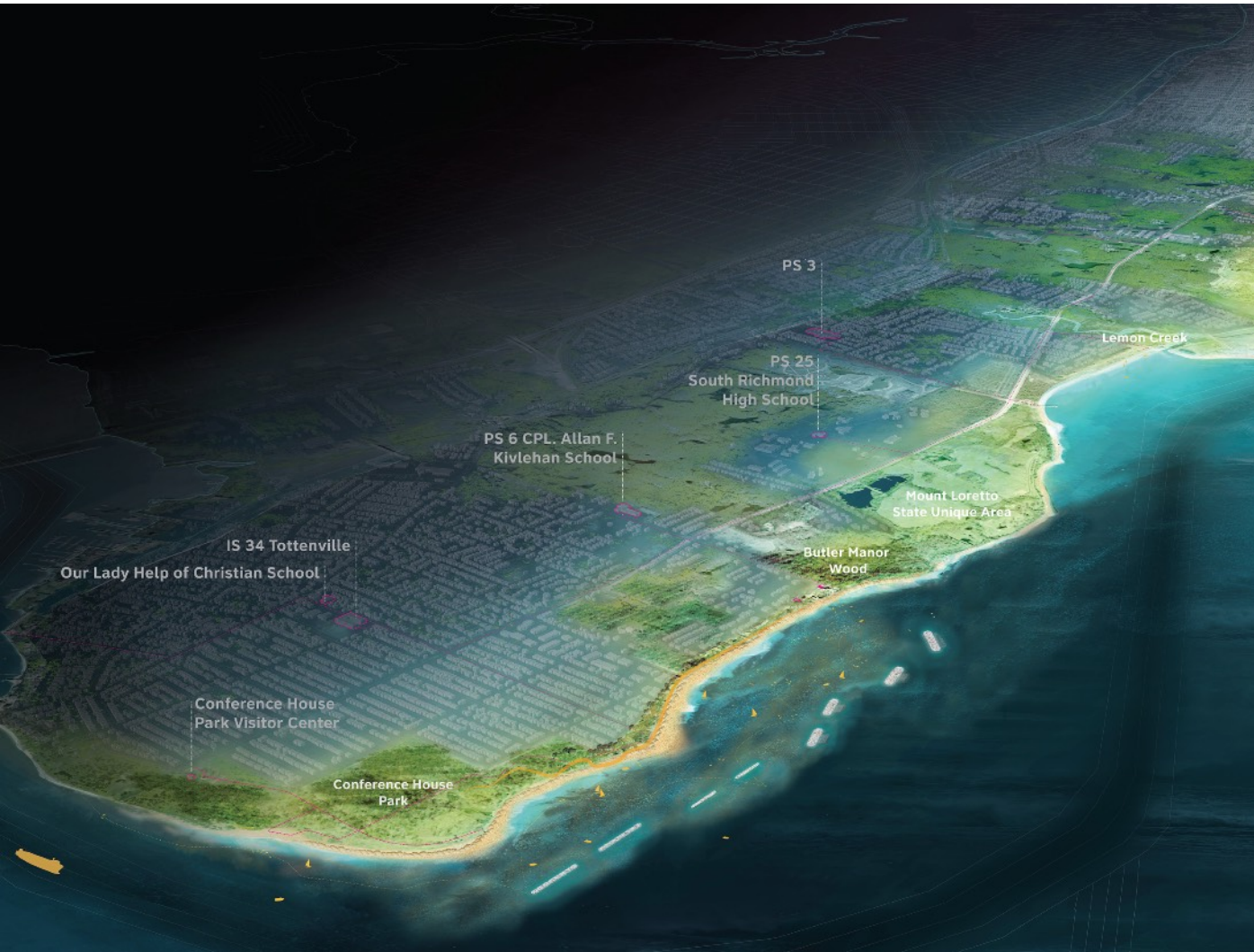
The breakwaters are designed to foster biodiversity for a range of species incorporating a wide range of habitat-supporting features.

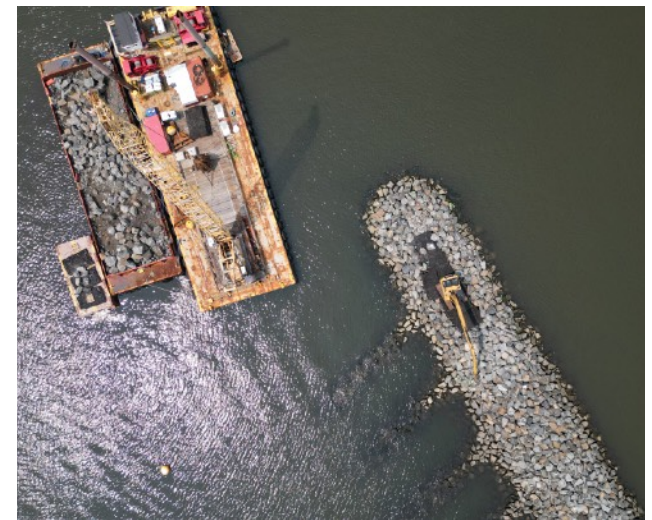


Living breakwaters has involved nearly a decade of educational and engagement-related programming.



Supported by years of iterative modeling and robust scientific analysis, the breakwaters are designed to attenuate wave energy, lessen the effects of coastal erosion, and reduce physical risk for on-shore communities.





Kate Orff Profile

Kate Orff, RLA, FASLA, is the Founding Principal of SCAPE. As the first-ever landscape architect to receive the MacArthur Foundation’s prestigious ‘Genius’ Fellowship in 2017, Orff has led a vanguard movement across the design fields to address sweeping 21st century challenges in social and environmental justice through projects, research, activism, and publications.

In 2023, Kate was named to the TIME100 Most Influential People in the world, as the first landscape architect to ever be included on the list. In 2019, she was elevated to the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) Council of Fellows—one of the highest honors bestowed on landscape architects practicing in the U.S. She currently sits on the Commission on Accelerating Climate Action for the American Academy of Arts & Sciences. In 2019, she accepted a National Design Award from the Cooper Hewitt, National Design Museum, on behalf of SCAPE, and was named a Hero of the Harbor by the Waterfront Alliance. She was a 2012 United States Artist Fellow, dubbed an Elle “Planet Fixer,” and has been profiled and interviewed extensively for publications including The New Yorker, The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Economist, National Geographic and more.

Orff graduated with a Bachelor’s in Political and Social Thought from the University of Virginia with Distinction and earned a Master’s in Landscape Architecture from the Graduate School of Design (GSD) at Harvard University. She is also the Director of the Urban Design Program, Co-Director of the Center for Resilient Cities and Landscapes (CRCL), and Professor at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation (GSAPP).



*“We cannot assume that somehow nature will just take its course and come back. Nature is a matter of design now,”
_Kate Orff*

* A Kate Orff interview/ quotes about the project can be found in the [Downloads link](#)

SCAPE Profile

SCAPE is a landscape architecture and urban design practice headquartered in New York with offices in New Orleans and San Francisco. We design and advocate for the ecologically restorative and socially engaged landscapes, urban environments, and natural infrastructure of the future.

Our staff of over 70 individuals includes landscape architects, urban planners, architects, ecological designers, horticulturists, and community engagement professionals—and a deep bench of technical expertise related to construction, regulation and agency review. We work across disciplines, collaborating with architects, developers, engineers, foundations, agencies, institutions, and grassroots environmental justice and community groups on projects across scales.

We plan, design, and build parks, waterfronts, plazas, master plans and urban frameworks, campuses, educational and cultural landscapes, greenways and multimodal trails, streetscapes, on-structure and interior landscapes, public libraries, wayfinding and interpretative signage, and more. We also communicate the transformative potential of landscapes through publications, exhibitions, research, thought leadership,

and other initiatives. With a focus on excellence in construction and long-term performance, we translate complex visions into realizable actions and beautiful, legible, and equitable landscapes.

SCAPE's work and leadership has been honored with the highest awards in the design field—including several national and chapter ASLA, APA, AIA, and other professional awards; the 2019 National Design Award from the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum; and a National Planning Achievement Award from

the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 2017, Founding Principal Kate Orff became the first landscape architect to ever receive the prestigious 'Genius' Fellowship from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation; in 2019, she was inducted to the ASLA Council of Fellows.

The firm's collaborative leadership team includes Kate Orff, FASLA, RLA, Founding Principal; Gena Wirth, RLA, Design Principal; Alexis C. Landes, Managing Principal; John Donnelly, RLA, Technical Principal; and Pippa Brashear, RLA, Resilience Principal. SCAPE was founded in New York in 2007.

website: <https://www.scapestudio.com/>

Living Breakwaters Team

CLIENT

NYS Office of Resilient Homes and Communities (RHC)

COLLABORATORS

COWI (Design Team)

Arcadis (Design Team)

SeArc Ecological Marine Consulting (Design Team)

WSP (Design Team)

MFS Engineers (Design Team)

Prudent Engineering (Design Team)

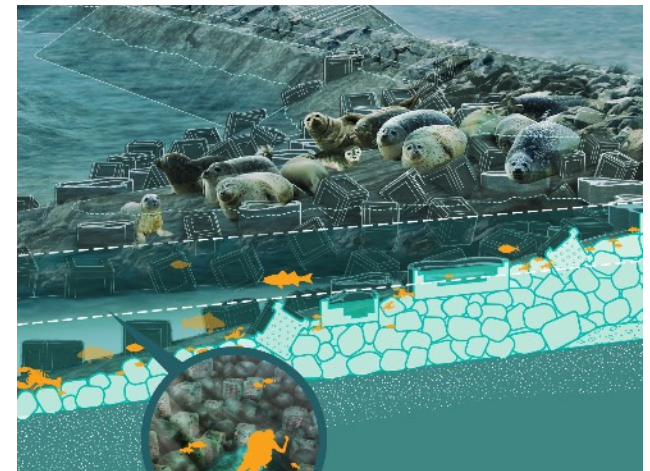
The Billion Oyster Project (Engagement)

Weeks Marine (Construction Contractor)

Ramboll (Construction Management)

Baird (Construction Management)

AKRF (Environmental Review & Permitting)



About the OBEL AWARD

The OBEL AWARD is an international prize for architectural achievement presented annually by the Henrik Frode Obel Foundation, founded by Henrik Frode Obel (1942-2014).

The aim of the award is to honour recent and outstanding architectural contributions to human development all over the world – architectural contributions considered broadly as any contribution that helps change our physical, designed environment for the common good. The award is given to works or projects from the past five years, and the winner receives EUR 100,000 and a trophy created by a leading artist.

Each year, the OBEL AWARD jury establishes a particular focus for the prize for the year, always keeping in mind the constant overall goals of the award. In 2023, the focus is: **adaptation**.



The OBEL AWARD trophy
created by Tomás Saraceno

Previous awardees

Each year, the jury sets a focus - an important challenge- and awards a potential solution. This year focus is Adaptation.

Year	Focus	Project	
2022	Emissions	SERATECH	a technique to produce carbon-neutral concrete by <i>Seratech</i> .
2021	Cities	15 MINUTE CITY	a global urban strategy by <i>Professor Carlos Moreno</i> .
2020	Mending	ANANDALOY	a community building in Bangladesh by <i>Anna Heringer</i> .
2019	Well-being	WATER GARDEN	a designed forestscape in Japan by <i>Junya Ishigami</i> .

2023 Award ceremony

The award ceremony will take place at the Sydney Opera House on 21 October 2023. The winner will receive a prize sum of EUR 100,000 and a unique work of art by artist Tomás Saraceno as a trophy.

Sydney Opera House is built upon Tubowgule, Gadigal country, so the Henrik F. Obel Foundation would like to acknowledge the Gadigal, the Traditional Custodians of this land, and pay our respects to its Elders, past and present.

Henrik F. Obel was a great admirer of Jørn Utzon and saw how architecture, and in particular Utzon's work, can act as a lingua franca – a common language for people to connect across barriers, be it generational, ethnic, political, gender, social, cultural, language or other obstacles to inter-human relations.

We are most grateful and honoured to be able host our fifth OBEL AWARD ceremony at this extraordinary site.

More info and materials

Press kit (including photos, videos, texts, etc.)

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/14i8u8v2yeo4ofs/AADC5f8E45CmCgTHNNCKXq6Ka?dl=0>

Contact information

Winner Kate Orff as well as the OBEL AWARD jury members are available for online/video conference/ phone interviews by appointment through:

Edgar Gonzalez, acting Communication Officer at the OBEL AWARD: comm@obelaward.org +34 657820616.

The OBEL AWARD

Website: <https://obelaward.org/>

Instagram: [@obelaward](https://www.instagram.com/obelaward)

Linkedin: [OBEL AWARD](https://www.linkedin.com/company/obelaward)