Balancing Innovation and Ethics: AI in Landscape Architecture

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

CLARB

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3:00 – 4:00 p.m. ET

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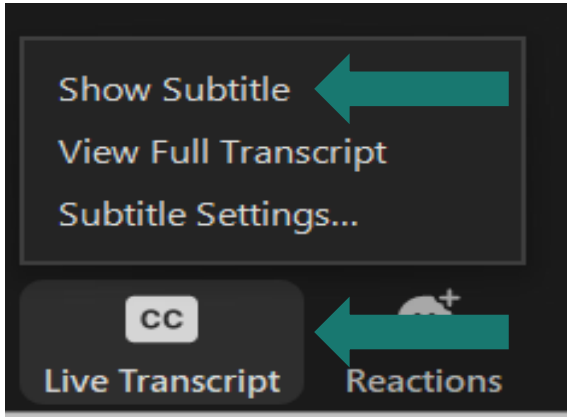

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Today’s presenter

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Balancing Innovation and Ethics

AI in Landscape Architecture and the Professional World

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Welcome!

Today's agenda:

- Why Now?
- What is AI (and GenAI)?
- Benefits, Risks, and Opportunities
- Best Practices for AI

Ask questions and share thoughts!

AI is a tool. Your leadership will determine how it impacts your work and your profession.

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Why This Conversation Matters Now

- AI tools are entering everyday professional workflows
- Generative AI is reshaping drafting, analysis, and design exploration
- Regulatory frameworks are evolving - but slowly
- Best practices are emerging now
- Certifications will reflect both regulatory requirements and best practices
- Professional duties remain - and evolve

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What Is AI (and GenAI)?

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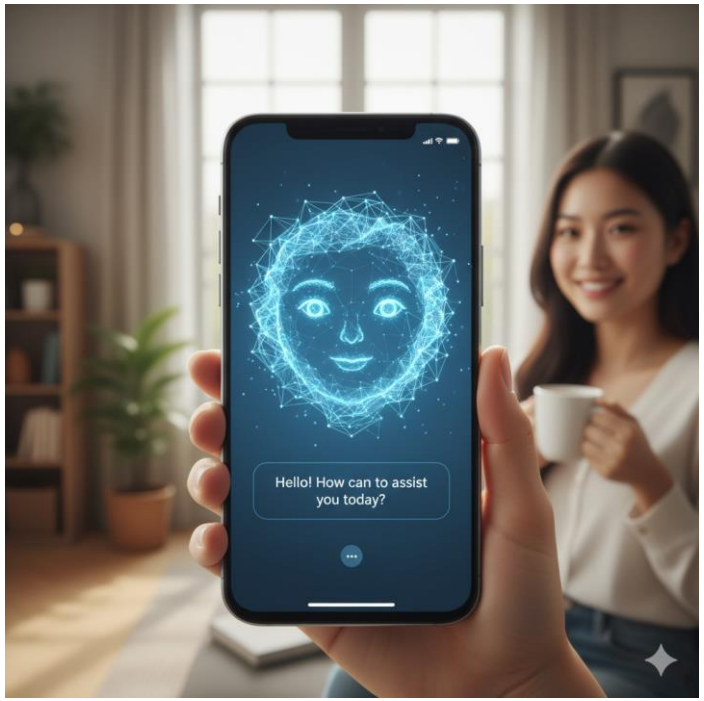
The Evolution of AI



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Definition of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

- Artificial Intelligence (AI) is using computers to:
  - Make decisions and predictions, answer questions, and solve problems using data.
  - Complete tasks that require creativity or higher-order cognitive skills when done by humans.

An AI system is a machine-based system that is capable of influencing the environment by producing an output (predictions, recommendations or decisions) for a given set of objectives.

- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

An engineered or machine-based system that can, for a given set of objectives, generate outputs such as predictions, recommendations, or decisions influencing real or virtual environments. AI systems are designed to operate with varying levels of autonomy.

- National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST)

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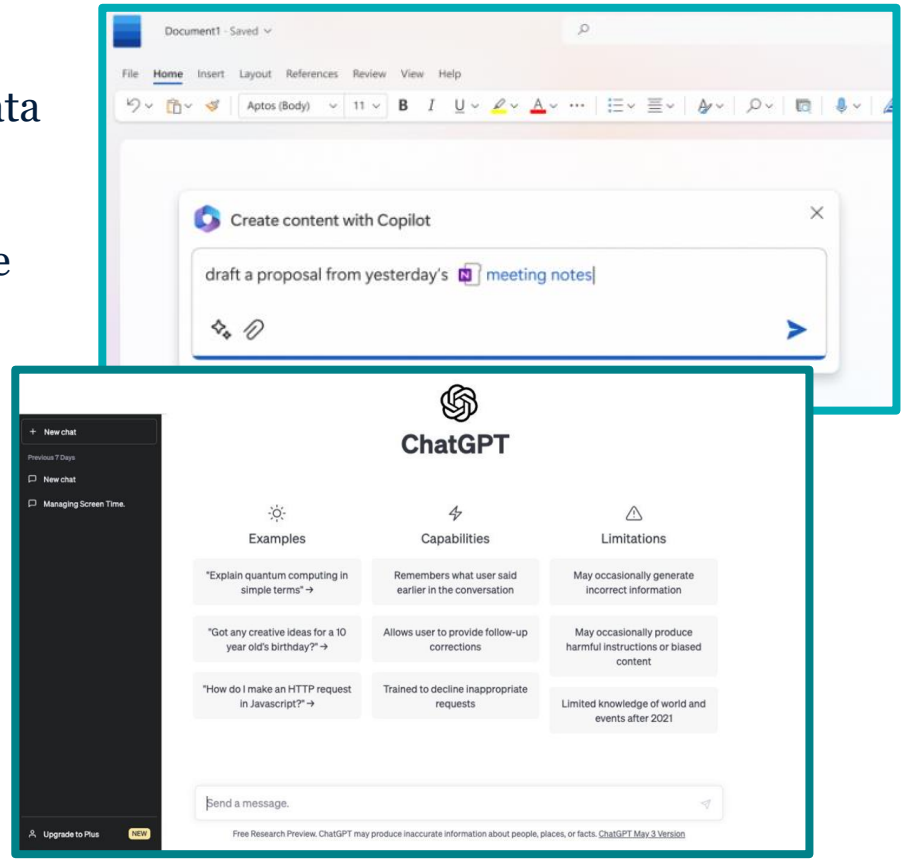
No, Really, What is (Generative) AI?

- Software that can create new content (such as text, images, audio, or code) from patterns in existing data.
- Generative AI:
  - Is trained on vast collections of text, images, or other data
  - Identifies statistical patterns in how information is structured
  - Uses those patterns to generate new outputs in response to a prompt
- Generative AI does not:
  - Understand meaning the way humans do
  - Know whether something is true or false
  - Have intent, judgment, or awareness
  - Understand context (mostly)



Generative AI produces outputs that sound or look plausible because they follow learned patterns, not because they are accurate or reasoned conclusions.

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What's Actually Happening When I Use AI?

- Define your input
  - Set goal and context
  - Provide information and rules
  - Give instructions
- AI processes the request
  - Uses patterns from prior training
  - Predicts useful responses based on input
- Output is generated
  - Draft or recommendation
- Iteration
  - Refine instructions or followup
  - Uses entire conversation, and may use user memory

How Can AI Help?

Opportunities

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How is AI Being Used?

Generally…

- Document drafting and processing
- Workflow optimization
- Data entry
- Report generation
- Invoice processing
- Fraud and cybersecurity protection
- Image analysis
- Data analytics (including predictive)
- Marketing and advertising
- Customer service
- Research and discovery

In landscape architecture…

- Site, precedent, and code support for projects
- Generative concept exploration and iteration
- Generative design
- Environmental analysis and scenario modeling
- Planting design and ecology
- Scheduling and staffing
- Client communications and email drafting
- Summarization and document digestion
- Proposal and boilerplate generation
- Internal workflow automation

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Where AI Adds Value

AI tools are great for:

- Repetitive, high-volume tasks
- Pattern recognition at scale
- Drafting and first-pass analysis
- Decision support with clear constraints and safeguards

AI struggles with:

- Ambiguous goals
- Context-based prompts
- Moral, legal, or professional judgment
- Novel situations with no precedent
- High-stakes decisions without human review

When you use AI…

- Define your goal, audience, and constraints
- Provide context and inputs (carefully)
- System predicts an output based on learned patterns
- You iterate—refine prompts, verify, and edit
- Human oversight is continuous—not optional

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Where AI Adds Value (and Where It Doesn't)

Strong at:

- Repetitive tasks
- Pattern recognition at scale
- First drafts
- Scenario exploration

Weak at:

- Ambiguous goals
- Context-heavy judgment
- Ethics
- Novel edge cases

High-stakes decisions require human review and sign-off

Benefits, Risks, and Opportunities

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Opportunities

Design innovation

- New sources of inspiration and precedent exploration
- Scenario modeling to test assumptions
- Generative support for early-phase ideation
- Improved visualization and communication with stakeholders

Business advantages

- Cost savings through process efficiency
- Scalability of services and responsiveness to clients
- Competitive differentiation in proposals and delivery
- Potential for new service offerings (with guardrails)

Professional growth

- Better cross-disciplinary collaboration (data, engineering, planning)
- Stronger strategic advising to clients
- Improved internal training and knowledge management
- AI literacy becomes a leadership competency

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Intellectual Property and AI

- Who owns AI-generated designs or text?
- Is the output derivative of protected works?
- Are you inadvertently reusing proprietary patterns?
- What do you promise clients about originality?

For design disciplines…

- Design outputs may implicate copyright and trade dress
- Some AI outputs may not qualify for copyright protection
- If you can’t own it, you may not be able to protect it
- Document human contribution and authorship decisions

Use care with AI when using or creating content that may be protected

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Data and AI

Privacy

- AI tools are data-driven, making data leakage a real risk for unapproved or non-enterprise tools
- Consider carefully before using sensitive or confidential information in AI tools or platforms
- Some tools and platforms are designed with protections for this data, others are not

Data Security

- Sensitive project data can leak through tools without the right settings, protections, or contracts
- Third-party integrations can expand data exposure and attack surface

Confidentiality

- Confidential client information may be mishandled
- Ambiguous terms regarding reuse and ownership of inputs and outputs

Be cautious about the tools you use, and the data you input

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Bias and Fairness

Bias and Fairness

- Training data reflects societal inequities
- Outputs can embed cultural, geographic, and demographic bias
- Risk of unequal representation in community-facing work
- Mitigation: test outputs, diversify inputs, and apply human review

Accuracy and Reliability

- Hallucinated facts, fabricated citations, made up elements
- Misapplied codes, standards, or site constraints
- Impossible configurations
- Plausible but incorrect analysis
- Human oversight is needed

Stay alert for signs that the tool is creating inappropriate outputs

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Human Risks

Overreliance on AI

- Erosion of core professional skills
- Automation bias (believing the tool because it sounds confident)
- Reduction of independent critique and peer review

Understanding AI Tools

- How AI tools work isn't intuitive, and not understanding how to work with them can create risks
- Responsible AI use improves with shared learning
- Talk about how you're using AI tools, and share best practices with each other

Keep humans in the loop, stay curious and skeptical

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Ethics Considerations

Professional Duties

- Public health, safety, and welfare remain the core obligation
- Professional integrity is still the standard
- AI does not shift accountability away from the licensee
- Tools can assist, but cannot be the responsible party

Transparency

- Consider disclosure for client-facing deliverables or public materials
- Be prepared to explain process and safeguards
- Transparency protects trust and reduces surprise risk

Human Oversight

- AI increases the need for careful review and human oversight
- Document key decisions and rationales
- AI and AI companies do not have liability - you do

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Best Practices for AI

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Innovation Brings Risk and Opportunity

We are all navigating:

- Legal uncertainty
- Ethical ambiguity
- Governance and quality-control challenges
- Evolving best practices

But these challenges are not insurmountable!

- AI governance is a leadership issue, not (only) an IT issue
- Leaders set tone, guardrails, and expectations
- Encourage experimentation within constraints
- Model responsible adoption and review discipline

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Choose the Right Tool

AI tools are not all the same, even though they appear similar. Understand what the tool is designed to do, and whether it is a good fit for the problem you are trying to solve.

- AI systems are advanced analytics, and lack intuition, experience, and creativity. Understand what each tool is intended to accomplish and ensure that tasks are appropriate to this design and training. Is the tool for writing, data analysis, automation, creative work, or decision support?
- Each tool has advantages and limitations. Many tools, like CoPilot, have broadly scoped capabilities. These tools can be less precise and predictable than more narrowly scoped tools.
- Don’t assume the marketing is accurate. We hear wildly inflated claims about what these tools do, so evaluate the tool for a given task and use any company guidance and your own judgement about whether it is appropriate.
- Evaluate the tool on tasks that you understand well, so that you can assess the appropriateness of the output.

Augment Human Judgment

Generative AI work is not the same as human work. These tools can support humans to increase output and efficiency – but they are software and must be treated differently.

- Use AI to assist in analysis and insights, but do not use it to make decisions.
- Monitor AI outputs for hallucinations, data leakage, and misleading or inaccurate information.
- Always review, validate, and contextualize any claims, facts, and information in AI output.
- AI does not bear responsibility – you do. Always ensure ethical compliance in AI output.

Consider an AI Governance Framework

- Clear policies on permitted uses
- Tool vetting and approval process
- Data governance and confidentiality controls
- Risk-based approval structure
- Expectations for disclosure and transparency
- Training and continuous improvement

As an example…

- Low risk: internal drafting, brainstorming, working with public data
- Moderate risk: client-facing materials, routine workflows, aggregated datasets
- High risk: safety analysis, regulatory submissions, decisions affecting licensure outcomes

Consider Documentation and Disclosure

- Track what data was input (and why it was appropriate)
- Capture review steps and who approved
- Retain key outputs that informed decisions
- Consider disclosure for client-facing deliverables
- Be prepared to explain process and safeguards

As an example…

- Record the tools used for designs
- Tell colleagues how you used tools when they review
- Track which elements of a design have been AI-aided

Adopt Thoughtfully, Not Reactively

- Avoid tool sprawl and marketing-driven decisions
- Start with well-defined use cases
- Pilot with guardrails and measurable outcomes
- Update policies as tools and risks evolve

As an example:

- Run pilots with feedback mechanisms
- Set guidelines around appropriate use
- Stay curious and skeptical

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Educate Teams

- Build baseline AI literacy across roles
- Run scenario-based ethics discussions
- Share examples of good and bad outputs
- Create a feedback loop for continuous learning

As an example:

- Presentations - like this!
- Team discussions and information sharing

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Before Using AI…

- Is this task appropriate for AI?
- Am I using the right tool? If necessary, has it been approved by my organization or client?
- What kind of data do I need to use? Is it sensitive or confidential data?
- Can I independently verify the output?
- Am I comfortable disclosing this use?

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Innovation Brings Risk and Opportunity

We are all navigating:

- Legal uncertainty
- Ethical ambiguity
- Governance and quality-control challenges
- Evolving best practices

But these challenges are not insurmountable.

Remember…

- AI supports your work; you remain accountable
- You need to use your professional judgement
- Diligence increases with risk
- Data protection (personal, confidential, sensitive) is critical
- Transparency and review are needed
- When unsure, ask early!

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AI is a tool. Your leadership will determine how it impacts your work and your profession.

And now: please ask your questions!

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Webinar Follow-Up

Provide your feedback:

Complete the CE quiz:

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Upcoming events

ASLA + CLARB Landscape Architecture Licensure Spring Summit

- March 18
- 3 p.m. ET
- ASLA and CLARB members

Spring 2026 Exam Basics and Q&A

- March 19
- 3 p.m. ET
- Exam candidates

ICOR Practice Overlap Guidance: Clarifying Overlapping Practice Between Design Professions

- March 25
- 3 p.m. ET
- CLARB Record Holders

March ProSeries Course

- March 31
- 3 p.m. ET
- CLARB Record Holders

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