



# Dreaming and building: Margot Chiuten and Chiuten Trowbridge Landscape Architects

By Michelle Sutton

**ABOVE:** Aerial view of the Buffalo Waterfront Lakeside Complex at Outer Harbor, one of the most fulfilling projects Margot has worked on to date. Photo used with permission of Buffalo Waterfront Lakeside Complex ([buffalowaterfront.com/venue/lakeside-at-outer-harbor](http://buffalowaterfront.com/venue/lakeside-at-outer-harbor)).

**M**argot Chiuten of Chiuten Trowbridge Landscape Architects ([ctlandarch.com](http://ctlandarch.com)) grew up in the Bronx around limited green space. She was drawn to nature through hiking, backpacking, and rock climbing in high school, and through mountain biking on greenways in New York City. She went to college where she knew the natural beauty would be exceptional—at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

“I could see myself living there afterwards,” she says. “Ithaca had what I liked about big cities, but in a college town setting. It was the kind of place I envisioned when I was growing up.”

Chiuten started out college as a biology major, but by her junior year, she knew she needed to make a big change. She took a year off from school, volunteering for

Habitat for Humanity and doing gardening work for a friend’s mom who knew Peter Trowbridge of the Cornell University landscape architecture (LA) department.

“My friend’s mom had an intuition that LA could be a good fit for me, so she set up a meeting for Peter and me, which was pivotal. The smaller class sizes, studio time, and emphasis on collaborative group work appealed to me,” Chiuten says. “My time in the program was super exciting, and at some point I knew I wanted to work with Peter. I really liked that his approach combined the highest-level design expertise with practical knowledge of construction so that he could oversee the actualization of the design concepts. Dreaming and building, both.”

While in the LA program, Chiuten was hired by what became the Ithaca Children’s Garden after she did a

“  
I like the  
challenge of  
bigger projects,  
and I’ve always  
flourished being  
part of a team.  
”



community design studio project for them through school.

Trowbridge & Wolf LLP also hired Chiuten first as an intern doing mostly computer-aided design (CAD) work and eventually, after she earned her certification, they hired her as an LA. In fact, her work there had expanded so much that she had to take a day off work to go to her Cornell graduation. The practice expanded and ultimately, she was promoted to senior LA with Trowbridge Wolf Michaels Landscape Architects LLP.

#### BUFFALO OUTER HARBOR

One of the most exciting projects Chiuten worked on was the ongoing development of the Buffalo Outer Harbor, something she was 15 years into when Trowbridge Wolf Michaels Landscape Architects LLP was bought by an engineering firm. “The Buffalo Outer Harbor project was very hard to give up, because I’d invested so much in it and could see many phases of implementation of a 20-million-dollar project come to fruition,” she says.

One of the most memorable Outer Harbor projects Chiuten worked on was the in-city Lakeside Complex Bike Park, which has three mountain bike tracks of varying difficulty, beautiful landscaping and native habitat restoration, expansive views of Lake Erie, food trucks, and a lawn for events. Chiuten took her son, Keane (11) to mountain bike there, which was meaningful for her on multiple levels. “That was pretty darn cool,” she says.

#### OTHER WORK

Besides the multi-phase work she did on the Outer Harbor, Chiuten has designed more than 120 projects for 30 higher educational institutions; numerous streetscapes and Complete Streets projects; and several infrastructure reclamation projects that transformed aging and disused structures into pedestrian spaces.

Chiuten and Trowbridge’s longtime collaboration continues in a new form. In December of 2021, they signed the papers to establish Chiuten Trowbridge Landscape Architects, and shortly thereafter they brought on landscape architect Ryan Wright, who had been their

colleague in earlier times. Chiuten would like to grow her new firm so that it can take on projects as substantial as the Buffalo Outer Harbor had been. “I like the challenge of bigger projects, and I’ve always flourished being part of a team,” she says.

#### WHERE TO NOW

What excites Chiuten most about her field right now? “Landscape Architecture is moving toward more native landscapes, toward addressing whole ecosystems. Everything is about resiliency now. I’m very interested in bringing back native species at all levels; the challenge is, how do we make native and natural landscape design legible to people, while also adjusting the viewer’s sense of aesthetics? How do we address the preconceived notions people may have about how a native or natural planting or meadow is going to look?” To aid her practice, Chiuten is cultivating a meadow jointly with her neighbor and taking copious notes on what works and what doesn’t.

Another area of interest and practice for her is designing for resiliency to extreme weather events. Working on the Buffalo Outer Harbor, she learned about the very specific phenomenon of *seiche* events. According to the National Ocean Service,

Seiches are typically caused when strong winds and rapid changes in atmospheric pressure push water from one end of a body of water to the other. When the wind stops, the water rebounds to the other side of the enclosed area. The water then continues to oscillate back and forth for hours or even days.

Lake Erie is known for seiches, especially when strong winds blow from southwest to northeast. In 1844, a 22-foot seiche breached a 14-foot-high sea wall killing 78 people and damming the ice to the extent that Niagara Falls temporarily stopped flowing. As recently as 2008, strong winds created waves 12 to 16 feet high in Lake Erie, leading to flooding near Buffalo, New York.

**ABOVE:** Keane (11) tries out the Lakeside Complex Bike Park on the Buffalo Waterfront. Photo courtesy Margot Chiuten



**ABOVE:** (from left) Shawna, Margot, Keane, Graem, and Emerson. Photo Courtesy Margot Chiuten

Combined with intense rain events, seiches cause damaging flooding events on the Buffalo Outer Harbor waterfront, so local building codes have changed to require homes and other structures be elevated. Chiuten worked on extensive plans for using topography, structures, and plant selection to better

prepare the landscape for seiches. She says, “The next phase was going out to bid as I was leaving my former employer; it was in an area repeatedly hammered by seiche events.” She laments not being able to see those plans through to implementation.

Much of Chiuten Trowbridge’s current work is focused on higher education projects. A post-COVID world, combined with changing student demographics, is creating increased pressure on colleges and universities to attract and retain student populations. One result is that many campuses are more focused on their outdoor spaces than ever. The desire to improve overall campus appearance is now bolstered by a need to create outdoor spaces for learning, gathering, and informal social interaction. An underlying focus is to support student mental health and

well-being, whether through athletics and recreational sports, or through contemplative places for respite and healing.

#### AT HOME

Life bubbles over for Chiuten, her wife, Shawna Black (chair of the Tompkins County Legislature), and their three kids. The eldest, Graem (18) is in the process of deciding where to go to college; Chiuten says that of the three kids, her eldest is the most sensitive to landscape aesthetics. Right now Graem is favoring Colgate or Smith in part because the campuses are so beautiful. She wants to study environmental science; she is also a rower and is looking for a good crew program to call home. “I’ll be happy for Graem to have that camaraderie and structure of being part of the crew team,” Chiuten says.

Chiuten and Black’s younger kids, Emerson (14) and Keane (11), are athletic like their big sister, but they are focused on travel hockey. Their league competition takes them to various cities including Pittsburgh, Boston, Washington DC, Philadelphia, and even Tampa, Florida. This exposure has opened their eyes to urban living, increased opportunities, and excitement. “I see them living in cities,” Chiuten says.

Michelle Sutton is a horticulturist, writer, and editor.

## Announcing the 13<sup>th</sup> Annual *Upstate Gardeners’ Journal* **Winter Photo Contest**

Enter online today.  
Contest ends April 1, 2023.

2022 Grand Prize Winner: “Hanging On” by Kim Anderson

Details online: [upstategardenersjournal.com/winter-photo-contest/](http://upstategardenersjournal.com/winter-photo-contest/)