



## Mary Anne Alabanza Akers (1959-Present)

Dean and Professor, Center for Built Environment &  
Infrastructure Studies

**Morgan State University**

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*"Working in the environmental field, you need to be aware of people's relationships with the environment...not just their consumption needs, but their health, spiritual, and cultural connections with natural and built environments. It is similarly important to consider these things within the context of sustainable economic development." Mary Anne Alabanza Akers, 2006.*

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### Overview

Dr. Mary Anne Alabanza Akers is dean and professor at Morgan State University, Center for the Built Environment and Infrastructure Studies. Her research interests include Urban Sustainability and Resiliency, Community Design, Design and Human Behavior, and Community-based Economic Development. She has won numerous awards including the 2015 Distinguished Alumni Award in Community Service and Educational Administration, 2013 American Society of Landscape Architects Maryland Chapter Planning Award, and 2007 Who's Who in the Asian American Community in Southeastern United States. Some of her selected publication are as follows:

- Determan, Jim, Mary Anne Akers, Isaac Williams, Christine Hohmann, Catherine Dunlop-Martin. "Learning space design for the future ethnically diverse American classroom". American Institute of Architecture, Washington, D.C. (2015).
- Akers, Mary Anne Alabanza. "Urban Streets Struggling to Survive: An Urban Design Solution" in Recent Researches in Sustainability, Architecture, and Structures. Proceedings for the World Scientific and Engineering Academy held in Baltimore, Maryland. December. (2013).
- Akers, Mary Anne Alabanza, Paul Voos, Dale Green. Heritage Tourism Development Plan for the Preston/Poplar Neck of the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Byway. Caroline County Office of Tourism, Maryland. (2012).
- Akers, Mary Anne Alabanza and Jonathan Van Geest. "Counting Matters: Point-in-Time Census Study for 2011". Report submitted to the City of Baltimore Mayor's Office. (2011, 2009).

- Akers, Mary Anne Alabanza, Jonathan Van Geest, Linda Loubert, Sidney Wong, Azza Kamal, Marvin Perry. "The Impact of the Baltimore Housing Resource Center: Report to the City of Baltimore Mayor's Office". (2008)

## Early Life and Education

Mary Anne Alabanza Akers describes her evolution into an environmental professional as gradual, but says that the natural world has always played a prominent role in her personal and professional life. She says that growing up in a mountain community in the Philippines “somehow strengthened [her] connection with nature and the environment” Although her educational background is in Sociology and Urban Planning, Alabanza always made an effort to connect issues she encountered in those disciplines to the environment. “Even when I was teaching Sociology, I was already linking the natural environment to people,” she says. “I would take my students on four-day-long trips to rural areas to live with farmers, and get first-hand experience with how it is to live close to the land.” Now an Associate Professor at the University of Georgia’s School of Environmental Design, Alabanza merges her interests in the natural and social worlds to develop a holistic concept of true sustainability.

Alabanza earned her undergraduate degree in sociology from the University of the Philippines, where she also taught and did research on indigenous farming cultures. She then worked for the Philippine National Housing Authority, researching slums and slum improvement, before becoming a community planner in a Philippine mining community. There, she looked for a sustainable solution to a community whose economic base had been depleted. “The environmental aspect came in because there was no gold left and the mines were shutting down,” she explains. “I had to develop sustainable plans to ensure that the community survived. So, with the people, we developed plans for creating compact communities in the mountains, utilizing indigenous house construction methods using local materials.” The project kindled Alabanza’s interest in urban planning, and she decided to pursue her Ph.D. in the urban planning at Michigan State University, where her father had also been educated. While completing her doctorate, she worked as a Project Assistant with Michigan State’s Center for Urban Affairs, and as the Executive Director of the Michigan Community Economic Development Corporation, where she examined issues of grassroots economic development in creating economically sustainable communities.

## Career

Alabanza joined the faculty at the University of Georgia in 1991, and is currently a professor at Morgan State University. At the University of Georgia she was a full-time instructor; her courses included Planning and Design, City Planning, and Ideas of Community. She has also overseen a number of senior projects and graduate theses. Alabanza says what she is doing now—teaching and working directly with communities—is the highlight of her career. She is also proud to have a track record of working with diverse communities on a variety of issues. “All my life I have been dealing with diversity,” she says. “Beginning in the Philippines, I worked a lot with poor people and ethnic minorities, and in Michigan I worked largely with African-American communities. Now, here in Georgia, I’m known through my writing and service learning projects for providing technical assistance to economically disadvantaged groups.”

## **Importance of Mentoring to Career**

Alabanza has benefited from the guidance of several mentors throughout her career, foremost among them her father, also a designer and urban planner. “He was one of the first people to ‘think outside the box’ in terms of design in the Philippines, and he was very sustainable in his designs,” Alabanza says. “That was a big influence on me.” She also credits her boss at the mining company, Mr. Amado Lagdameo, with showing her many “sustainable, indigenous practices that should be applied to comprehensive development.” Dr. Rex Lamore at Michigan State also helped her “discover and understand what grassroots economic development really is.” Alabanza says that mentoring is now one of the most rewarding aspects of her position; however, she notes that she has not had many opportunities to mentor minority students as there are very few in Landscape Architecture.

## **Advice to Young Professionals**

Alabanza encourages minority students interested in environmental careers to take a holistic approach to the environmental field and integrate the needs of diverse peoples and communities into their approach. “Build as much of a knowledge base about ‘the environment’ as you can,” she advises. “But at the same time, working in the environmental field, you also need to be aware of people’s relationships with the environment ...not just their consumption needs, but their health, spiritual, and cultural connections with natural and built environments. It is similarly important to consider these things within the context of sustainable economic development.”

## **For More Information**

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*This interview was conducted in 2015.*