

ROUNDTABLE REPORT:

Leaders in Landscape Architecture Assess the Profession

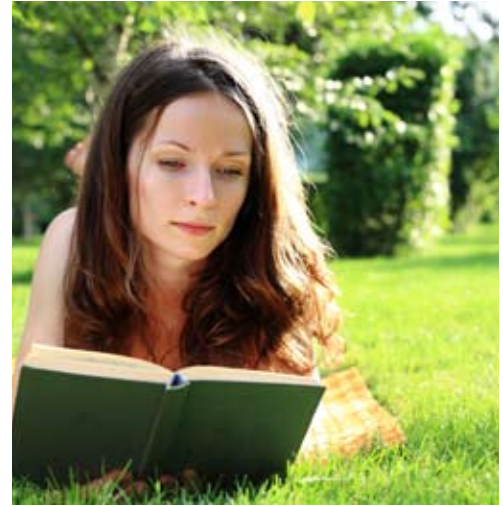
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Barbara Faga, Principal and Executive Vice President, AECOM

On May 11, 2010 twenty four leaders in landscape architecture gathered at the Elysian Hotel in Chicago for a moderated roundtable discussion sponsored by Landscape Forms and the Landscape Architecture Foundation. The purpose was to share ideas on how current economic realities are impacting landscape architecture practice, how firms are responding to the challenge, and how participants see the prospects for the profession. Guests came from fifteen states and all regions of the country, from small proprietor-led practices and large interdisciplinary firms. Hosts for the event were Bill Main, President, Landscape Forms and Barbara Deutsch, Executive Director, Landscape Architecture Foundation. The roundtable

was moderated by Edward Uhler, the Director of Chicago’s Millennium Park, who oversaw construction and completion of the widely celebrated 24-acre park, coordinating the efforts of numerous design teams, and acting as liaison to municipal agencies and the philanthropic community.

Asked to provide one word to describe the state of the profession today participants offered: “improving...stressful...challenging...hopeful...frustrating...sleep-deprived...optimistic...opportunistic...transitional...and...It’s the S word, but it’s not sustainable.”



Growing Competition/Shrinking Fees

Moderator Ed Uhlir jump-started the conversation by commiserating about the vastly increased competition landscape architects face in bidding on major public projects. That resonated for Deb Mitchell of JJR, Chicago, who declared, “We’ve all reflected over the past year and a half on what I’m going to call hyper-competition in the marketplace. It’s not just local competition or national competition, it’s global competition.” Other people in the room felt the pain. “Requests for proposals to 28 or 29 firms, double-digit short lists, people flying in from around the world for a single assignment. In terms of how much time and money is invested, I find the process to be abusive,” complained Ted Wolff of Wolff Landscape in Chicago. “The abuse is definitely happening,” added Doug Smith of EDSA, Ft. Lauderdale, who recounted his experiences submitting qualifications and pricing for public sector projects, being selected as a finalist, and then being told to resubmit the price proposal. As agencies receive stacks of proposals and the vetting process gets more convoluted, marketing costs for firms are soaring. Deb Mitchell said, “We’ve gotten a lot smarter and more strategic in our marketing. If you asked me to go after a Millennium Park opportunity this year, I probably would not do it because of the expense.”

Nate Cormier of SvR Design Company, Seattle described his firm’s adaptive strategy. “We’ve got a process now of

asking questions before we decide to go after something. Do the math and figure out how much other value you could have created for a client. Could you have approached an agency or organization and built a relationship? The business development side is not glamorous but in this environment relationship building is double or triple the value of what it was previously. Our firm has managed to get through without laying anybody off and one of the reasons is that shift in tactics. Firms that go after something where 30 people are submitting are like deer in the headlights. You have to hold your emotions in check to survive.”

And it’s not just in the competition for new public projects that the pressure is being felt. Firms with existing public contracts are being asked to renegotiate at lower fees. Landscape architects Terry Ryan and Ernie Wong are among the Chicago practitioners whose firms were asked by the city’s Department of Procurement to take a percentage cut across the board on all their city projects. “In this economy we’ve frozen our rates for years,” said Ryan, of Jacobs/Ryan Associates. “That’s already a major cut and you have to go into these bids competitively pricing down to the bone.” Tom Whitlock of Damon Farber Associates, Minneapolis, reported that his firm’s fee for work with the Army Corp has been cut at the same time that there has been an increase in the number of federal projects that are going design/build, “So we’re seeing fees reduced even further.”

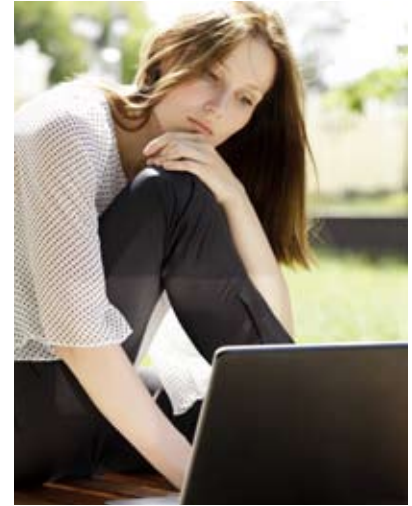


Private sector work is not immune. For many firms, well-established relationships no longer provide protection against competitive pressures. Richard Conant of Foster Conant & Associates, Ft. Lauderdale, noted that a firm with 20 or 30 years of continuing service with a client is nevertheless subject to the client's efforts to cut costs. "On the next project they simply invite everybody to take a look. So even in markets where you've been able to hold a pretty tight grip, your slice of pie gets cut up again," he said. Cindy Sanders of Olin in Philadelphia observed, "Clients are asking more for less, which obviously affects profits. And this ties in to design integrity. We will take a hit to our profit margin to keep our design integrity up and we've kept everybody employed. But I have owners asking, where's my return on investment? These are difficult conversations in our firm."

Design integrity rang a bell for many participants, including Lynn Moore of Davis Partnership in Denver. "The design integrity piece is central," she declared. "The most challenging thing for me as a professional is how to maintain my personal integrity, keep my firm's name elevated in my sphere of reference, and keep my doors open without selling out." Long-term clients who respect her firm's ability still approach them first, but they now have to negotiate, doing projects for five or six percent, which is less than they would have billed in the recent past. And, she added, her firm faces competition from what she calls "bottom feeders:" individuals with questionable qualifications who "work out of their basements."

Brian Clark of Confluence in Des Moines said his firm is also working hard to maintain integrity, even when it hurts. "No matter what the fee, we continue to over-deliver," he said. "Break even is now a new kind of normal. But if we can continue to meet payroll, pay rent and get to the next up-tick, we'll be fine." Leo Alvarez of Perkins + Will, Atlanta wasn't so sanguine: "We can all deal with two or three years of difficult times but if at the end of that it's all four percent or nothing, that's a real problem," he said. "The danger is that this actually becomes the standard." Dennis Carmichael of AECOM in Alexandria VA, took a more philosophical view. "I don't think any of us came into the profession to get rich," he said. "The vast majority of landscape architects aren't motivated by money. They're motivated by design integrity, by doing great projects, by having an impact on the world as they see it. That's what gets me out of bed in the morning."

The challenge of keeping and nurturing young leaders under trying economic conditions was a concern for many around the table. Confluence has been offering extra time off, flexible hours, "stuff that doesn't cost you hard cash," Clark explained. Olin has paid a bonus to its young employees. "It's not a performance bonus," Cindy Sanders said. "We call it a thank you for sticking with us and putting in those long hours." Several participants said they find internships in the current economy troubling. They are unable to reconcile the idea of young talent working without pay, while paying them has the potential to create morale problems among existing staff who



resent billable work being diverted to low-paid workers. As a result, some firms reported discontinuing internships in the current climate, while acknowledging the tension between doing what seems fair and keeping doors open for those eager to learn in order to ensure the future of the profession.

Where the Work Is

Barbara Faga of AECOM, San Francisco, sees the answer to the recovery and future health of the profession in the kind of work that landscape architects pursue. “We are in a paradigm shift and we’ve just got to get used to it,” she said, noting that the opportunities now are in infrastructure: water resources, healthy cities and transportation. “The easy projects are done,” she declared. “Now they’re all going to be difficult. They’re not going to be greenfields. They’re all going to be in town, they’re all going to be complicated and they’re all going to have political action attached to them. We should be involved in these because that’s where the work is and that’s something we know about doing. It’s still our work. We’ve just got to re-organize it.”

Legislation now before Congress, including HR 3734, the Urban Revitalization Livable Communities Act; HR 4202, the Green Infrastructure for Clean Water Act; and new efforts to re-fund the Wind and Water Conservation Fund, would potentially fund infrastructure initiatives with significant opportunities for landscape architects. Ed Freer, of JJR

in Madison, WI, made the case that landscape architects are uniquely positioned to move into leading roles on such infrastructure projects. “We’re holistic thinkers. We deal with transportation, water management and open spaces to increase value in communities. And we are concentrating on cities. I like to quote a client who says, anybody can build in a cornfield. I’m excited because there are great opportunities if we refocus on what we do best.”

Federal stimulus funding for infrastructure gets mixed reviews. Dennis Carmichael is hopeful about the EPA/HUD collaboration on a smart growth initiative and, he reported, the US Park Service now has funding. “I think it will start to happen but it may be another year before we see real projects on the street,” he said. Cindy Sanders isn’t so optimistic. “We have spent a lot of time trying to track stimulus money and it hasn’t landed in our realm,” she asserted. “GSA projects are the area where we have seen the greatest activity. But I don’t know a lot of firms that are staying whole because of federal stimulus funds.” Nate Cormier noted that most of the first round of stimulus money was sent directly to the states for shovel-ready projects, which often meant highway-related projects. “State houses have an anti-urban bias so they end up spending most of the money in ways that aren’t building the healthy cities that will protect us from this environmental crisis,” he observed. But some large firms have found opportunities even there. “We’re getting trails and highway



landscape and siting of reservoirs, all related to transportation, which is really nice work for landscape architects because engineers don't do a good job of that," Barbara Faga reported.

International vs. Domestic

It was generally agreed that there is work in Asia, Latin America and India for American landscape architects who are willing to travel. And some large firms have benefited from an established offshore presence. According to Faga, AECOM invested heavily in establishing offices in London and China that have saved the firm many times over what it invested. For firms without these resources the big issues are finding people who want to travel, identifying markets that are financially secure, and determining the appropriate concentration of the firm's portfolio in international projects.

Cindy Sanders reported that Olin has taken a conservative view of the Middle East and China because "we were burned in Taiwan." Her firm's international work is now about 15% of total portfolio and diversification is the name of the game. "We have one project in China, one in UAE, one in London, we're looking at one in France and one in Italy. We're not going to one place. You have to watch that concentration."

Doug Smith reported that as the domestic economy shrank, EDSA's international work grew and is now approaching 80%

of the firm's portfolio. "Second world countries offer great opportunities for our services because they have the political and financial structure to carry out development, but are sorely lacking the expertise that we bring to the table as master planners and landscape architects and the ability we have to bring together teams of experts to address all the issues," he explained. When asked about problems regarding payment, especially in China, he advised asking for larger retainers and holding up work during the process if necessary until payment is up to date. Chip Impastato of Mesa Design in Dallas said the key for his firm in doing international work is to do the research on clients up front. "Do your homework. Talk to people who have worked with them. Find good people who are like minded and build the right relationships."

Peter Hedlund of Sasaki reported that his office's international work, about 15% of its portfolio, is booming. "But you need to find good partnerships, especially in China, with good local firms to ensure the quality of your product." And he noted how diversity in the firm's Boston office, where people come from many countries and speak 25 languages, helps in developing international work. "These people use their ties to try and secure work in their home countries," he explained. "So we have the value of an international practice as well as international projects within our office."



Small/Medium/Large

It is clear that a firm's size makes a major difference in the scope, depth and location of its work. Small firms often carve out a niche and large, multidisciplinary firms have the resources to cover the entire spectrum, but mid-size firms of between 30 and 60 employees have had a harder time adjusting to the new realities. Some of these firms are re-shaping their practices. Keith Myers of MSI Design in Columbus said he hoped the forecast on mid-size firms wasn't as dire as it's been portrayed. "But there's been a lot of consolidation over the last few years," he said. "Engineering firms have been trying to acquire landscape architecture firms and recently we competed against a national landscape contractor who has been buying landscape architecture firms. You can imagine that becoming a successful model."

Ernie Wong of (mid-size) Site Design Group in Chicago said, to laughs, "If I was a four person firm or a really large firm I wouldn't worry about anything. But I'm caught right in the middle. Responsible for everything and no control." Dennis Carmichael retorted that the control part wasn't always so easy. "AECOM is a colossal beast and you have all these greats in house," he said. "But whether the specialties are in or out of house, you still have to work with them. You still have to herd them. You still have to prod them. When they say, I can't do that because I've never done that before you have to just say, well, we're doing it now. The greatest



asset we have as a profession is the impatience and the unacceptance of the way things have been done. And we have to keep on doing it."

Who Moved My Cheese?

Meanwhile, competition from other professions is growing. Architects are billing themselves as planners and civil engineers are leading projects even where it isn't clear that their skills match the challenges. Peter Schaudt of Hoerr Schaudt, Chicago decried "the sudden environmentalism" of architects in the wake of LEED, and suggested that if architects are going to market themselves as planners, perhaps landscape architects should be taught to design buildings. Terry Guen of Terry Guen Design Associates, Chicago, reported, "We go to campuses and a lot of the managers of those projects ask for the landscape architect because they know the architects are not performing -- they don't comprehend the integration that's needed to create sustainable solutions. So we really need to hold our ground."

Leo Alvarez did the math. "CNU (Congress for the New Urbanism), among others, is appropriating our world and it's related to scale and numbers," he declared. His calculation, based on Department of Labor statistics, is that the landscape architecture profession is growing by 20% on a baseline of 26,000 practitioners while civil engineering is growing by 24% on a professional base of 250,000. His conclusion:



“Projected out, we’re a boutique going away or integrated completely into urban design planning and architecture. And I don’t think that’s the right answer for us. We need to maintain the culture that this profession has brought to the table and is clearly well suited to address the problems of today. But we’re not big enough. We can’t split the pie up and survive. We’ve got to make the pie bigger.”

Tom Whitlock believes that is happening. “Engineering might be a bigger profession, but we are smarter and more beautiful people,” he joked, and went on to describe his firm’s experience designing a tank range for the National Guard. “They said they wanted a landscape architect leading this project because of their sensitivity. They specifically said they did not want a civil engineer. There are landscape architects in these agencies who appreciate and understand what we do. So I see the web of opportunity growing.”

Deb Mitchell agreed. “I find myself in unusual situations with clients who ask me to do some things engineers might ordinarily do – like a pedestrian underpass. So I’m leading these teams and telling engineers what to do.” She pointed to the landscape architect’s skills in design, dealing with clients, and going through public forums, which are not the typical engineer’s strong suit. “Let’s celebrate our strengths,” she said. “We’ve got great assets as team leaders. I can run a lot of engineers if I have to. So bring it on.” Ernie Wong is ready, too. “We can compete on the same level,” he declared. “And

I carry as much insurance as that engineering or architecture firm. So what’s the differentiation? We can do the work so we should just do it.”

Throughout the discussion, participants acknowledged the increasing importance of marketing for expanding business opportunities. At Olin, Cindy Sanders reported, marketing is a key part of the firm’s infrastructure. “We are becoming the aggressor. Putting people on planes and making a major investment to get to know people and expand our horizons.” Doug Smith said that at EDSA marketing is considered everybody’s responsibility from firm principals to the person who answers the phone. And when firm members travel, he explained, “We never waste a trip. We take another day to meet with potential prospects and clients.” Lee Gastley, of SW+A in Mount Pleasant, SC described his firm’s creative approach in which it acts as real estate and marketing agent for clients to create projects for them, and by extension, for the firm. “They’re out there wanting to do something, but they can’t find the right piece of property or another investor, so we’re actually involved in trying to market properties in order to create work.”

In the course of the three-hour roundtable, participants identified four areas in which landscape architecture needs to become more proactive if it is to expand the number and scope of projects under its purview and assume leading roles in carrying them out: owning sustainability, partnering/teaming,



increasing expertise in the hard sciences, and advocating for the profession.

Owning Sustainability

Environmental sustainability is where the landscape architecture profession began. Brian Clark declared, “We were green when green wasn’t cool,” and challenged landscape architects to remind the general public and other professionals, “We started it.” The roundtable’s Chicago venue occasioned the participation of more than half a dozen representatives of Chicago firms who are proud of their city’s leadership in urban green initiatives. But Ted Wolff cautioned against taking the road most traveled by. Using Chicago as an example, he reminded his peers that landscape architects have been doing green roofs for decades, at first calling them “gardens on structure,” and have come a long way in working out problems of water access and maintenance. “But Chicago really falls short in putting them to the hard test of cost and benefit,” he charged. “There are a lot of ways to do storm water management in an urban setting that are cheaper than the minimal amount to retain a green roof and the urban heat island effect is much cheaper to address with a highly reflective roof than with a green one. We’re draping a lei around something and making it look pretty,” he said. “If we were serious we wouldn’t do the easy things, like green roofs, with other people’s money, but the city would step up and do something about, for instance, putting water meters on domestic water taps.”

Bill Odle of TBG Partners in Houston cautioned against clients who try to game the system. “The movement for green needs to be for the right reasons,” he said. “We’re finding some new developers who are just trying to get a check in the box so they can get the process through the city, put a seal on it, and then forget about it. We as professionals have to continue to do the right thing and that may mean pushing them in a direction that they don’t want to go because it’s the right thing to do.” And Christy Ten Eyck of Ten Eyck Landscape Architects in Phoenix pointed to a problem with the word “sustainability.” “We’re running into people whose eyes glaze over when you talk to them about sustainability,” she reported. “So “maintainability” is our new focus because it’s really the same thing and to old codgers it’s more understandable.”

The Sustainable Sites Initiative may offer hope for a more holistic, systems-based approach to landscape infrastructure. At present, however, SSI does not enjoy the name recognition or press attention enjoyed by LEED, to the occasional detriment of landscape architecture. Peter Schaudt recounted his experience submitting an SSI proposal to a client who was also looking at LEED certification. “The client went with the architects and did LEED instead of SSI because of the expense of doing both,” he explained. “Which is why I think SSI and LEED ultimately have to merge into one system that we could ultimately take over.”



Increasing Expertise in the Hard Sciences

Complex infrastructure projects require knowledge in the hard sciences and metrics capable of demonstrating measurable results. Whether a firm partners with outside specialists or incorporates them within an interdisciplinary practice, science will play an increasingly important role in landscape architecture going forward. And landscape architects, to pursue their desired roles as visionaries and integrators, will need to grasp it all. This may involve general ongoing education, formal or informal, in the sciences. As Doug Smith put it: “It’s important that we all continue to engage and educate ourselves in the hard sciences for these big infrastructure projects that are going to be a very important part of our profession.” Or it may involve a specialized degree in a scientific discipline in addition to, or in lieu of, a master’s in landscape architecture. Dennis Carmichael declared that thirty years into his professional life he can attest that landscape architects have greater impact now than they did three decades ago, but believes they would have even more impact if they were smarter in the sciences. “The big news is that clients value this now,” he declared. “I advised some young people we had to let go who are now going back to school to go back for hydrology, go back for any of the hard sciences that are quantifiable, measurable, so when you’re competing with civil engineers it’s a fair fight and you can win.”

Partnering/Teaming

One of moderator Ed Uhlir’s favorite examples of brilliant partnering is Kathryn Gustafson’s work with Dutch master plantsman Piet Oudolf on the Lurie Garden in Millennium Park. On a small scale, partnering can provide the piece that is the sine qua non. On large complex projects partnering is essential for all but the largest interdisciplinary firms with expansive expertise in house. Roundtable participants agreed on the necessity for their firms to partner in order to win and carry out significant projects. Peter Schaudt said categorically, “You can’t survive without having large teams. And you have to team with people who really know the science.” And speaking as the principal of a small firm he declared, “Teaming with people to achieve the greater good is more satisfying than doing a small project all by myself. I can’t urge enough the notion of teaming with other people to work on significant work. Large firms have positioned themselves so that when the cycle goes up they’re ready to rock’n roll. If they don’t team a lot of smaller firms are going to be asking, where’s my piece?” Leo Alvarez sees a smaller but more relevant profession emerging and called for mending fragmentation within landscape architecture by strengthening partnerships within the profession. “I think we could develop the networked sharing of knowledge as a profession working together that becomes a model for architects, engineers and others,” he declared. And Barbara Deutsch of the LAF stressed



the importance of partnering with the non-profit sector to give them tools they can use to show the value of landscape architecture because, “They’re the ones that have traction on the hill and can help make things happen.”

Advocating for the Profession

What sort of advocacy does landscape architecture need? If roundtable participants speak for the profession, it’s advocacy like that provided by the AIA: continuous, connected, comprehensive and supremely confident. Absent the gold standard, participants recommend greater willingness of landscape architects to sound their own horns. Keith Myers: “There’s been a trajectory of responsibility that landscape architects have enjoyed over the last 20 years as we demonstrated our ability to take on big projects and manage them completely. If we shed some of our professional modesty, we’ll achieve even more.” Reach outside the usual boundaries. Ernie Wong: “We do need to be more active politically and reach out to people outside of this discipline and the design

world to expose more people to what we do.” Educate younger students. Doug Smith: “We need to reach down to the high school level to let that age group know what we do as a profession and get more people interested in the field.” Command greater control of projects. Bill Inman: “We have the ability to work at quarter scale and GIS on the same day and are typically the frontrunners on the playing side of things. And yet we are too willing to give the work up once the budget shift turns to architecture or to infrastructure when we should be involved all the way through the project as the prime consultant regardless of where the contractual structure or dollar amounts lie. I’d like to see more willingness and business savvy to maintain that prime consultant relationship.” Demonstrate measurable results. Terry Guen: “We don’t have the allure of architectural history and writing to go on. Leaders of the profession, including the LAF, should be working on building sustainability metrics and making the case for landscape architecture.”



CONCLUSIONS

Co-host Bill Main observed in his closing remarks that the outlook of participants seemed to brighten as the morning wore on. The general consensus was that the worst is probably over, although there are still tough times ahead; that things will never be the same but different isn't always bad; and that there are things that can be attended to in the meantime. Barbara Faga suggested it's a great time for research and publishing. Ed Freer said it's a time to "weed out the dead wood," and come out of this a stronger profession. Some firms are seizing the opportunity to hire an outstanding person who might not be available in a different market and using the time to create the infrastructure for robust marketing. And there is innovation in education. Rick Conant reported on the City Lab program in Orlando, called 2plus2plus2, aimed at providing students with a well-rounded background. It combines two years at a Community College, two at the Univ. of Central Florida and two at the Univ. of Florida, after which students graduate with masters in landscape architecture or urban planning, with a focus on sustainability. He hopes this will become a model for attracting more and graduating better prepared people to the profession.

Finally, Bill Main described the focus on "performing" landscapes that is driving his company's creative thinking about products for outdoor environments. Whether it's attracting visitors for passive enjoyment or bringing in crowds for programmed activities, the emphasis in public spaces is on people and how they interact with the environment and each other. Nate Cormier, arguably the youngest professional in the room and the one most attuned to currents in the academy, opined: "The latest wave of theory, of landscape urbanism or operational focus or infrastructural focus, is less compositional, less formal and post-formal. It has an experiential dimension. When I was at GSD we fought to get more ecology faculty and I think there's a next spin on that in which what might have been background content before is now becoming foreground. And I think we really need that." It's safe to say that many landscape architects would agree.

It's a new day. Landscape architects are taking a fresh look at the historical focus and strengths at the root of the profession – and looking forward with new approaches and strategies for realizing them in a radically altered world. That augurs well for the future.

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