

MANY DIRECTIONS

These landscape architecture students earned their degrees side by side, but since then they have gone off in many different directions. What can other young landscape architects learn from their experiences?

Edited by Daniel Jost, Associate ASLA

YOUR WORK AS A
CAD MONKEY HELPS
YOU EARN YOUR
EMPLOYER'S TRUST.

Sarah Donato
HOK • San Francisco

MY JOB HUNT BEGAN during my final semester of senior year. I was obsessed with fashioning the most amazing portfolio—one that would show the world that I was an edgy, skillful young designer with tons of ambition and creativity. I spent a lot of time thinking about color palettes

and what shape it would take. Looking back on the hundreds of hours—not to mention dollars—I spent, I now realize that my focus was completely misguided. I was so concerned with making something that looked cool that I lost sight of the purpose of a portfolio: to highlight your best work and show your technical skills.

During my final months in school, I wrote letters, made phone calls to principals, and dragged my overthought portfolio all over New York City. My assertiveness paid off. I ended up with three job offers, and I accepted a job with the HOK Planning Group. Only three days after graduation, I began my new professional career.

WE ALL TOOK THE SAME woody plant and site engineering classes together. Side by side we spent late nights in the studio at Cornell University, hovering over drawings that were due the following morning. But today, approximately four years after we graduated with our bachelor's degrees, we've gone in very different directions—both professionally and geographically.

What are the first few years in the profession like for recent landscape architecture graduates? I decided to ask my old classmates. While most are still working in the field, the sort of work they do is quite varied. And a few people are no longer working at design firms at all. One is now a partner in a catering business, another works at a doctor's office, and a few people are practicing or studying related fields.

Through the miracles of modern technology (aka Facebook), I was able to leave messages with everyone in my studio cohort. I asked them to tell me about the paths they have taken since graduation and the lessons they've learned along the way that might be helpful for this year's graduating class. Eleven people responded, and this is what they wrote.

You might say I started out as a CAD monkey, but it really wasn't as bad as it sounds. Although my work consisted primarily of noncreative AutoCAD and Photoshop work, moving between the two programs as frequently as possible allowed me to never feel trapped or pigeonholed. This work was the first step in earning my employer's trust, and, eventually, I earned the right to do more creative work as well. By creative work, I mean anything from new CAD details to final plant and material selections to conceptual design.

The conceptual design phase is refreshingly very similar to the process we used in college, where a layer of trace and diagrams



Sarah Donato
visiting Jerusalem

finally manifest into a cohesive and grounded design direction. However, there was certain vocabulary that was never included in my education—and I'm talking about basics. I didn't know the difference between schematics, design development, and construction documents. At first, it seemed like people were constantly speaking in code and using acronyms fit for the CIA, not a design firm. I asked questions and kept my ears open all the time, and eventually I learned how to talk the talk. However, it would have been helpful if some of this office terminology was introduced in studio classes or at least in our professional practice class.

After spending two years in HOK's New York office, I decided to move to San Francisco. My boyfriend, who was also a landscape architecture major at Cornell, is a San Francisco native. Luckily for me, HOK has many offices throughout the United States, including a successful location in San Francisco. They offered financial assistance in my move and allowed me about four weeks to travel before starting my new job. Staying with the same company made the transition to a new city much easier. Starting at the San Francisco office I was new, but not foreign. I already knew some of the people I was working with and the company's CAD standards and professional protocol.

I have been working at the San Francisco office for close to two years now. Working here has allowed me to realize what had been lacking in my career; I was suddenly

“I asked questions and kept my ears open all the time, and eventually I learned how to talk the talk.”

a part of a team that made me excited to come to the office and interact. When entering the field, you must be discerning about your future work environment. After all, you will spend more time with your coworkers than with any other people in your life. Fostering relationships with the people you work with will give you the motivation to work to your full potential and will ultimately advance your career.

Life at HOK is dynamic. My roles at the office include consultant coordination, grading, drafting a sketch into AutoCAD, conceptual design, and fielding a myriad of client requests. Some days are gone in a single heartbeat—rushing to submit a progress set of drawings or anxiously coaxing the color plotter to hurry up and spit out a rendering before someone leaves the office for a client presentation. Other days are more leisurely, spent in in-house design meetings, researching the latest in skate stops, or assessing a project's LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) status.

I no longer discredit the seemingly ordinary task of designing the score joints of

a sidewalk or an expansive stretch of a corporate surface lot. I love my work because I own my work, and I appreciate the opportunity to make an impact on other people's lives.

“DON'T WORRY IF YOU CAN'T FIND A JOB IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE IMMEDIATELY.”

Stephanie Webster
CECIL GROUP • Boston

I HAD BEEN INTENT on becoming a landscape architect since my junior year of high school. It was my dream job—no other field of work blended my interests so well. But a year and a half after graduation, I was working in retail.

Taking a number of fine arts classes during my last semester had left little time to gather my work into a portfolio or look for a job during my final semester. After graduation, I headed home to Syracuse to resume work at a clothing store, where I had been a seasonal employee. I thought this was an ideal arrangement at the time. I could live at home rent free (thanks, Mom and Dad) and develop my portfolio so that I could land a job at a dynamic firm that I really wanted to be a part of.

However, the portfolio ended up on the back burner as I moved up the ladder at the clothing store. A year passed, and I found myself traveling across the country to train employees and support new stores. They began training me for a management position. I was honored but also concerned—was this how I was going to spend my life?

Then, suddenly, I had a word-of-mouth opportunity to interview at a well-respected central New York firm. I dusted off my portfolio and readjusted my focus: My goal was to work as a landscape architect, and that had not changed despite the sidetrack in retail. The interviews went well, and I received many compliments on my strong work samples. However, they kept me on the fence for months.

The firm was concerned with my lack of CAD experience in an office setting, and they said they didn't have the resources to

train me. While I was at Cornell, I had worked a number of summer jobs and internships that I thought would prove valuable in getting a job. I worked at a landscaping nursery to learn plants; for a nonprofit in Boston that manages urban wildlife areas, community gardens, and outreach programs for inner-city youth; and even for a fledgling landscape architecture firm doing administrative and marketing tasks. But for them this was all overshadowed by my lack of experience as a CAD intern.

While they tried to decide whether to hire me, I decided to refocus my job search. Maybe someone else would value my other experiences more. I cold-called a couple of “dream firms” that were working on engaging, complex projects. I even arranged a few office visits in Boston (which I envisioned as a mecca of design and planning) to learn about these offices and how they functioned.

As luck would have it, a small, yet very busy, planning and design firm named the Cecil Group in Boston was looking for an entry-level landscape designer at the time. They wanted someone with a design-heavy background, and my fine arts concentration fit the bill. Being a small office, they also wanted someone who could be flexible and help out with various tasks when others were stretched. I was excited about the opportunity to work with other types of professionals, and a steep learning curve didn't scare me. While they told me

“One landscape architect I met had actually taken eight years before returning to the practice.”

it would have been ideal to have a stronger background in CAD, the principals at the Cecil Group also saw my lack of office experience as an opportunity: They could train me to create construction drawings and plans in their own style. A year and a half after graduating, I finally had the chance to work in my own field.

The Central New York firm eventually offered me the position as well, but I chose to move to Boston for the design environment that promised a larger range of projects. Since starting at the Cecil Group, I've worked on design development for transit-oriented pedestrian improvements, landscape construction drawings for an old mill complex being renovated into condos, and site layouts and renderings for several waterfront parks. I've also attended a handful of public meetings to facilitate and lead group discussions, most recently for a village master plan in Rhode Island that our firm has been working on. Occasionally I'll assist with site analysis, area calculations, and graphics support for the planners. I've

become quite comfortable working in CAD, and I've been able to bring the plant knowledge I developed at school and working in the nursery to numerous planting plans.

Looking back on my job search, one thing that did surprise me was that none of the firms I spoke with were nonplussed by my stint in retail. A few principals I spoke with mentioned that there were others in their offices who had taken a less conventional route into the profession. One landscape architect I met had actually taken eight years before returning to the practice. So my advice for new graduates is don't worry if you can't find a job in landscape architecture immediately.

“INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS ARE INTERVIEWS.”

Linda Ciesielski
GRADUATE STUDENT • Boston

■ WOULD RECOMMEND using the summer after graduation to do something unconventional; you will not have the time once you begin work. Four weeks after graduation, I was teaching conversational English in China. Through Bridges for Education, a program that organizes language camps for teenagers in a number of countries, I had the chance to learn about another culture and see places I might never have seen otherwise.

Before I went to China, I began looking into offices in Portland, Oregon. I wanted to learn from and be a part of the city synonymous with green building and thoughtful planning. I also wanted to live someplace where I did not need a car, which would be difficult if I stayed in Western New York. I put a lot of time into my portfolio in May, June, and August. The last semester at school was demanding, and I found I didn't have enough time to scan projects and refine work. Creating a portfolio is a project in itself. I didn't set a deadline for myself—so I definitely spent too much time on perfecting the format and the graphics—but I wanted it to be the best I could make it. I knew it would be my foot in the door in a city where I had no connections. Then I began calling

COURTESY STEPHANIE WEBSTER



Stephanie Webster walking in Boston

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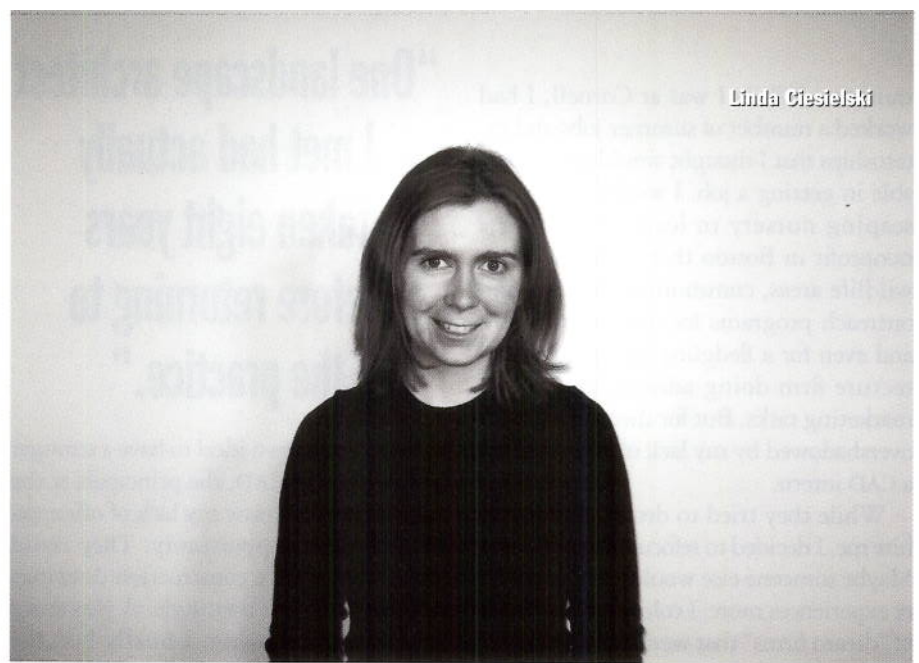
offices and sending off cover letters and copies of my portfolio.

By September, I'd landed two interviews in Portland. I flew out for a week, stayed with relatives, and called nearly every landscape architecture or planning office in town and asked for an office visit. By playing the "out-of-towner" card, I was able to visit five additional offices for informational interviews. Informational interviews *are* interviews. Even if an office is currently not hiring, it may be in the future. From these informational meetings, I was pulled aside and offered two positions if I was still looking for work in a few months. After this trip, I also had two concrete job offers from my more formal interviews. I took one and moved to Portland in October.

I learned a great deal in the first two months. I have to thank Professor Marv Adelman for his site-grading courses at Cornell, because I was soon entrusted with

doing most of the grading at the office. I was working in a seven-person firm, which provided the opportunity to learn many different tasks; I wasn't simply a CAD monkey. I was able to design, grade, build models, visit sites, and meet with clients and subconsultants.

But after a few months, I began to feel restless. From school, I was used to learning new things every day—but this was not happening at work. Socially, the small office was also limiting. I was the youngest by 10 years. Being in a new city with older coworkers was isolating and was one of



Linda Ciesielski

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the factors that prompted my move to the Bay Area the following summer, where several friends were living.

I was hired by a firm focused on planning and urban design with a number of smart early and mid-20s staff. Staff makes such a difference! I was persuaded to join the office because at the second interview, I met the entire staff and learned their backgrounds. I was also able to speak to a young staff member on my own after the meeting. It was the best interview experience I have ever had, and it won me over.

I persuaded them to give me five weeks until my start date, then, for a few weeks in July, I worked on my friend's farm in Maine. It was great to be physically engaged with the earth again. It seems natural to be outside working in the summer; I wish I had stayed longer!

At the planning office, I did a great deal of research and writing. I enjoyed the change from construction documents, and I liked being at the front of a project, creating the framework for how something could proceed later. However, I was often frustrated

“Being in a new city with older coworkers was isolating and was one of the factors that prompted my move.”

by planners' design naïveté—bike paths traversing 20 percent grades, inadequate space for trees, or infrastructure that would likely require great site disturbance. I missed builders and figuring out how to work with the puzzle of the landscape.

I also realized how limited we are as designers. Policy has by far the greatest impact on the landscape. As designers, we can create and improve places, but these disparate parts don't necessarily make a whole. I think this finally resonated for me in California—but it naturally grew out of extensive travel and work experiences in

the United States and abroad. In unincorporated counties throughout California's dry Central Valley, subdivisions spring up on agricultural soils, often equipped with large fountains and oversized infrastructure. It is obscene—and sadly it happens all over. The scale of landscape abuse across the United States and most of the world is something that designers working on individual projects can't fix.

Last fall I began graduate school for a master of city planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, focusing on environmental policy and planning. In order to see policy change, a great challenge lies in connecting people to their environment. My intention is to enhance dialogue around natural resources and link local knowledge to policy through participatory media and storytelling.

To those just entering the job market, I'd encourage you to take chances, follow your convictions, and express your willingness to learn new things. Landscape architecture teaches systems thinking, and I am grateful for my education.

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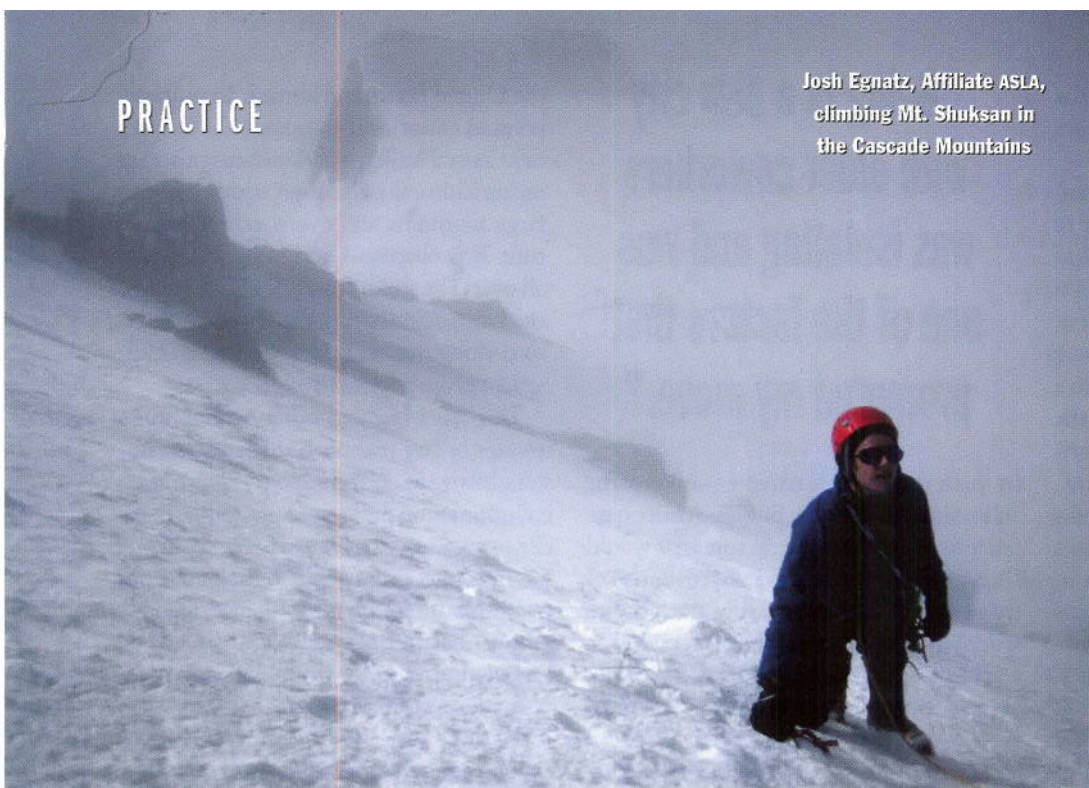
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“ALL OF THE KNOWLEDGE YOU NEED TO REALLY GROW CAN’T BE LEARNED THROUGH PRACTICE ALONE.”

Josh Egnatz, Affiliate ASLA

MICHAEL VAN VALKENBURGH ASSOCIATES • New York

AS I APPROACHED GRADUATION, with the specter of student loan payments on the horizon, there was little doubt in my mind I wanted and needed to find a paying job right away. Immediately after graduation, I worked for Egnatz Associates, my father’s architecture office in central Massachusetts, doing site layouts, grading, and garden design. While the work was rewarding, I realized that to participate in my preferred type and scope of work, I needed to work in a landscape architect’s office.

In the fall, I visited landscape architecture firms and dropped off résumés and electronic portfolios. I interviewed with firms in Boston and New York, one of which was Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates (MVVA), a New York City firm whose design ethos and office culture

seemed like a good fit for me. After a handful of interviews, I was offered a job. In December I moved to Lower Manhattan and started work in their New York office as a junior designer.

Over the past three years, I have worked on at least 30 projects, 10 of which I am closely involved with. These projects include public parks, campus landscapes, and private residences. They range in size from a 2,500-square-foot garden for an elementary school to an 80-acre waterfront park. From preparing RFQs to performing punch list inspections, I have contributed to all phases of project development, and I look forward to this summer when several more of these projects will be in the ground.

The work has been rigorous. There is a sense of urgency with every task I perform, which supports a steep learning curve and rapid professional growth. It is humbling to look back at when I started at MVVA, building models and creating miniature trees, to what my responsibilities have become in three very quick years. Since January 2008, I’ve been a senior designer, and while I continue to build design and presentation models, I also manage an institutional project, lead the production of design/construction documents, perform construction observation, and prepare project proposals.

I am in the process of taking the Landscape Architecture Registration Exam.

One of my short-term professional goals is to become licensed, and I am fortunate to be working for a firm that has placed an emphasis on exposing me to the wide range of knowledge needed for this exam.

But all of the knowledge you need to really grow in this profession can’t be learned through practice alone. To expand my knowledge, I have found myself dedicating a considerable amount of free time to reviewing professional journals. Also, I’ve continued to explore the built environment. Frequent weekend safaris into the mountains to climb, hike, ski, or golf are an integral part of my life. The flood of smells, textures, and colors renews my spirit and encourages me to be a better designer.

My most pleasant surprise about this profession is learning how liberated the individual is to follow his or her own track—so long as that individual is fueled by desire, education, work ethic, and character. As this article shows, there are many roads one can take in this field, and I am thus far thrilled with the ones I have taken.

“THERE’S USUALLY NOT A HANDBOOK... BUT THAT ALSO MEANS YOU HAVE OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE THINGS.”

John Knowlton
OEHME, VAN SWEDEN & ASSOCIATES • Washington, D.C.

WHILE IN COLLEGE I was aware of some common complaints against landscape architects. I often heard people related to the profession saying, “Landscape architects don’t even know their plants.” This rang in my head as if they were saying landscape architects are ignorant, barely even knowing the basics of their own profession. I knew I didn’t want to be that guy.

I took my first job at a small to medium-sized design/build company in northern

PRACTICE

New Jersey, where I had interned the summer before graduating. I was anxious to get out from behind my studio desk, and I knew this job would give me hands-on experience in the daily operations of construction.

Overnight, I became a manager in the company—designing residential landscapes, meeting with clients, estimating jobs, supervising crews, and coordinating the scheduling. In school I assumed that whatever company I worked for would have all their processes perfected so that things would run smoothly...however, this is not always the case. In my experience, companies don't have everything figured out, and there is usually not a handbook available telling you how to accomplish tasks that will be required.

But that also means that you will have opportunities to improve things. For instance, every morning we were responsible for getting all the crews loaded up with



John Knowlton in front of the Oehme, van Sweden & Associates office

the supplies and tools they would need for the day. To do this, I needed to know who would be working with whom and what they would be doing. This sounds easy enough, but the schedule was nowhere to be found—it was all in my boss's head! I often found myself frustrated and lacking any understanding of what needed to be

accomplished. In an effort to put us all on the same page, I devised a plan and bought a large dry-erase board, dividing it into a five-week calendar where we could note the crews and our schedule. This way anyone looking at the board could easily understand what was to be accomplished on any given day.

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“At both companies, it took some time to learn what elements of design pleased each boss.”

Working at a design/build company was an invaluable experience because I was able to experiment with different plants, seeing them grow and sometimes die. I was also able to develop a well-rounded sense of landscape architecture, learning not only design, but how to estimate jobs, write proposals, work with clients, and handle accounting.

But after two years in the design/build sector, I felt it was time to move on to a professional design firm. With the help and encouragement of my wife, I tackled what felt like the daunting task of putting a portfolio together and applying for a job. From the time I had been in school, the thought

of constructing a portfolio had intimidated me, mostly because I wasn't confident regarding what one should even look like.

After waiting some months and going through interviews, I accepted a job offer with Oehme, van Sweden & Associates in Washington, D.C., in August 2006. (A bit of advice for those moving to a new city—be sure to ask for your moving expenses to be reimbursed.)

Working in a professional firm was a bit intimidating at first because I had not used AutoCAD since school and I only had one semester of training. Also, at both companies, it took some time to learn what elements of design pleased each boss. At first, we had significantly different perceptions of how spaces should look and function and what's involved in the general design process. I have found the best way to overcome these difficulties is to design “through your boss's eye.”

My final word of advice for current students is to learn and master the many skills a landscape architect is required to know. Take the time to understand what is being

taught. Learn how to draw and use line weights. Master grading, know your plants, and develop an understanding of general construction techniques and processes.

“EVENTUALLY, I FOUND THE RIGHT FIT.”

Rebecca Francisco
CHILD CARE RESOURCE • Chittenden County, Vermont

SINCE GRADUATING from college, I have worked for a few landscape architecture firms looking for the right fit, but found it hard to find a position that allowed me to continue working with all the skills and design interests I had developed throughout my studies. Eventually, I found the right fit outside a firm, in the nonprofit sector. I have completed two Americorps terms of service with the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps, and I am now working for Child Care Resource in Chittenden County, Vermont.

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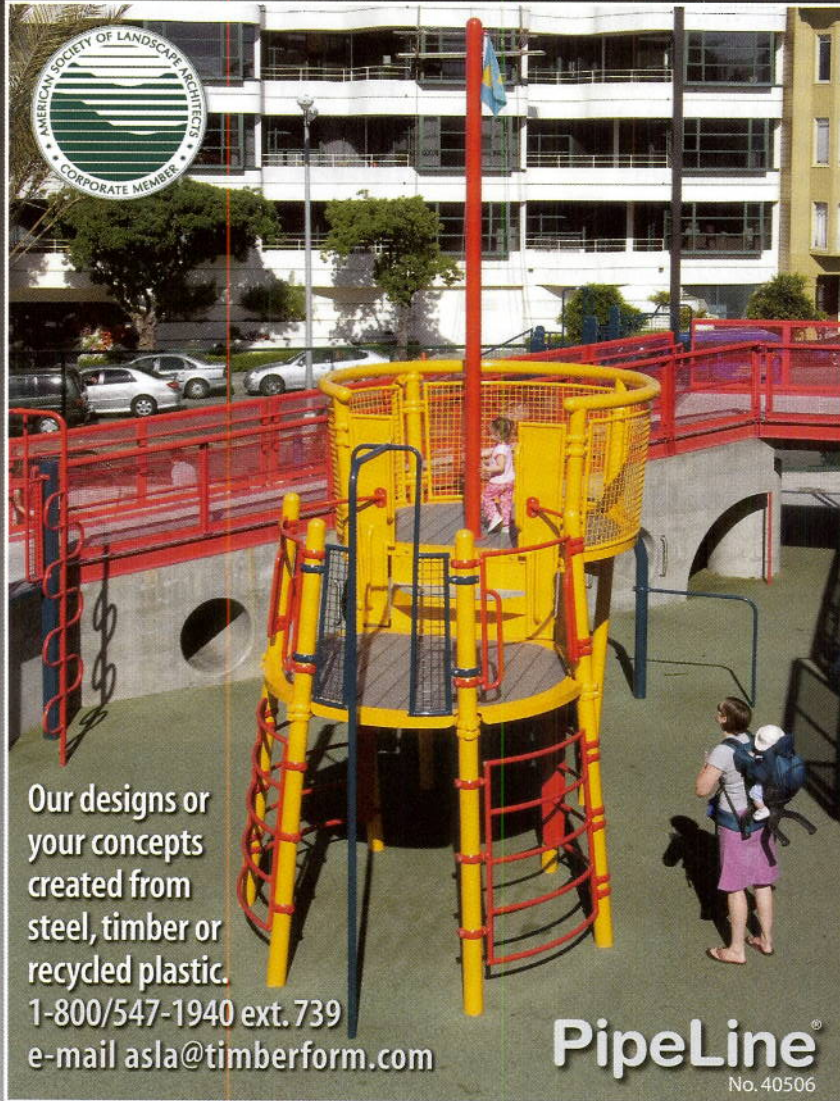


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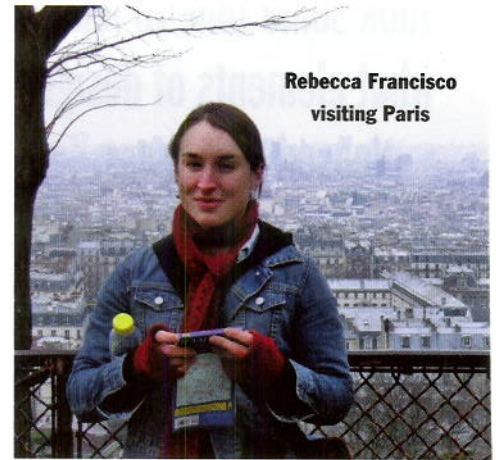
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Rebecca Francisco
visiting Paris

I found it easy to find a job right out of college. I spent a few weeks polishing up my portfolio, sent it out, and soon had a number of offers. I am really good with computer programs such as AutoCAD, GIS, and Photoshop, which made me a desirable candidate. However, being good at something doesn't guarantee you'll like it. I think it is extremely easy to get pigeon-

“I chose to change fields to get back to the aspects of landscape architecture I originally loved.”

holed early on in your career and very hard to get out of that. When you are limited to one task for months on end, it can be very frustrating, and I found it hard to stay invested when the only challenge was the long hours (at one firm I often worked 50 to 60 hours per week).

I chose to change fields to get back to the aspects of landscape architecture I originally loved: working with real people in the communities they care about and effecting change that will help create stronger and more beautiful communities. I now work primarily in community organizing and education and coordinate service learning projects and an educational gardening program. The one aspect of my education that

COURTESY REBECCA FRANCISCO

has most affected who I am today was working with real stakeholders on real projects. Getting to know community members and helping them to attain what they need and want in their communities has become the ultimate goal of my career.

Although my title is no longer landscape architect, I still feel that I am very much a part of the field. My advice for recent graduates: To be successful you have to swim in a stream that is going in the direction you need to go. It's okay to let go of your idea of what you had planned for yourself if it is not taking you where you want to go.

To continue along the path I have started, I am considering graduate school to study public administration. I hope to expand my capabilities to influence the public sector and instigate positive change in the communities I work in.

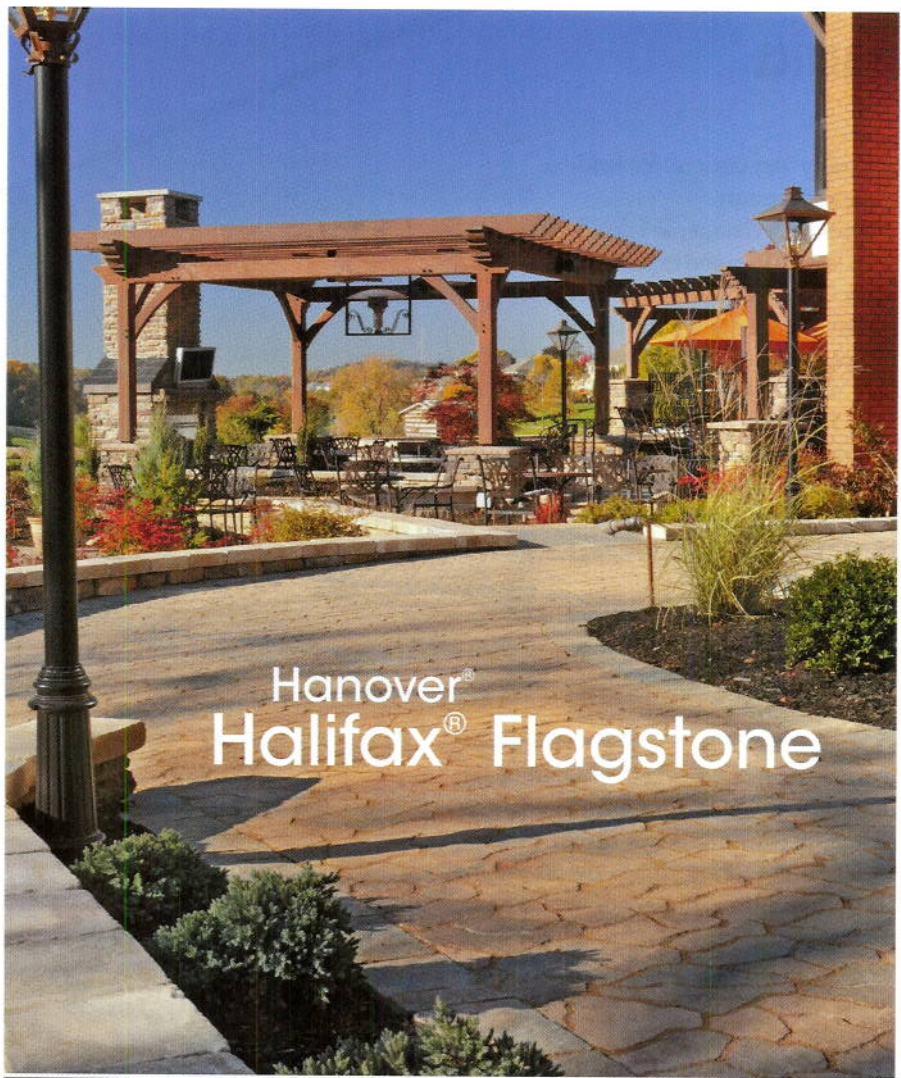
**“THE SIMPLEST PATH
ISN'T ALWAYS THE BEST.”**

Jon Ernsberger
NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF PARKS &
RECREATION • New York

AS I APPROACHED GRADUATION, I had a number of worries. Will I like the “reality” of landscape architecture? Do I really know anything useful? If I commit to a job, will I have time or energy left for anything else? (Like being in a rock band, for instance...)

I knew that I was done with school. I was sick of studying and writing papers, and I liked the idea of getting something physically accomplished. Also, there was something almost blissful in the thought that when you come home from work, no matter what, the rest of the day belongs to you. Beyond that I didn't really know what I wanted.

I was rescued by a professor of mine who is also a one-man firm. He needed an assistant, and getting that job was pretty simple. I never even created a résumé. But the simplest path isn't always the best. At that job, I spent half of my time doing unimaginative CAD/Photoshop work and the other half doing construction on a “green” addition to my boss's home. While my CAD skills were improving, I just wasn't excited by what I was working on, and I wondered



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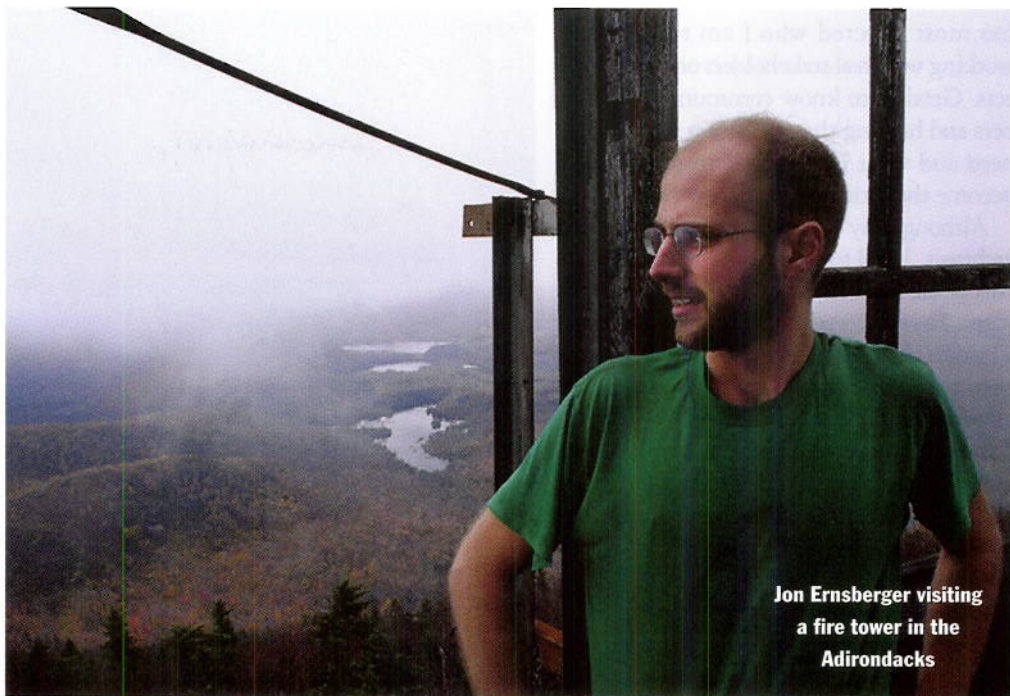
if I really was cut out for landscape architecture.

I needed a change, so I decided to leave Ithaca and explore the West Coast. I flew to Vancouver and took a train down the coast, stopping at various cities on the way. While I enjoyed this adventure, I did not fall in love with any of the places I saw on my travels. Discouraged, I moved in with my parents in Endicott, New York, hoping to “recollect myself,” as they say.

I had some rapport with a small landscaping business where I had worked as a laborer during summer breaks, and they took me on as one of two landscape designers. Here, I worked on a number of fun projects, but there was rarely anyone around to teach me anything. At times, I was all but making things up on the fly and crossing my fingers. There was so much I didn't know how to do, and there was a lot of pressure to deliver steady work to the labor side of the business.

I made some pretty bad mistakes there. One time I called for six cubic yards of soil when the job needed more like 26. On the same job they got their Bobcat stuck in a swampy area that I had failed to warn them about, and our company had to rent more equipment to get it out. For a different client, I got hustled pretty good. The job had promised to be the biggest of the season. I spent a great deal of time on the design, meeting with the clients a number of times, but we never got the job. Instead, the clients took all my design ideas and then hired someone else. My bosses were all very understanding. But at the end of the season events coincided to take me in a different direction. Work naturally comes to a close with the onset of the cold for the landscape team, and it was a good time to cut loose gracefully.

A friend invited me to sublet a room in NYC for a short time until the true tenant returned. I thought I was staying for only a few months, so I got a job at an art store, thinking it would be a short-term thing.



Jon Ernsberger visiting
a fire tower in the
Adirondacks

“One pleasant surprise was that after less than a year with Parks, I was actually designing something—a pocket playground in Greenwich Village.”

However, the other tenant never came back to claim the room, so I stayed, and nine months later, I found myself still working at the art store.

I started to think about getting a more permanent job. After this lengthy break from landscape architecture I was nervous about returning to the scene. I wondered what an employer would think of this hiatus, and I was worried that my skills had already begun to dull with time.

Two and a half years after graduating I wrote my first résumé. Through a former college classmate I got an interview with a giant firm that I am glad rejected me. The rejection was mutual. Then during a miniature reunion at a bar in Manhattan, I learned about openings at the NYC Department of Parks & Recreation. I liked the idea of designing parks and playgrounds, and I knew several people working there already. I was interested!

I believe my friend may have worked a little magic behind the curtain. She must have told her manager that I play guitar and a little about my musical taste, because he had her ask me if I could supply some guitar tablature for a Nirvana song with my résumé. I'm not sure if this really helped me get an interview, but I think it was my portfolio that secured the job. I'd created a new portfolio mixing projects from school that showed my interests with projects from the landscaping company that showed my practical abilities. My interviewer seemed genuinely interested in what I was showing him, and I've been working here since.

One pleasant surprise was that after less than a year with Parks, I was actually designing something—a pocket playground in Greenwich Village. Being the project manager/designer meant I would be responsible for everything from conceptual design to bid documents. In Parks a lot of people have to approve your design. You have to be flexible and willing to explore a lot of alternatives. Sometimes what you think is a great idea is waved aside, which can be frustrating. But ultimately I found that the design is changed for the better most of the time. I'm grateful to be in a position where I can get help and guidance from those who have been here longer than I have.

And while I'm currently not in a rock band, I have time to write and play music

frequently. My workload varies, but sometimes I come home from work and find that a significant portion of the day does indeed belong to me.

MY GRADUATE EDUCATION HELPED ME ESTABLISH A NICHE.

**Jeannette Compton,
Associate ASLA**

NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF PARKS & RECREATION • New York

GRADUATED A SEMESTER EARLIER than most of my classmates and went straight to grad school at Cornell's Urban Horticulture Institute, focusing on sustainable urban design. Earning a master's degree at the same school where I'd gotten my bachelor's degree allowed me to really hit the ground running. I already had an adviser and a good idea of what my thesis would be focused on: the stormwater benefits of green roof design.

I finished up my thesis in August 2006. A month later, I started a full-time job at

the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation as a landscape architect intern. While having a master's degree didn't pay off right away—I came in at the same time and rate as those with bachelor's degrees in the class below me—the experiences it provided have since benefited me greatly. Having an understanding of stormwater management and green roof design based in research allowed me to take responsibility for additional projects beyond my design assignments. When the mayor's office put together a task force on stormwater management, I was able to participate in a valuable way. Today, I am the project manager/fellow for Parks's partnership with the Design Trust for Public Space to create "High Performance Landscape Guidelines,"

"Once people know you are passionate and willing to put in the time, more opportunities will follow."

which will encourage New York City to take a more holistic and systems-based approach to creating parks. I also research ways to increase the sustainability of ongoing projects, and I am an active member of various committees, including Parks's green roof committee, its Sustainability Group, and the mayor's Climate Change Policy Group. This is all thanks to my graduate education.

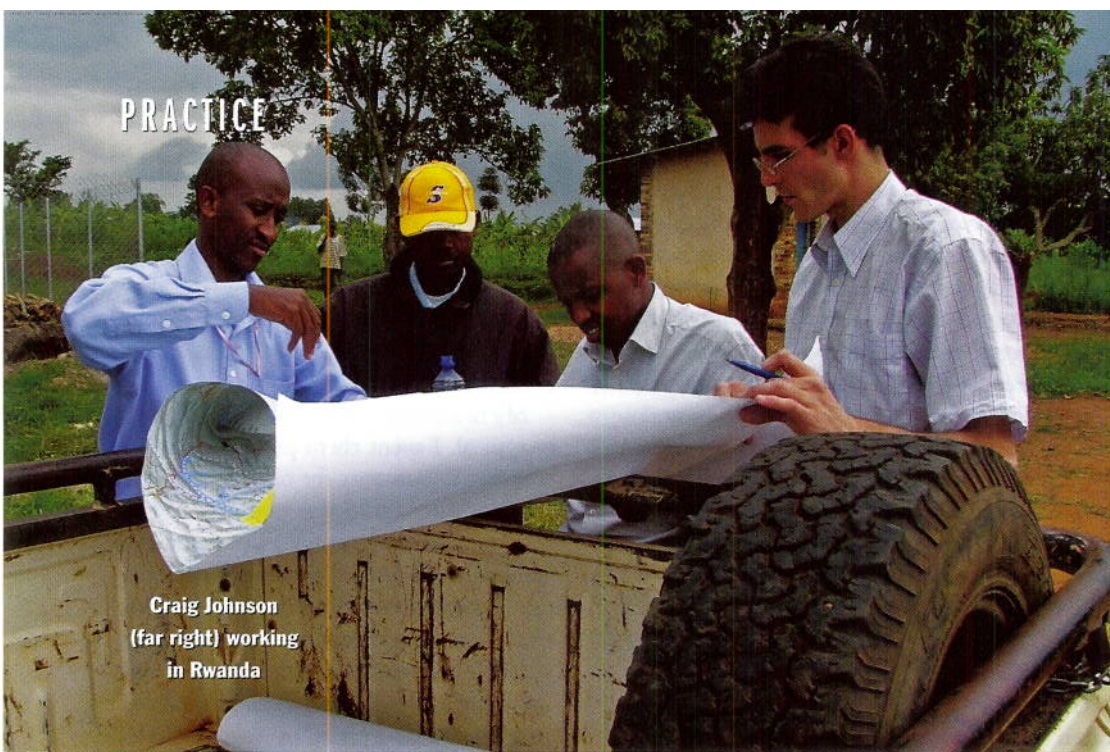
My first few months at Parks were pretty typical. I spent them putting together contract documents for other designers, but soon afterward I was in charge of two construction projects for a designer who had left, and I quickly took on smaller design projects as well. Parks is unique in that there are many smaller projects that younger designers can tackle and learn all the steps in the design process. I expected this, but I was surprised by how much designers can infuse their own personal interests into a project (within the parameters of the project, of course). My own emphasis on natural plantings, sustainable materials, and stormwater management can be seen throughout my designs. This opportunity for exploration seems unusual compared to many private firms.

One project that I am particularly proud of was my work for the Schoolyards to Playgrounds Initiative known as PlaNYC. I worked with the student council at Public School 138 in the South Bronx to do site analysis, taught the kids about plant selection so they could choose their own plants, and gave them a "budget" of points to determine what type of play equipment they would like. Within this design I also incorporated other priorities of PlaNYC such as directing stormwater to continuous tree pits and increasing canopy cover and shading. The project ended up being the first to be completed under the initiative, and the mayor attended the ribbon cutting.

Of course I've made a few mistakes along the way. One of the most important lessons you will learn in an office is the value of spell check. Once, I missed a typo on a shop drawing, and that resulted in an eight-foot granite monument



Jeannette Compton, Associate ASLA (left), with NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg (center) and others at the opening of a school yard she worked on



Craig Johnson
(far right) working
in Rwanda

being installed with the word “Swedish” instead of Swedish. The funny part was somehow the Swedish consulate found out that Sweden was mentioned and wanted to attend the ribbon cutting. We managed to have an engraving company come in and fix the etching in situ, but I will proofread very carefully the next time I write something in granite.

I’ve also learned how little can be covered in school. It is impossible to learn everything about site construction in college. You get a basic understanding, but a working knowledge of materials and construction comes with time and experience. I know I have a long way to go, and I am constantly talking with people who have been doing this work for a long time and learning from them.

That said, some things have changed over the years. Don’t feel sheepish when people who “have been in this business since before you were born” tell you that something must be done a particular way. Sustainable design is a paradigm shift in construction, and it is your job to be an advocate for it. Just make sure you really know what you are talking about. Explain your reasoning, and, if you can, use case studies of other places where your idea has worked. Design decisions that come from nowhere often come to the chopping block. If you can justify your designs or new ideas, and present them in a way that

is meaningful to your audience, you will generally be more successful.

Also, go beyond the call of duty. I was able to earn my current position by volunteering beyond what was required of me. I served on a number of committees and actually functioned in my current title in a volunteer capacity prior to getting the promotion. Once people know you are passionate and willing to put in the time, more opportunities will follow.

“MY INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE HELPED GREATLY IN GETTING A JOB.”

Craig Johnson
EDAW/AECOM • DENVER

MY INTRODUCTION to the workplace began overseas. During my last semester, I studied abroad on a research fellowship with the Singapore National Parks Department. The fellowship morphed into an extended trip throughout Southeast Asia, where I had a wealth of wonderful experiences. Before going overseas, I was not mentally prepared to work at a firm or think about applying for a job, but after six months in Southeast Asia, I came back with a desire to look for a job in landscape architecture and earn some money. I also

came home with an interest in staying close to family and friends, something that I had not really felt important beforehand.

I spent about four months applying to various jobs, living with my parents in Colorado Springs, Colorado. In college, I’d studied both landscape architecture and planning, and I was looking for a job where I could use all of my skills. I tapped into the alumni network and searched for positions online. I also had to make a portfolio, which I had not needed for class or any previous jobs. I didn’t spend too much time on my portfolio, and I am a bit ashamed to admit that I did the whole thing in PowerPoint.

My international experience helped greatly in getting a job; I found a lot of firms were looking for people interested in working or living overseas. I ended up taking a job at the Denver office of EDAW. I chose EDAW because the firm was close to home, yet still worked on many international projects.

I have worked at EDAW for the past three years. I was blessed with having an unbelievable mentor. This boss tapped into my international interests—sending me to sites on five different continents—and gave me the opportunity to grow and develop as a designer, planner, and project manager on projects ranging from a 35-acre campus redesign to a 35,000-acre citywide conceptual plan. Despite the varied scales and geographies, a typical project for me progresses from an existing conditions phase to a scenarios phase to a final concept plan.

The most defining and fulfilling project that I have worked on is in Rwanda. This project has won two Colorado ASLA Awards and just recently won a Daniel Burnham Award, which is given by the American Planning Association for excellence in comprehensive planning. My role was project planner in charge of collecting and analyzing existing condition data, drafting the land plan and public participation strategy, and providing policy recommendations related to land development. I developed a tight connection with my fellow consultants—engineers, architects, and economists—and together we have

PRACTICE

been able to teach a graduate-level class, present at conferences, and start a lecture series in Denver. Through this project, I feel I am starting to find a niche working in developing countries and emerging markets. I am developing connections and getting experience that is helping me pursue more work in this niche.

However, whenever a new summer intern works in the office, I am constantly aware of the computer skills that I did not learn in college and have not had a chance to learn on the job. Even being away from college for three years, I feel in some aspects like an aging dinosaur and have been a bit frustrated with how difficult it is to learn new programs while working full time. I have told myself that I would go back to school when I fall into a rut at work, but the ruts have luckily been quite shallow, and after three years at EDAA, I still find my work to be stimulating and deeply engaging.

HOW I BECAME A WRITER AT LAM...

Daniel Jost,
Associate ASLA

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE •
Washington, D.C.

SO HOW DID I END UP writing for *Landscape Architecture* magazine? I ask myself that question sometimes. Let's just say it's not what I imagined right after graduation. At that time, I was intent on moving back to my hometown, Buffalo, New York, and being a part of its ever-elusive renaissance. I did a bunch of part-time work there. But five months after graduating, with a number of successful interviews under my belt but no one actively hiring full-time entry-level landscape designers, I decided to test the waters elsewhere.

I posted my résumé on ASLA's Job Link and e-mailed cover letters, résumés, and portfolios to a number of firms with openings. Almost immediately, I started get-

ting phone calls, and three different companies agreed to fly me out to interview with their firms. I doubt I would have the same experience today. These were boom times, right at the height of the housing bubble, and there was actually a shortage of young landscape architects nationally.

After getting offers from all three companies, I took a position in Las Vegas at a 17-person landscape architecture firm. My interview there had left me impressed. It seemed to have the most diverse staff and projects, including master planning work for a bird-viewing preserve on the site of an old sewage treatment plant. And the principal really looked me in the eye, which at the time I took as a sign of honesty.

I would soon find out that the man was an avid poker player. Certain things that were promised during the interview never materialized. He said the firm was in the process of adding vision and dental coverage to their insurance, which never happened. He'd promised to pay for a plants identification class that would let me familiarize myself with desert plants,



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Daniel Jost, Associate ASLA, visiting Pershing Park in Washington, D.C.

but a week or two after arriving, it became clear that this was not going to happen either. He had also promised me an active role in the bird preserve project. Through a little bit of grandstanding, I managed to make him follow through on this particu-

lar promise, and that's probably the only reason I stayed there for the next two and a half years.

The extremely flexible work schedule didn't hurt either. For those companies too cheap or not able to offer better benefits,

it's a great way to inspire employee loyalty. We were allowed to arrive anytime before 9:00, and if we worked late Monday through Thursday, we could take a half day on Friday or perhaps not come in at all, as long as we met our 40 hours. This schedule was great for taking weekend trips to visit friends also living in western cities, and it was really good for taking night classes. I could usually leave a little earlier on a day I had a class and make up for it the following day. It also allowed me to break into freelance writing.

Initially, work at the office was really boring, as I spent the first six months doing nothing but redlines and plugging hand drawings into AutoCAD. I was finding little reward in my work and I was depressed with the style of development in Las Vegas, which surrounds every community and every individual home with a six-foot concrete block wall. As a firm, we didn't have any control over this; we were just there to throw a few shrubs in front of the wall. Day to day, this made up the majority of my work.



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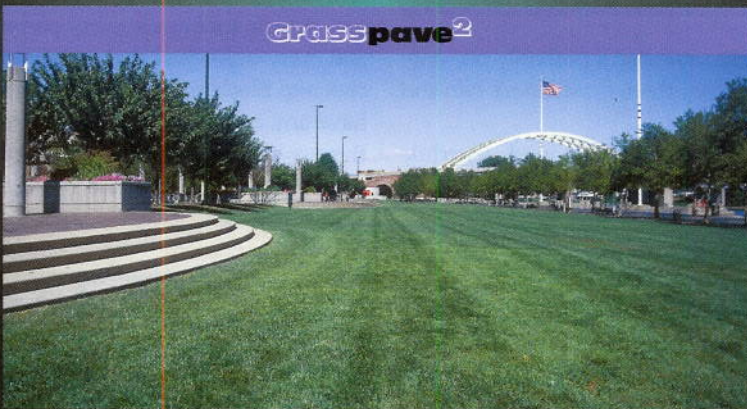
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PRACTICE

Eventually, I would be able to play a major role in a number of more interesting projects as a project manager and assistant project manager. However, my early dissatisfaction with work led me to pursue other methods of creative expression. After I read a Critic at Large piece comparing Parc André Citroën to the Luxembourg Gardens, two places I had visited on a studio trip to Paris, I wrote a letter to the editors of *Landscape Architecture* magazine, pointing out the flawed methods of evaluating a park's use found in that article. The letter was published in April 2006. I wrote

"My early dissatisfaction with work in a design office led me to pursue other methods of creative expression."

a second letter after Bill Thompson's Land Matters column decried the state of writing in landscape architecture, following the death of Jane Jacobs. In the letter I noted that I would be interested in writing something for the magazine. Using my first letter as a writing sample, I convinced him to let me try writing for the magazine in my spare time. The fact that they didn't have any other writers living in Las Vegas also didn't hurt me.

The first article I completed was a piece looking at a controversial new law that prohibited feeding the homeless in Las Vegas parks. I researched this story on my lunch hour, on the weekend, and on the Friday afternoons I had off—speaking with homeless people and advocates and reviewing tapes from a public meeting. The editing process on this piece was a little painful for me, and I remember having a long talk with my housemate about whether I should try to fight various edits made. He convinced me to only challenge three edits that