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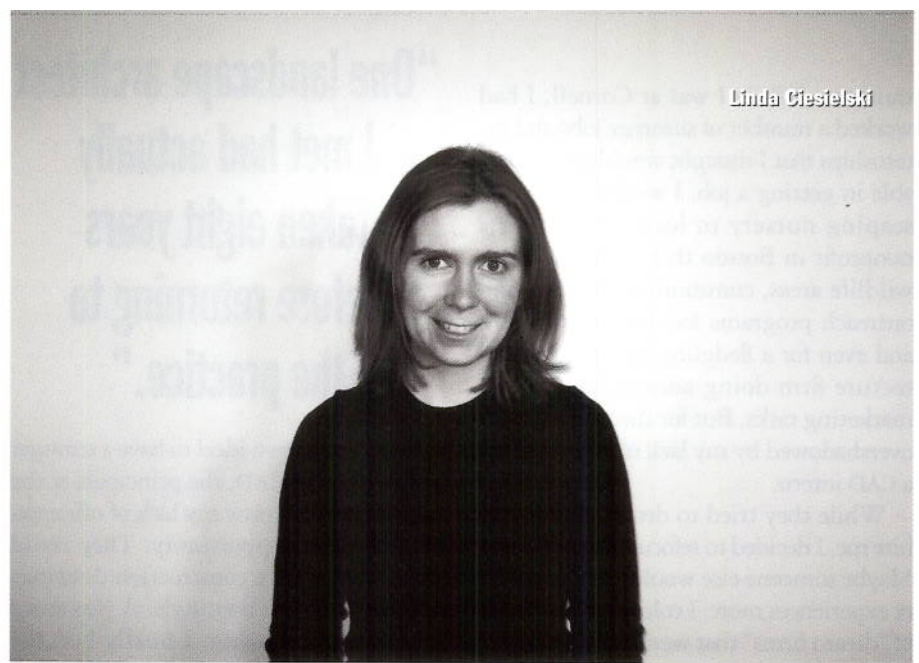
offices and sending off cover letters and copies of my portfolio.

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



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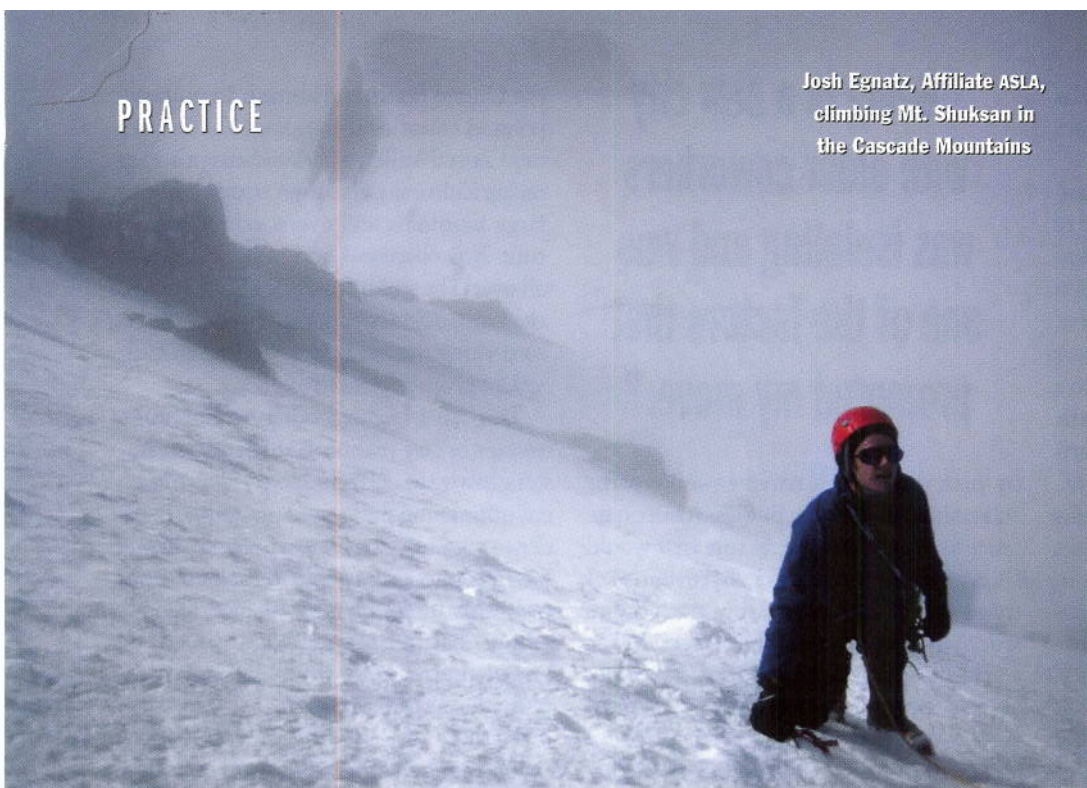
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“ALL OF THE KNOWLEDGE YOU NEED TO REALLY GROW CAN’T BE LEARNED THROUGH PRACTICE ALONE.”

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

“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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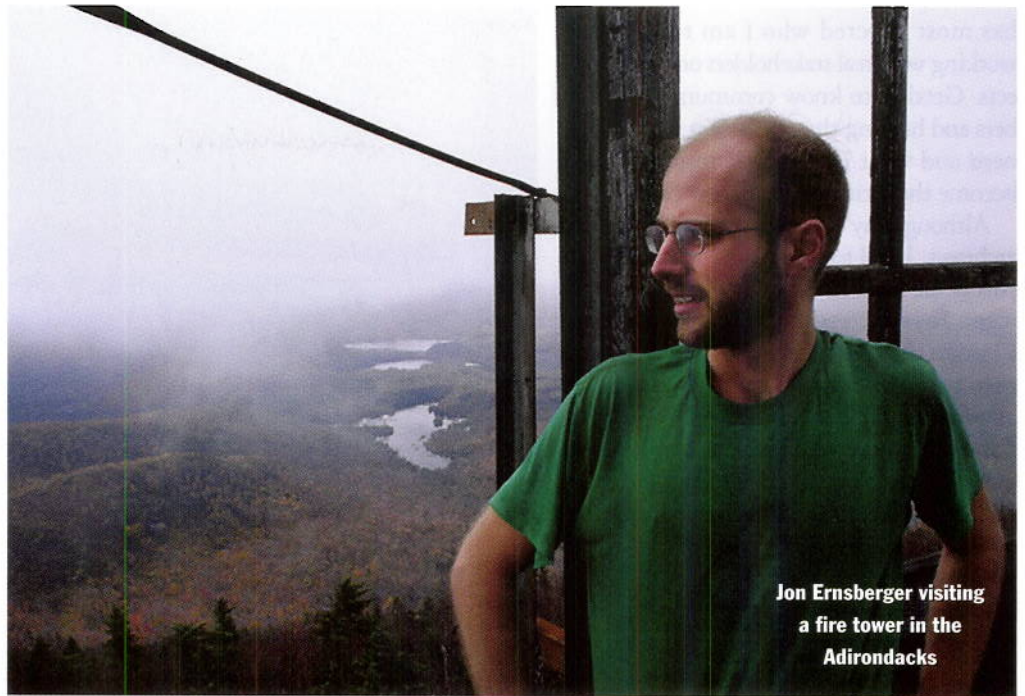
if I really was cut out for landscape architecture.

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.

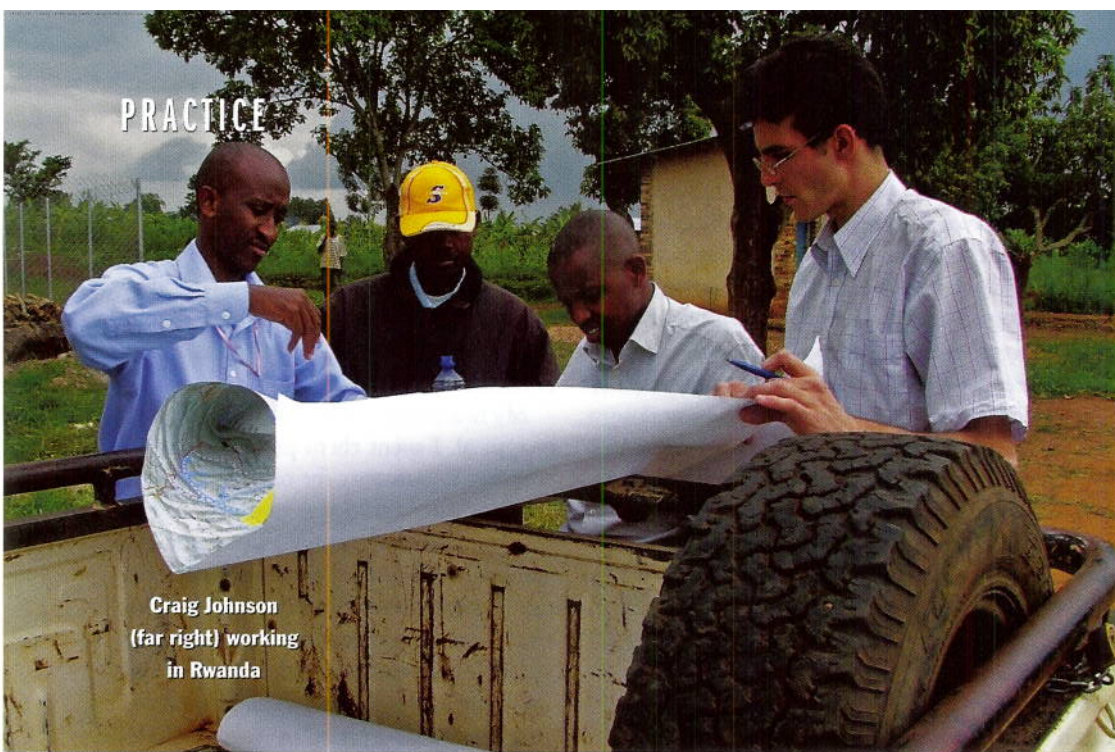
I started to think about getting a more permanent job. After this lengthy break from landscape architecture I was nervous about returning to the scene. I wondered what an employer would think of this hiatus, and I was worried that my skills had already begun to dull with time.

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



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



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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