



Landscape Architects: Stewards of the Built Environment

By Erin Weesner

Few things display the character, goals and visions of a community so discernibly as the identity and caliber of its public spaces. Finding the right identity is a challenge for the whole community, and involves the skills of its residents as well as those of designers, developers, engineers, politicians, planners and financiers. It also involves a group of professionals known as landscape architects. Following is the first in a series of articles illustrating the benefits of good urban planning and design, and the tangible effects it can create for the greater community. Everything in the built environment needs to be designed to maintain quality and therefore value.

The meaning of landscape architecture is often misinterpreted as the literal pruning, mowing and maintaining of a garden. While some landscape architects may engage in these activities, landscape architecture actually refers to the development and design of land for human use and pleasure using plants, landforms, water, paving and/or structures. The term may be new to some people, but the profession actually dates back centuries in countries around the world. In the U.S., Frederick Law Olmsted was the first to call himself a landscape architect as he set about designing the first public park in America, Central Park, in New York City, in 1857. As more people began to practice the philosophies of Olmsted and others, landscape architecture earned a professional recognition in the founding of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) in 1899, and the following year formal education began in landscape architecture at Harvard University. Since these early days, the realm of landscape architecture has expanded to include everything from public parks and recreational spaces to golf courses, resorts, and downtown centers. To get a better understanding of what landscape architects do let's take a look at some specific project examples.

Environmental planning and protection takes place often in the largest scale projects, such as work done within our national parks and conservation land. The National Park Service was actually founded in part by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. in the early 1900s, and more recently, landscape architects across the country have joined in the movement to conserve our parks and maintain the visual quality of our protected lands. Another larger scale type of project is the development of community parks, botanical gardens and public recreation areas. The landscape

architect helps locate the best land for these open spaces, then follows through on conceptual design, what the parks will look and feel like, what programmatic elements each will have and then implements the design using detailed construction documents. Great examples of this project type include Homestead Park, in Washington Township, Ohio, Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania, the Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens, in Columbus, Ohio, the Sister s Garden at Inniswood Metro Park in Westerville, Ohio and the Dublin Community Recreation Center in Dublin, Ohio. Community and town master planning also exhibit the skills of landscape architects. As cities continue to grow and housing and traffic issues require more attention, it is important to provide a cohesive plan and vision of what residents expect to see within their surroundings. Sound master planning ensures that neighborhoods will not only meet the needs of the residents but also enhance the surroundings and provide a strong sense of character and uniqueness. Many examples exist today of sound community planning, such as Simon Kenton Farms, in Springfield, Ohio and Cobleton in Columbus, Ohio. Of historical importance is the community of Mariemont, planned in 1921 in Cincinnati, Ohio, by landscape architect John Nolen. Mariemont remains a popular and beautiful community still today.

One surprising category might include public works of art. While many people may see these projects as solely pieces of art in the landscape, they are often designed and implemented by landscape architects working to make a statement but also to engage the surroundings with the art form. The recently completed Ballantrae Park in Dublin, Ohio, features the work of sculptor Sophie Ryder of London, England as an excellent local example for central Ohio. The Oklahoma City National Memorial in Oklahoma, and the FDR Memorial in Washington D.C. both involved the skills of landscape architects and provide a powerful and influential civic space for reflection. Two types of projects that often go hand in hand are the creation of civic spaces and plazas, and urban design and planning. Civic spaces play an important role in the formation of cities because they are designed not just for the residents but for visitors and tourists as well. In a well-planned urban situation, open spaces will be provided as places to gather and socialize, while the urban fabric of streets, architecture and other development ties it all together. The Nationwide Arena District, in Columbus, Ohio, is a great example of urban design and civic space. The District features entertainment, retail, office and residential uses all designed around the focal point of McFerson Commons Park. The overall design establishes a network of streets and open spaces that create a unique development district within the surrounding urban context, an identifiable sense of place. Bryant Park, in New York City, and Copley Square, in Boston, are two other excellent examples of well-planned civic spaces.

Landscape architects also take a large role in the design and planning of resorts, timeshare, and vacation club projects. From developing the theme of a resort to specifying materials, vegetation and architectural styles, a resort project requires planning from the ground up. Examples include the Hard Rock Hotel at Universal Studios in Orlando, Florida, and Castaway Cay, a Disney resort located on Castaway Cay Island, Bahamas. One final area of practice for landscape architects rests in campus planning and design. Whether master planning an entire campus or restoring/redesigning just a portion, design solutions must account for fluid circulation as well as aesthetically pleasing surroundings and the integration of land and structure. The Wittenberg University Campus in Springfield and the Oval Lawn at the Ohio State University in Columbus both enlisted the help of landscape architects for design and planning services.

While the projects listed above represent only a fraction of the type of work performed by landscape architects, its easy to see that landscape architecture is a broad, all-encompassing profession; one that enhances our surroundings, encourages design with nature, fosters strong, unique communities, and improves and beautifies our sense of place and identity. Through sharing opportunities such as this article, landscape architects hope to raise public awareness of the profession and an appreciation for the value of planning and design in creating a higher quality of life throughout our neighborhoods and communities.

Erin Weesner is the Marketing Coordinator for MSI, a landscape architectural design and urban planning firm with offices in Columbus, Ohio, and Winter Park, Florida. Firm works include:

Nationwide Arena District, Columbus, Ohio; Simon Kenton Farms in Springfield, Ohio; Tuttle Crossing Interchange in Columbus, Ohio; Hard Rock Hotel, Universal Studios, in Orlando, Florida; Homestead Park in Washington Township, Ohio; and Castaway Cay, in Castaway Cay Islands, Bahamas.