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The importance of landscape architects in site design

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The last few years have been difficult for the design and building industry as we have all seen in a reduced number of projects, tightening of costs and tremendous competition among designers. Site design seems to become subject to the lowest bidder and the final product is very different from what was being produced even a few years ago. We are seeing more and more clients try to engage the municipal review process on their own or with consultants with extremely limited budgets. As we all try to trim costs, we often forget that successful site design requires a finesse that considers how the project relates to its surroundings, how people will move through the site and how the project will meet those regulatory requirements such as zoning regulations and stormwater requirements.

Landscape architects are uniquely qualified to create successful and effective designs. A good commercial project site design creates a place where tenants are comfortable regardless of the weather, feel safe and reflect their own values of quality and usefulness. A well-designed project has higher participation which often translates into higher rent.

Despite the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) best efforts over the years, landscape architects are still the profession that "does plants." That is true, and we are the only profession who is actually trained to understand plant materials, but shows a remarkable lack of understanding of the training and skills of a landscape architect.

Although there are technically three professions who can, according to the State of Connecticut licensing laws, prepare site plans, landscape architects have one of the most extensive training programs to do exactly that. Most engineering programs and architecture programs have a single maybe a full year course on site planning. Landscape architects have a full college course of study - including grading (usually a whole year on just that), construction techniques and plan production. Instead of structural steel classes or mechanical engineering calculations, the typical landscape architecture program includes classes on human behavior, regional-level design, ecology and other arts and sciences that affect our built and natural environment. These courses of study help to create a site plan that doesn't suffer from parking spaces where you can't open the door or parking areas where you can't get out of the space once you get in.

In addition, as landscape architects the work we do generates more work. When we are lead on a site plan project, we don't do it alone. There is a local civil engineer, a biologist, an architect, and with more complicated projects or site a myriad of other consultants. The more work we do, the more there is for other firms. The large national conglomerates can't say that. More importantly, when a development project (private or municipal) hires a local firm, the money is spent locally and generates even more money, employs people who pay taxes locally, own houses and live in and contribute to the community. When the money and work gets farmed out to the south or mid-west, that money is just gone. As a Connecticut taxpayer, I find this new trend very troubling.

Connecticut has been home to some of the greatest landscape architecture firms in the country and our current practicing landscape architects are doing great work when we have the chance. We are the ones who are training and doing low impact development before it became an engineering trend, working the first ideas on erosion control and stormwater quality and working to create extraordinary places for the next millennium. Our training allows us to see opportunities where there are only problems, new life for tired places and communities and solutions that fit with the context. A landscape architect can enrich the human experience for any project. Most project benefit immensely from the vision used by landscape architects when planning a project. Architects and engineers provide the essential organs for a design but the landscape architect is the one that molds and models it into an identifiable place. Landscape architects should never be the last one into the project - just to "pretty up the plan."

The seasons are turning again and we hope for a productive and profitable fall.

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