

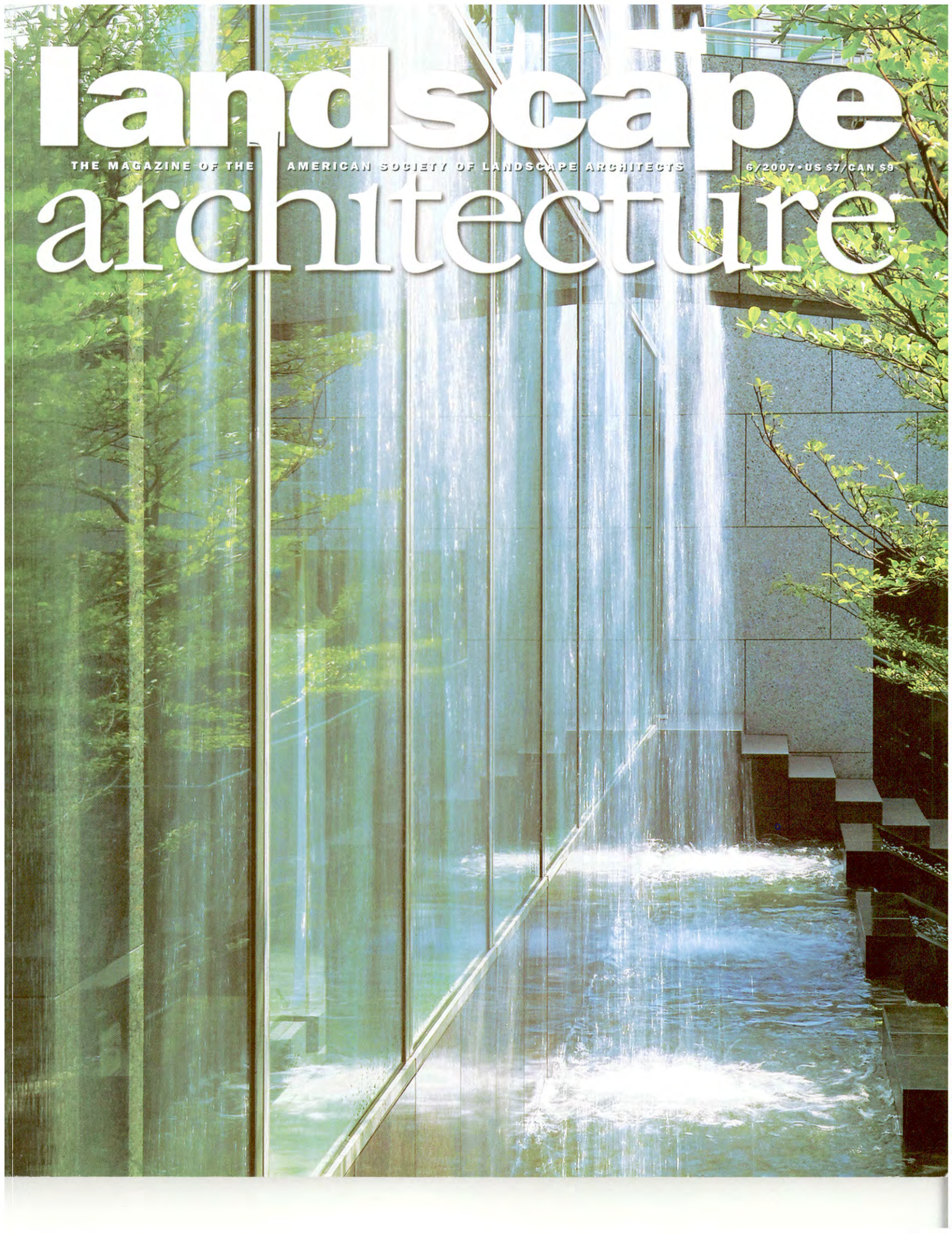
landscape

THE MAGAZINE OF THE

AMERICAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

6/2007 • US \$7/CAN \$9

architecture



THE FIRST CEO ROUNDTABLE on the particular challenges and gratifications of small firms was held last October at the ASLA Annual Meeting in Minneapolis. The session was moderated by Joseph Lalli, FASLA, president and managing principal of EDSA in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Panelists were Gary Hilderbrand, FASLA, of Reed Hilderbrand in Watertown, Massachusetts; Mark Johnson, FASLA, of Civitas in Denver; Martha Schwartz, ASLA, of Martha Schwartz Partners in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London; Tom Oslund, FASLA, of oslund.and.associates in Minneapolis and Chicago; and Ray Leone, of the marketing consulting firm Leone Resources Group in Charleston, South Carolina.

☛ Why go out on your own?

OSLUND: I worked in a large multidisciplinary office for nine years and I really had this desire to have my own practice, to test out my ideas with free rein and free will, and to create a culture that concentrated on the work but in which we could have a lot more fun.

SCHWARTZ: I was working for a corporate firm for about three years after school and I wanted to have a family and it didn't seem like it would be possible. I also wanted to make art. So I tried to convince one of the senior principals that I would go out and find art opportunities because it seemed to me that there might be just a few people in the United States who might want to do big art and I would go and find them and bring it into the office. He just

blew me off and told me I was crazy, so I decided to try it myself.

JOHNSON: To me it's incontrovertible. I couldn't work for anybody else; it would be impossible.

☛ What are the advantages of staying small?

SCHWARTZ: I don't know of any advantages to staying small. The



IS SMALL BEAUTIFUL?

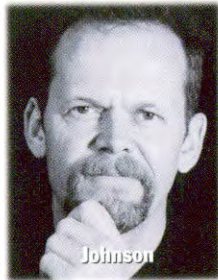
Landscape architects talk about the ups and downs of small firms.



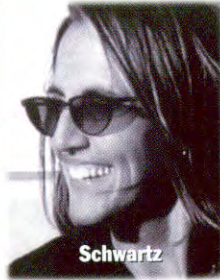
Lalli



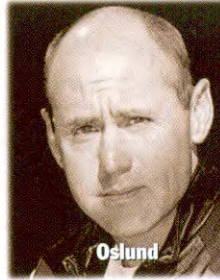
Hilderbrand



Johnson



Schwartz



Oslund



Leone

ILLUSTRATION: BRUNO BUDGEVIC/IMAGES.COM; PHOTOS, FROM LEFT: COURTESY EDSA; © WILLIGENT HARVEY; COURTESY CIVITAS INC.; COURTESY MARSHA SCHWARTZ INC.; COURTESY OSLUND AND ASSOCIATES; COURTESY LEONE RESOURCES GROUP

PRACTICE

pat answer would be that you can maintain control and be selective. The nice thing about being big is that you can make a lot of money. But if you have a big firm and you want to make a lot of money then you had better produce something that a lot of people want, which I don't.

I am bound in size because I have to be involved and look at every single project. But we are now about 40, which is the largest we've ever been, and we have the insane situation of being a relatively small office in two places—one in Cambridge and one in London. I don't recommend it!

If you are a small office, unless you have a real specialty, you end up having a lot of small projects. That creates a need to manage every project and to build each project—it's a lot of work doing a lot of little work, even though it's artistically very satisfying. You need [your business] to be of a certain magnitude to be able to get large projects, and the large projects may want the same level of artistic creativity. But guess what? They're much bigger, there's a much higher fee, and you can make a lot more profit on it.

JOHNSON: I don't see particular benefits in remaining small. We're 25 now, we used to be 55. [Back then] we made money but we weren't a good business; we weren't the kind of design firm I wanted to run. So, not because of the economy but for strategic reasons I reduced the firm down to 20 and we're now building the firm up again around the strengths of the other people in the firm instead of just my strengths.

HILDERBRAND: I think small is beautiful. For me it's really about trying to have an artistic approach to the work that enables us to be somewhat close to every stage of every operation on the job.

OSLUND: I must take issue, Martha, with [your point about] bigger projects. I think you can lose track just as easy on a big project. It's like playing craps in that you have a bigger fee but the bigger projects take longer, and you have to be as attentive on those as you do the small projects.

SCHWARTZ: Well, the economics of it are that you have one project manager for a big project and one project manager for a little project and the economics actually bear themselves out. We've [analyzed which] projects made money, and it's projects that are over \$1 or \$2 million.

JOHNSON: We get much more design authority, authorship, and control of the big projects.

“I am bound in size because I have to be involved and look at every single project.”

—Martha Schwartz, ASLA



“[Big projects] are like playing craps...you have a bigger fee but they take longer, and you have to be as attentive on those as you do the small projects.”

—Tom Oslund, FASLA

How do you find, keep, and inspire staff?

JOHNSON: Number one—make sure you are doing your best work yourself.

SCHWARTZ: If you want good people to go along with you, you have to explain your ideas so people can get behind you. You have to teach. Right now the real issue is personnel. It isn't easy to find staff because everybody's really busy.

OSLUND: You have to be able to attract young people who are smarter than you but who share the passion and conviction, and then you have to find a way to give them a position of control. I've got four young people who can run me over in a minute, and they are running our biggest project.

LEONE: Let me give you a statistic that should scare you: In the next six years, 50 percent of the American workforce is eligible for retirement. So acquiring and retaining talent is your number one challenge over the next 10 years. For a lot of generation Xers, money comes third from the bottom [on a list of priorities]. So you have to look at the whole project that way.

How did you achieve success?

HILDERBRAND: You show conviction about what you want to do, and that allows people to have faith in you. It allows you to surround yourself with like-minded people who will stay with you. It means franchising the people around you on your side of the table and getting confidence from people on the other side of the table.

[My partner and I] have also had from the start personal advisers, financial advisers, and professional design firm advisers. We have also traded secrets and questions with many

of our friends and discussed over long dinners how to make it work and how to keep your convictions in the face of difficult business challenges.

We have a business manager who has been with the firm 10 years. She does an incredible job keeping the office organized

and making sure everything happens. There are almost no boundaries to the things she has at her fingertips or knows how to deliver—she is really kind of the lungs and circulation system of the office.

OSLUND: I know my weaknesses, and I never took a business class in my life. My partner is someone who comes from business, and it was the smartest thing that I ever did because we share a similar philosophical base about the work and about the way in which the culture is created and perpetuated.

[It's important to have the perspective of] somebody who has been through it—my partner came out of a retail business, owning multiple stores, which is like having different personalities in every city. [He had to] handle the personalities and personnel issues that go along with that and also be quite frank about business decisions.

He and I share an office, like Marley and Scrooge. So far, knock on wood, it's been working really well because I do what I do best and he does what he does best, we meet somewhere in the middle, and we still keep our eyes on the prize.

SCHWARTZ: The hardest part of my career and my practice has been the business part. It's really hard to have all the components it takes to be a good designer and then to actually have a business head on you as well. If you only have the right brain, be smart enough to go get a left brain.

For the first 20 years of my practice [my projects] were pretty small. But I knew that I was going to have to give up profitability for the luxury of being able to explore my design ideas, which took a lot of time. I'm self-indulgent; I often don't know when to stop the design process. I just didn't make a lot of money for a long, long, long time because I wanted to do something artistic. You have to have a clear view of what it is you really want out of your practice and be willing to make the sacrifices.

HILDERBRAND: Small firms certainly can be profitable, and there are a hell of a lot of people in this room who are doing reasonably well while doing good, careful work and not having gigantic fees. My office has never had a million-dollar fee and we are a very healthy business. By that I don't mean that we're very profitable, I mean that all of the financial dimensions of the office, including the long-term protection of the business, are as good as they can be, and they are built on small projects.

We have certainly got the ambition to make larger projects and for those projects to be more complex than the ones we have built so far. Having no projects that are losing money is a fantastic place to be and I can't admit that we are there, but there are only a couple [projects] that are not at least around the target for staying healthy. It's about setting expectations at every level of work in the office, at the most junior level and at the most senior

ONE CALL, THOUSANDS OF POSSIBILITIES.



Innovative Design. Steadfast Quality.

For luminaires and for poles. For bollards and lighting accessories. And now an exciting new line of Site Amenities, The StressCrete Group is the one company that can supply it all. Since 1953 we've provided designers with the fixtures to complete their vision. From modern to historical and everything in between.

To request our complete product line please phone toll free **1.800.268.7809** or visit our website at **www.StressCrete.com** or **www.KingLuminaire.com**



King Luminaire • StressCrete • Est. 1953

STRESSCRETE GROUP

The StressCrete Group is ISO Certified.

Northport, Alabama ■ Jefferson, Ohio ■ Atchison, Kansas ■ Burlington, Ontario

CIRCLE 246 ON READER SERVICE CARD OR GO TO [HTTP://INFO.HOTIMS.COM/11567-246](http://INFO.HOTIMS.COM/11567-246)

RECRUITING LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE PROFESSIONALS?

Each day, more than 1,500 landscape architects, students, and other professionals use ASLA's JobLink to search for employment. With an exclusive reach to the landscape architecture community, JobLink is the best way to recruit top-quality candidates for positions at your organization.

Post your employment ad today at www.asla.org.

AMERICAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS
636 EYE STREET NW, WASHINGTON, DC 20001-3736
202-898-2444 • FAX 202-898-2285 • WWW.ASLA.ORG

PRACTICE

level. It's empowering people and also expecting their very best.

JOHNSON: We have figured out how to make money on any size project. We report all our financial information weekly and I bet this year we have not missed an expense budget by 1 percent—not one line item anywhere. We demand personal accountability from every single person in the firm.

But we have another way of talking about it that I call design accountability—the design itself has to be accountable to something.

You can't just have a fabulous idea if you don't know exactly what it means and exactly what the consequences are. This is something we should be teaching in the schools, because so many people love to run away with ideas. There's a difference between a runaway idea and the intellectual and artistic pursuit of doing something that's beautiful or well crafted. Those are different processes. [Some designers] make the mistake of thinking that the first is the second.

LEONE: We have a rule: Never sign a contract that will make you angry to fulfill.

LALLI: [For many years] we did a lot of good projects but we never made any money. Two things changed the situation. First we hired a business consultant who came down and evaluated what we were doing. Then we hired a financial officer. We were landscape architects dealing with money—we had no training and it wasn't what we liked to do. For the past 12 years the firm's profitability has gone up, up, up, and up.

How does a small firm manage growth??

JOHNSON: If you performed on the \$4,000 jobs you better perform on the \$290,000 job—that is number one! You've got to figure that problem out and figure it out in a way that you won't have to whack a bunch of people when you're done with that job.

LALLI: [When you land a big project] it's already time to start looking for the next one; otherwise you'll have peaks and valleys. You'll wrap up from that job and you won't have any work and you'll have to let people go.

LEONE: I've seen so many different companies go broke because they were doing a million dollars worth of business and then the next year they're doing two million and think they're really doing well when in fact the market has

“The design itself has to be accountable to something. You can't just have a fabulous idea if you don't know exactly what it means and what the consequences are.”

—Mark Johnson, FASLA

What kind of marketing do you do?

JOHNSON: Visibility is absolutely critical, but people have to know what they're seeing. We've each defined ourselves in a way that people know who our firms are, what we represent, and what we stand for, and when we're visible then the right people call us.

Believe it or not, five years ago, 83 percent of our work came in the door through referrals, and right now maybe 5 percent of our work comes through referrals. We are an aggressive marketing machine. We're invested in changing the urban infrastructure of America.

Whether it's transportation or landscape, we are in the heart of the biggest cities we can get our little hands on and we are going where the problems are really, really hard, because we learned how to address them and we have built credibility. We are constantly trying to create

opportunities around the country through very, very long lead marketing and relationship building, and it's proved to be extremely successful. It was very scary making that transition from 83 percent this way to 95 percent the other.

SCHWARTZ: Marketing in the United Kingdom and Europe is very different than in the United States. I can't say I'm a great success in the United States; I'm much better off in Europe, where they do business based on interpersonal relationships. Europeans want to work with people they like, whereas here it's more transactional. People want to give you work if you can do it in time and within budget and they don't care much about the in-between stuff. I have a business development person who has made all the difference in the world and that's not a marketing person and it's not a PR person.

OSLUND: Everybody here does fabulous work and obviously that's the place to start. We're focusing on the work, and I'm a believer that if you just keep your nose to the grindstone that things will happen.



“You need to know what your market share is... just because you're making more money this year, you may not be better—just lucky.”

—Ray Leone

SCHWARTZ: That's very old school!

OSLUND: I know, but I don't have an office in London. I have one in Chicago where we have to use a different strategy. The work gets us in the door, and it's hard to perpetuate the myth. You have to deliver the goods.

SCHWARTZ: My ex-husband, Peter Walker, also believed that if you just do good work, people will come. That was pre-media age, and we are in the media age. And yes, you have to do good work. But now when people can have access to [so much information about] you, what you brushed your teeth with, what projects you're working on—if you want to get work, the media is not something that can be ignored.

If you've done something that you really are proud of, make sure that the world sees it because you might get a hit from Korea. Then all of a sudden you're on a plane to Korea because somebody in Korea wants what you're doing. You have to think strategically about how and where you're going to show what it is you're doing.

HILDERBRAND: I, too, have always believed that the work ought to speak for itself. But I agree with Martha—that isn't a reliable strategy today. Every project manager, every client and owner/representative, every construction manager, every developer who is hired by a university to conduct their projects on a profitable basis ... they all have a new set of expectations for how you describe your work.

You used to be able to say that relationships cemented work opportunities. Today you're asked to describe your performance on change orders on projects. What's the billing history of the project and tell us where you veered off course and how many times that's happened in your business life? So there is a new level of accountability we all have to meet. How we describe the work, how we understand, how we billed the work, how it's been received, how it lives on, and how we conducted it—those are the more important things in what you call marketing, to me.

And the look of the work you present to clients is still crucial, whether it's electronic or it's in print. It must look great. It's not so hard to make it look okay. Everybody's got the tools. But it's very hard to make it look spectacular.

LALLI: It's also got to get built. The worst



Creation of a space for reflection to provide a peaceful transition from the workplace to inner space requires the finest plant material selected for performance and ease of maintenance.

Angelica Nurseries, Inc. lists over 400 varieties of premium grade nursery stock for the landscape professional's selection. Visit our website or call for your copy of our 2007 catalog today.

Angelica
NURSERIES, INC.
Growth You Can Count On®

11129 Locust Grove Road, Kennedyville, Maryland 21645
Telephone: 800-867-7673 Local: 410-928-3111 Web: www.angelicanurseries.com

CIRCLE 9 ON READER SERVICE CARD OR GO TO [HTTP://INFO.HOTIMS.COM/11567-9](http://INFO.HOTIMS.COM/11567-9)

DISCOVER A REWARDING CAREER IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

Visit the ASLA web site at www.asla.org to learn about becoming a landscape architect. In addition to career information, the page includes a brochure that can be used in the classroom—perfect for school career days and National Landscape Architecture Month!

AMERICAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS
636 EYE STREET NW, WASHINGTON, DC 20001-3736
202-898-2444 • FAX 202-898-2285 • WWW.ASLA.ORG

K



SPECIFY
KORNEGAY DESIGN
LANDSCAPE CONTAINERS

notable alternatives for distinguished projects
877.252.6323 www.kornegaydesign.com

Ten Eyck Landscape Architects • James Hotel, Scottsdale, AZ

CIRCLE 118 ON READER SERVICE CARD OR GO TO [HTTP://INFO.HOTIMS.COM/11567-118](http://info.hotims.com/11567-118)

PRACTICE

thing is to show somebody a lot of projects that never happened. And that also goes to which projects you accept. You've only got so much time. If something doesn't look possible or if it's never going to get built, we pass on it, because [projects like that] don't help us; if anything they hurt us.

LEONE: The best marketing for anything is writing articles for trade publications or newspapers. You can't buy that kind of advertising. When you write an article

“The look of the work you present to clients is crucial. It's not so hard to make it look okay. But it's very hard to make it look spectacular.”

— Gary Hilderbrand, FASLA

you position yourself as an expert in your market, and you need to keep your name in front of people.

☛ Does your firm have plans for transition of ownership?

OSLUND: We have given one of the more senior staff a small part of the company. As I said, I came from a large multidisciplinary firm where I went through an incredibly painful experience of transitioning a firm. I believe we all have a half-life, and to set up and perpetuate a structure that was started on the passion of a person or a couple of people is really quite difficult.

Right now I'm okay with where we are and I'm not too worried about who's going to carry on the torch. Hopefully I'll be around for a while yet, but I think it's okay that offices do what they do and they're just going to go away.

HILDERBRAND: One of our business advisers asks that question every six months, and for the longest time I had my head in the sand. The thing that turned me around

Wide range of paver colors and styles.

Meets all ASTM C902 requirements.

Extremely durable - strong and colorfast.

Size consistent and versatile - often reversible.

Clay pavers contribute to LEED certification.

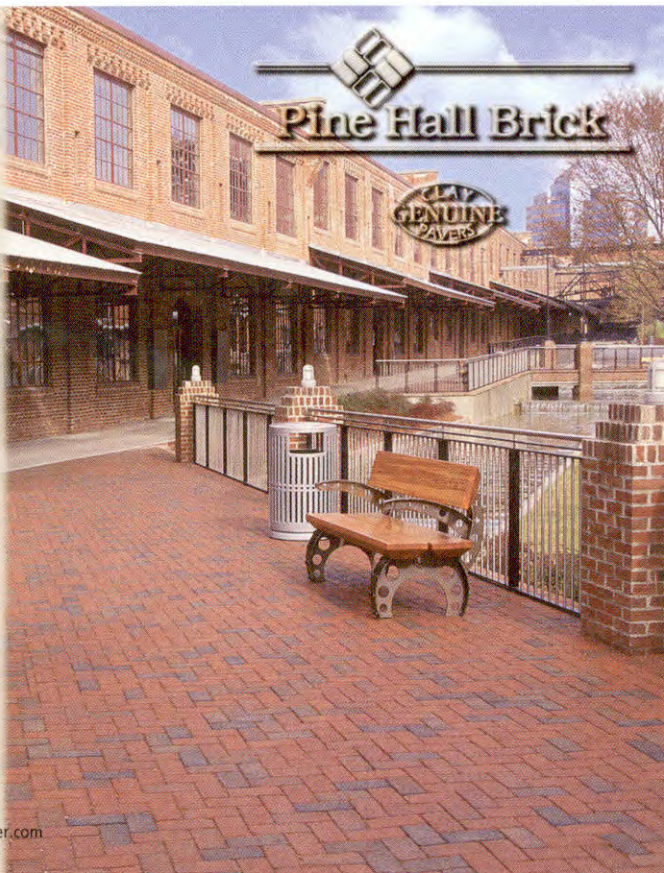
Low environmental impact for manufacturing and building operation and maintenance.

Pine Hall Brick Co., Inc.

P.O. Box 11044
Winston-Salem, NC
27116-1044

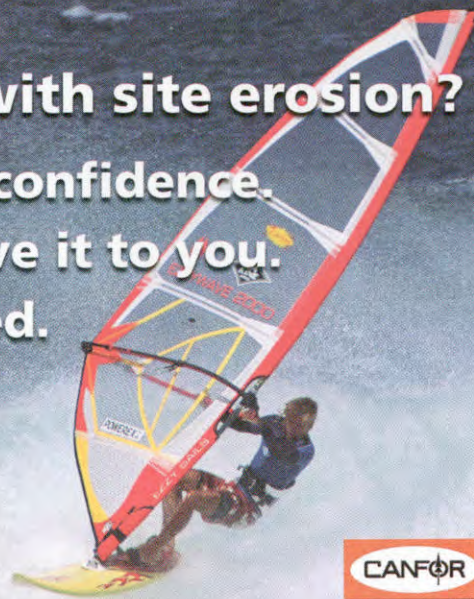
800.334.8689

www.americaspremierpaver.com



CIRCLE 159 ON READER SERVICE CARD OR GO TO [HTTP://INFO.HOTIMS.COM/11567-159](http://info.hotims.com/11567-159)

**Problems with site erosion?
You need confidence.
We can give it to you.
Guaranteed.**



A cost effective alternative to blankets, **EcoMatrix™** has been designed to help you stay within the provisions of the Clean Water Act, Phase II. For our complete product line and specifications see our web site or call 1-800-426-6002.

www.canforfd.com

CIRCLE 40 ON READER SERVICE CARD OR GO TO [HTTP://INFO.HOTIMS.COM/11567-40](http://INFO.HOTIMS.COM/11567-40)

**ASLA
Advocacy Network**

Shaping the Political Landscape

Introducing...

ASLA Advocacy Network

*The New Online Service to
Help You Shape the Political Landscape*

Visit www.asla.org/advocacynetwork/ to take action.

PRACTICE

is the realization that we had a group of people with us for 5, 6, 8, 10, 11 years, and the more you realize the value of that, the greater the implications for the long-term structure of the practice. We are on a long arc of evolving another stage of ownership of the business. We don't have the answers yet, but we are on a track to [find them].

SCHWARTZ: I'm the oldest of all these guys and I should be thinking about it. I want to try to cash in! I think people are starting to step up to the plate to buy me, which is really kind of scary, but I don't think a real design firm can be bought. You can't really motivate your employees by saying "Oh, by the way, next year we're go-

"We are an aggressive marketing machine."

—Mark Johnson, FASLA

ing to be bought and you're going to belong to somebody else." I don't really have the heart for it either.

☞ What's the value of teaching?

HILDERBRAND: Design practice and design teaching are inseparable. The exchange that happens in design studio and in other parts of the university is always stimulating. The gratification one can take from there can be poured back into the office and vice versa.

SCHWARTZ: I am a much better practitioner because I've been teaching [in a landscape architecture program]; because I've had to think very quickly on my feet, I've had to articulate my ideas in order to convey them efficiently to the students, and I see all sorts of ideas I wouldn't come up with myself.

On the other hand I have to say that teaching is a big pain in the ass because it's very hard work. I feel that my brain is trickling out my ears at the end of the studio. It's a positive thing but at the same time there is bit of a cost to your own firm.

OSLUND: Teaching renews my optimism in the profession and the future. I always come away from the experience drained

intellectually but tremendously stimulated about where we can take this relatively young profession.

Teaching also helps you recruit the top students. Getting them is the easy part; keeping them is difficult at times because of the bumps and the turns in the road and the economic downturns. You have to motivate, they have to feel that they're contributing and feel passionate about what they're do-

"I don't think a real design firm can be bought."

—Martha Schwartz, ASLA

ing, and they have to be rewarded adequately. We try to be as transparent as we can about who's responsible for what. There's a whole series of different strategies—compensation, bonuses, all kinds of things.

What does the future hold?

SCHWARTZ: I'm a bit pessimistic about the United States right now. We have not as a country invested in our infrastructure. We've pretty much destroyed whatever kind of commitment we have to a public life and public space. I don't see there being a lot of money from the federal government to make public landscapes, so everybody is dependent upon the private sector.

Europe is a little bit more stable and that's why I'm putting my eggs in the London basket. I think that economy is probably going to be healthier longer than that of the United States. My advice is to diversify. Don't take your work from one place. Also, make sure to set aside a piggy bank and keep some money for the hard times and to not get yourself all puffed up so you really have to collapse.

The topic of sustainability and the environment is really important to all of us here and I know you think it's strange coming from me. Ultimately the only real sustainable strategy that we have in the States is to go back to our cities. A lot of people are really invested in urban landscapes and suburban landscapes, but we should all be collectively thinking about how our talents can be brought to creating a much better environmental strategy for the United States.

LAW

CIRCLE 195 ON READER SERVICE CARD OR GO TO [HTTP://INFO.HOTIMS.COM/11567-195](http://info.hotims.com/11567-195)

CIRCLE 66 ON READER SERVICE CARD OR GO TO [HTTP://INFO.HOTIMS.COM/11567-66](http://info.hotims.com/11567-66)