

**T**O MORE THAN A FEW spring 2009 graduates, this must feel like a rotten time to be launching a career as a landscape architect. Will you allow me to encourage you to hold onto the idea of being a landscape architect, even though the next 12 to 24 months may require more resourcefulness than might have been the case a year ago?

A career in landscape architecture can last for half a century—Larry Halprin is still working in his 90s; Dan Kiley was going strong well into his 80s. Unlike, say, a baseball star or a computer whiz, the incubation period for a career in this field is usually long and slow. And while that felt like a drag when I was young, it's welcomed now as I still like to go to work every day and I love what I do, while my older brothers are all eager to retire because they didn't like the careers they chose. If, when you wake up tomorrow, you know you love this field, we need you to not give up on it.

The worst thing that could happen right now is that landscape architecture would lose you, a talented beginner, because you cannot find the traditional job that many of your friends from last year were able to get without 10 percent of the effort that it will take you to find a job. As discouraging as the job market is, and as much as many of us in the profession are clearly hurting from the recession, I want to make a case to you, class of 2009, for optimism and resourcefulness. We will need every one of you to successfully address the staggering landscape and environmental challenges that need tackling in every corner of the world—in Iowa and in Ethiopia, from something as small as a better way to collect rainwater to something as big as how to improve the continuity of wild areas as corridors for migratory species.

Please forgive my presumption to suggest a few alternative avenues that you might pursue if you are thwarted in your initial job search, or even a completely different and possibly better way to start the journey of becoming a landscape architect. The summer I was a carpenter and built a playground for the Urbana, Illinois, Parks Department, or the time I spent working in the related urban design office of Kevin Lynch and Steve Carr—and even the weekend “landscaping” that my wife and I did while we were having to build our first house, are all immutably important parts of my being a better landscape architect. So here are my suggestions:



Michael Van Valkenburgh

## IN A TOUGH JOB MARKET, REASONS TO PERSEVERE

If your dream job isn't available, consider some alternatives.

By Michael Van Valkenburgh, FASLA

**1. Start with a job in a smaller office** where you have the opportunity to learn the things you don't know. Even if the scale of the projects is not what you are aspiring to personally, or even if you find your tastes differ radically from those of your boss, you will have a better opportunity to be exposed to all phases of a design in a small office than you might in a big office with projects that take many years, or even decades, to complete.

**2. If you find a position at the very bottom of the ladder, take it seriously** rather than feeling disappointed (this is good policy even in the best of economic times). Many people working at my firm, for example, despite their emerging talents as designers, are doing all sorts of unglamorous and ordinary things with an extraordinary level of dedication and care.

**3. Look for work in one of the many fields that overlap with landscape architecture**—ecological engineering, civil engineering, gardening, forestry, journalism, carpentry, construction, food production, or not-for-profits such as botanic gardens or any number of efforts around the country that are similar to the amazing New York Restoration Project founded and led by Bette Midler. Invention and creativity often come from the margins of the field, and oftentimes these adjacent professions will appreciate the perspective you bring as someone who has been trained in design.

**4. Explore working abroad.** Expand your cultural horizons, learn another language, experience another cultural perspective—these are all things that will serve you well in your career. I worked the summer of 1972 for Dame Sylvia Crowe in London as the office assistant. I was charged with making the tea, buying the biscuits, and watering the boss's plants (see item 2 above). I also focused on learning a lot of basic professional skills while exploring a city and a culture that were entirely new to me. I made so little money that I lived in a youth hostel and slept in a dorm room with what, in my memory, was upward of 50 others every night, but I also saw a lot of things that I wouldn't have if I had stayed at home. I wouldn't trade this one summer for the world.

**5. Look into grant opportunities** that might allow you to travel or continue your studies in specialized ways. The summer after I graduated I did a grant fellowship at Dumbarton Oaks. I worked in the gardens there half the day, read in the library in the afternoon, and spent the summer with a small (*Continued on Page 133*)

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(Continued from Page 134) stipend that allowed me to see every built Dan Kiley landscape in America. This program was resurected this year, and only 14 people applied for three positions!

**6. Give yourself a broader base** by exploring areas of personal interest without focusing on their direct applicability to your professional skills. The landscape imagination that you develop as a designer will be stretched by many things, most of them experiences you have outside the office. For instance, while I was between degrees, I studied photography at the Boston Museum School.

**7. If you find yourself in a job that is so far removed from landscape architecture that even the most optimistic mindset couldn't make it seem like a form of training, remember to keep yourself inspired.** Have you read the play *Arcadia* by Tom Stoppard or *Six Memos on the Next Millennium* by Italo Calvino? What about Robert Smithson's canonical essay on Central Park and the dialectic landscape? Witold Rybczynski's biography of Frederick Law Olmsted? How about Andrew Jackson Downing's, J. B. Jackson's, or John Stilgoe's books, or essays by James Corner, Elizabeth Meyer, or Charles Waldheim? Have you read Anita Berrizbeitia's book on Roberto Burle Marx in Venezuela? Do you know Anuradha Mathur's work?

Without wishing to minimize the difficulty that many grad-

uates are facing today, I offer this list as a starting point for finding what might need to be an indirect pathway into the profession. Please take heart in the fact that there will always be work that requires the skills of a landscape architect. There is no doubt in my mind that the future for the profession is bright even if the immediate present is not ideal. The most important civic pursuits for this century will be taming the sprawl of suburbia; making clean water, affordable housing, and open spaces available to everybody; cleaning up the toxic messes that many of our predecessors didn't even know they were creating; and making the city both more beautiful and more efficient.

Above all else, don't abandon the field. There is never a bad time to be a landscape architect. The landscape is the most important piece of "infrastructure" that we possess in common as a society and as a planet. Transforming the way it is designed and built will be a fundamental part of any effort to address the challenges of the 21st century.

Please stick with us. We will need your talents and your enthusiasm. The next Frederick Law Olmsted, Roberto Burle Marx, Ian McHarg, Martha Schwartz, or Sylvia Crowe is out there, reading this, right now.

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*Michael Van Valkenburgh graduated with a BSLA degree from Cornell University's College of Agriculture in May 1973 and did not land his first full-time job in a landscape architecture office until November, after a long search during a significant economic downturn.*

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