

MAR 2017 / VOL 107 NO 3  
US \$7 CAN \$9

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN  
SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS



# GET STARTED

What does it take to launch  
your own firm?

---

## ROLL WITH IT

Steve Durrant of Alta is making  
better places to bike

---

## CHICAGO RIVERWALK

Sasaki takes city dwellers  
down by the river

---

## LEARNING FROM DROUGHT

How a die-off helped Houston's trees



**BARELY FIVE YEARS** after getting his bachelor's degree in landscape architecture, Nick Aceto was a principal of his own firm, Terrain Land Architects, which is now Aceto Landscape Architects (ALA), in Basalt, Colorado, along with his wife, Caitlin Aceto, ASLA. "I always wanted to have a business and be my own boss," he says.

ALA has kept them both employed full-time (and then some) for the past two years, with additional staff a possibility, but it didn't start out that way. After school, Nick was working at a small firm; he started down the road toward independence when he and Caitlyn relocated for her new job and his boss allowed him to continue working remotely. Aceto took advantage of other opportunities to work from



**WHAT DOES IT REALLY TAKE  
TO LAUNCH YOUR OWN  
DESIGN FIRM?**

BY KEVAN WILLIAMS

# START YOUR ENGINES



JAMIE CSIZMADIA

**OLTHIA**

OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA  
EST. 2011  
PRAIRIE LANDSCAPES,  
RESTORATION

“As business owners, we have an opportunity for origination. We create our own unique ‘cultural blueprint’ of what it means to do landscape architecture. We get to fully infuse our work with our personal signature and our soul’s purpose. We determine our hours of operation, our life–work ratios and overlap, the types of projects we desire to bring into this world, and the methods we employ to do so.”

home and consult part-time, building a network of firms that brought him in for contract work. “It kind of evolved over time, and eventually I started getting picked up by some architects to do some work, a lot of graphic work in the beginning,” Aceto says. Graphic projects, along with signage and wayfinding, were a service niche that the Acetos carved out as they worked toward licensure as landscape architects; it still remains a significant part of their workload.

“In some ways, there’s never been a better time for someone starting out in that so many of the tools for marketing and promotion are right there. The Internet has changed so many things in terms of getting your message out,” says Nancy Egan, who leads New Voodoo, a consulting firm that works with designers of varying disciplines on marketing. And it’s not just the Internet—laptops, subscription-based software licenses, and coworking spaces are among the many tools that designers are using to launch new small businesses.

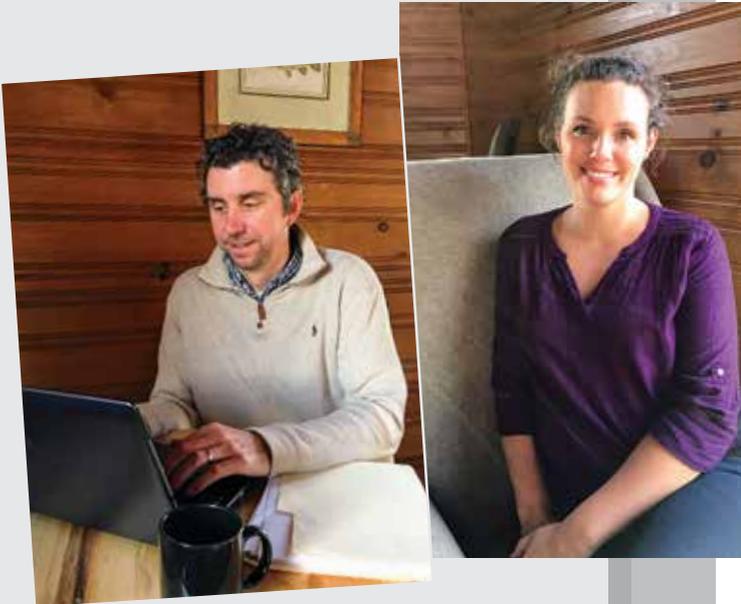
According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, about one in five landscape architects is self-employed. I spoke with some of these principals around the country to learn more about what it takes to launch a small design business today. Though keeping up with rapidly changing technologies, skills, and modes of practice was a concern, other worries were more timeless, such as maintaining good relationships with clients and team members and ensuring that money flows in to pay the bills.

“I WORK SEVEN DAYS A WEEK. I WORK HARDER AS A SELF-EMPLOYED PERSON THAN I EVER DID AS AN EMPLOYEE.”

—NICK ACETO

“NO ONE TELLS YOU THAT CREATIVE DESIGN ACCOUNTS FOR ONLY ABOUT 15 PERCENT OF THE TIME.”

—THOMAS ANGELL, ASLA



JASON JUSTICE, ASLA,  
AND LEIGH JUSTICE  
**LAND DESIGN GROUP INC.**

GAINESVILLE, GEORGIA  
EST. 2007

LARGE-SCALE DEVELOPMENT,  
COMMERCIAL DESIGN, PLANNING,  
ARBORICULTURE

“We wanted the freedom to collaborate with other professionals on a range of design projects. We had come to the point personally and in our geographical area that it was more promising to invest our skills and abilities in a company that we could guide.”

If Aceto's story of succeeding as your own boss is the aspiration for many young designers, it's also the outlier, at least in terms of career stage, among the principals I spoke with. Most of them were much further along in their careers, sometimes 10 or more years in, before they decided to launch their businesses. During that time, they picked up skills, built relationships, and even landed choice projects that made them feel much more confident about their chances of branching out on their own. But there's no formula for the right time or career stage. “It's like when people talk about getting married or having a child: There's no good time, and there's no bad time. You've got to decide: Do I have enough skills, have I learned enough in practice to do projects all by myself?” Egan says.

One of the first things to think about coming out of school is how to continue your professional training. “Going into business for yourself or with a partner is a very personal choice that is not really based on technical considerations, but I will say you can make things harder or easier on yourself,” says Paul Nakazawa, an architect who teaches professional practice at Harvard's Graduate School of Design. “Certain firms are noted at different times for producing other firms.... They are great firms in the sense that they not only produce good work, they produce good people,” Nakazawa says. If you've got an independent streak, those are the places to look for when seeking out internships and early career jobs.



JEFF CUTLER

**SPACE2PLACE**

VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA

EST. 2001

PUBLIC REALM, INFRASTRUCTURE,  
URBAN DESIGN

"If you are looking to start your own practice, it is important to get experience at as many aspects of the job as possible. This provides you with an opportunity to learn and understand every part of how a project comes together. Gain as broad of an experience as you can. That way when you do start your own practice, you are more self-sufficient and don't have to hire as many people to fill in your experience gaps."

"WE BEGAN WITHOUT MUCH CAPITAL OR EVEN OFFICE SPACE. THE TIME SIMPLY CAME UPON US, THE WINDOW OPENED, AND WE RAN WITH IT."

—JASON JUSTICE, ASLA

That's the way things played out for Thomas Angell, ASLA, who worked for the landscape architect Robert Marvin in Walterboro, South Carolina, for eight years before founding his own company, Verdant Enterprises, there in 1995 (Verdant moved to Savannah, Georgia, in 2012). "He blessed me when I hung out a shingle in his own small town," Angell says. "[Marvin] had ascended from garden design to master planner," he explains, saying there wasn't much competition between the two as Angell was pursuing residential projects at the time. Marvin even assisted Angell by sending smaller commissions his way. But despite that training, mentorship, and support, Angell wouldn't recommend following exactly in his footsteps. "Consider a consortium or a partnership. It's been hard to be the sole proprietor, both emotionally and financially, even intellectually," he says.

Nakazawa agrees, saying, "The Lone Ranger scenario is the toughest one, at any age, under any conditions." Partnerships, which allow for start-ups to bring in broader networks and more diverse skills, are much more sustainable. That's the strategy that Maura Rockcastle, ASLA, and Ross Altheimer, ASLA, employed when founding Minneapolis-based TEN x TEN Studio in 2015. The two met while working and teaching in Minneapolis and began informally discussing the idea. "We had started chatting a while ago, about what our experience was, and what we wanted to do in the field. There were a lot of shared views and optimism about the future of landscape practice in the city," Rockcastle says. The two began soliciting feedback on freelance



GIGI SALTONSTALL, ASLA, AND  
LISA GIERSBACH, ASLA  
**G2 COLLABORATIVE**  
WALTHAM, MASSACHUSETTS  
EST. 2013  
SMALL INSTITUTIONAL, URBAN  
HOUSING AND STREETScape,  
RESIDENTIAL DESIGN

“It is good to really learn what it is that makes that employer successful and less successful. Every situation is a learning situation, no matter how long you have been practicing. Sometimes it is not the obvious stuff you need to pay attention to, but more subtle things like building relationships with clients and colleagues. Good mentors can teach you a lot about relationship building and serving clients well.”

work from each other, and teamed up on a design competition proposal—Automata, a design for a lakefront kiosk for the 2015 Chicago Architectural Biennial—to make sure the relationship would work. “That’s when we let our bosses know we were leaving,” she says. The next day, they were selected for the first phase of Mill 19, a tech hub in Pittsburgh, based on an RFP they submitted with MSR Architects.

Another set of relationships to cultivate is with the broader team, beyond you and possibly a partner or two, that will make your firm go. “A landscape architect is good at design and communication but has no small business training,” says Angell, who has a part-time bookkeeper on staff. Rockcastle and Alzheimer took small business classes to grow their knowledge, but also brought in a lawyer. “Build solid infrastructure,” Alzheimer recommends. That means working with lawyers to choose the appropriate legal structure for your business—such as a sole proprietorship, limited liability company, or S corporation—insurance brokers to protect yourself from risk, web designers, and especially accountants and bookkeepers. They sought recommendations from the instructors of a course they took at a small business development center, and conducted interviews to find the right fit. “We found a boutique lawyer that specialized in artists, designers, and start-ups. We did that with accountants as well,” Rockcastle says. The cost for the initial legal work was around \$1,000, lower than a large law firm thanks to their attorney’s familiarity with their area, and they pay about \$1,000 annually to their accountant for payroll management and other services.

“I HAD NOTHING MORE TO LOSE.  
THAT’S THE TRUTH. LOOKING  
BACK, I CAN SEE THAT  
EVERYTHING I WAS HOLDING  
ONTO HAD TO CRUMBLE FIRST.  
THIS IS STILL ONE OF MY  
FAVORITE TURNING POINTS  
OF MY LIFE.”

—JAMIE CSIZMADIA

“BUILD UP A FINANCIAL CUSHION BEFORE LAUNCHING SO THAT YOU CAN SURVIVE THE FLUCTUATING INCOME STREAM. YOU WILL NEED IT TO KEEP CALM AND REMAIN SELECTIVE ABOUT THE PROJECTS YOU TAKE ON.”

— MATT DONHAM, ASLA



NICK ACETO AND  
CAITLIN ACETO, ASLA  
**ACETO LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS**  
BASALT, COLORADO, AND  
PORTLAND, MAINE  
EST. 2011  
SITE PLANNING, VISIONING,  
SIGNAGE/WAYFINDING, GRAPHICS

“In a way I think it was fortuitous that I came out of school in the midst of a recession. The necessity of the situation put me in places I may not have experienced if I were to follow a more conventional career track in a growing economy. It made me pay attention to the few opportunities that presented themselves and understand why and how clients kept coming in, even though the rest of the world was mired in financial turmoil.”

A design firm is a business, and one of its functions is to keep its staff paid, which means that good accounting must be a high priority for anyone starting out. “Firms don’t devote any resources to it. They don’t know if they’re making money or not,” says Mark Zweig, founder and chairman of Zweig Group, which conducts research, publishing, and consulting on the business side of the design field.

Jamie Csizmadia went as far as bringing in a nondesigner, Tiffany Stuhr, who has a background in data management and analytics, as director of operations for her Oklahoma-based firm, Olthia. “She has been working on all of the business strategy parts. That has allowed me to focus on being the personality of my business,” Csizmadia says.

Managing cash flow can be tricky when projects stretch over months or years, especially for landscape architects, who are often subconsultants to architects and other firms and so may be waiting on those groups to pass fees down from the clients. “The way the industry is, you don’t get paid until the permit is pulled. That can sometimes drag out for months, which isn’t good,” says Jason Justice, ASLA, of Gainesville, Georgia-based Land Design Group. For some who started their firms before the recession, like Thomas Angell, dwindling cash flow and commissions meant hard times and cutting full-time positions, which have taken years to recover.

“As a small business, one of the hardest challenges is to be able to do everything,” says Leigh Justice, Jason’s wife and business partner. Although their own skills are complementary—Jason has worked more with engineers, and Leigh with residential projects and developers—it still doesn’t cover everything. When they need to, they’ll call on their own subconsultants to provide extra horsepower or specialized expertise.



DEB MYERS, ASLA  
**DEBORAH MYERS**  
**LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE**  
 BOSTON  
 EST. 2015  
 URBAN DEVELOPMENT,  
 MIXED USE, INSTITUTIONAL,  
 PUBLIC PARKS

“What drove me to start my firm was a strong belief that I could create a business that allows people to grow professionally, meet the needs of clients, and execute projects to the highest standards. Finding a healthy life-work balance was a strong underlying goal. I surveyed many firms and other industries to see if I could be creative with my benefits package in order to compete with more well-established practices. I want my employees to feel a sense of ownership and pride in building a successful firm.”



THOMAS ANGELL, ASLA  
**VERDANT ENTERPRISES**  
 SAVANNAH, GEORGIA  
 EST. 1996  
 RESIDENTIAL, INSTITUTIONAL,  
 MASTER PLANNING

“Employee turnover was a real frustration in a small, rural town (Walterboro, South Carolina). It’s better now in the city with a nice office, goods and services, food and culture. Driving 500 miles a week to sites that are one to two hours away is tiresome but necessary.”



DANIEL WOODROFFE, ASLA  
**dwg.**  
AUSTIN, TEXAS  
EST. 2010  
URBAN ARCHITECTURAL  
LANDSCAPES

“Tell your wife/husband/  
significant other that you love  
them every day. Starting your  
firm is hugely rewarding, but  
it is an uphill sprint at first and  
hence sacrifice is necessary.  
A new business requires a lot  
of time and effort, and frankly  
there are only so many hours  
in the day. Find balance.”

The individualist streak is strong in the designers who start their own business, and sometimes that can get the better of them, in the form of too many hours devoted to tinkering with websites when they should be connecting with clients, or too much pride in doing it all themselves. But a landscape architect already requires familiarity with so many skills—from design and construction to horticulture and ecology—that one of the best skills you can bring to your firm is delegation, relying on others’ expertise so that you can focus on yours.

Getting yourself and your team set up is another big decision. Most of the landscape architects I spoke to took advantage of the flexibility that technology provides early on, working from home, public libraries, or coffee shops while they tested out their new business. But as things started to get more established, there was a divide: Some stayed small and continued to work from home, but others went for coworking and flexible office spaces, and a few decided to invest big in their companies, renting space and outfitting it with new furniture and equipment. Which path is right depends on the kind of clients you’re working with, the culture you’re trying to create within your firm, and the image you want to project.

“The first decision, to move from the dining room to an office downtown, was terrifying,” says Daniel Woodroffe, ASLA, whose Austin, Texas, firm, *dwg.*, has since grown to a staff of 20 from when he launched it in 2010. That first office, a coworking space that provided a shared conference room and other perks, gave the firm a more professional presence, but also connected it to a community of other professionals—interior designers, artists, and a developer. “It really solidified an important lesson of cross disciplinary collaborative working,” Woodroffe says. The connection with the developer in particular also led to new clients and projects for the firm.

“MY FRIEND TOM BURFORD,  
THE APPLE AND FRUIT  
EXPERT IN LYNCHBURG,  
VIRGINIA, TOLD ME TO DO  
IT—AND YOU LISTEN TO TOM  
WHEN HE GIVES ADVICE.”

— MATT WHITAKER, ASLA



BILL SALLANS

“WE MAY HAVE FOUND THE BOTTOM OF THE INTERNET SEARCHING THINGS LIKE ‘SMALL BUSINESS INFRASTRUCTURE.’”

— MAURA ROCKCASTLE, ASLA,  
AND ROSS ALTHEIMER, ASLA



MATT DONHAM, ASLA  
**RAFT LANDSCAPE  
ARCHITECTURE, DPC**  
BROOKLYN, NEW YORK  
EST. 2012  
CAMPUS AND CIVIC SPACES

“The prevalence of narcissism in firm leadership makes much more sense to me now that I’m in it. I feel a constant imperative to perform—as the creative visionary in a competitive field, as the competent professional in the face of doubting clients, as the knowing project director despite the novel challenges of each site, as the confident firm leader unfazed by the always uncertain income stream. It’s a challenge to maintain self-awareness and compassion while pushing yourself to succeed in all of these roles.”

TEN x TEN is also taking advantage of coworking, sharing a space with another landscape architecture firm, Travis Van Liere Studio. “We’re trying to keep overhead costs at a minimum and share resources with other companies,” Rockcastle says. Another benefit of these kinds of work spaces is that they allow shorter leases and varying spaces, often from a single desk to multiple offices, allowing businesses to grow in place. For a firm with intermittent projects, that kind of flexibility is a benefit. “We’re able to work from anywhere really easily, so that if we couldn’t afford rent, we could go back to the public library really easily,” Rockcastle says. Monthly subscription models for software such as Adobe Creative Cloud are another way that a firm’s costs and resources can be tuned to its workload; however, this model swaps a higher initial investment and low operating costs for a higher operating cost, which has its own drawbacks. For some, connections to universities as faculty, adjuncts, or instructors can provide access to software and other technology that can facilitate starting up a firm or research studio. To support their start-up, they borrowed \$8,000 from family for technology, materials, and other start-up costs.

Matt Whitaker, ASLA, who established W. M. Whitaker & Associates Landscape Architects in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 2013, has taken a determined approach to capitalizing his firm, starting with a \$15,000 investment. “I know other people who have started at different stages, and I have found that it’s very important to not look like you’re running an office out of your house,” Whitaker says. In addition to space, he’s



MATT WHITAKER, ASLA  
**W. M. WHITAKER & ASSOCIATES**  
**LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS**  
CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE  
EST. 2013  
PUBLIC, COMMERCIAL,  
RESIDENTIAL

“The biggest challenge has been getting medium to large public projects because of our size and short history. You can have all the experience of working for other firms you want, but that time was spent under the guidance of the principals there, no matter how strong your role. You were never running anything without their oversight as you do when you start your own firm.”

“NETWORK! I WISH I HAD BEGUN NETWORKING EARLIER IN MY CAREER AND PARTICIPATED IN MORE LOCAL/NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, BOTH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE FIELD OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE.”

—KIMBERLY GARZA, ASLA

focused on office equipment. “I have made less than my employees for the last two years so that if we need a computer or software, we don’t do without,” Whitaker says. “I tend to lean forward into that and say let’s get the right tools.” At *Atw.*, they also focused on investing in specific aspects of the work environment, even seeking out high-quality task chairs for employees. “We spent top dollar on those because you’re gonna be sitting on your bottom many hours a day,” Woodroffe says.

But sometimes, going without for a little while can offer new insights and innovations in the design process. “How am I going to work without a plotter?” Alison Duncan, ASLA, of Alison Duncan Design PLLC in New York, initially asked herself when starting her own firm. “But you really don’t need it,” she says. When preparing graphics for printing, she works primarily in 22-by-34-inch sheets, which easily print on a home printer to 11-by-17-inch paper at precisely half scale. Design firms are increasingly going paperless, which allows limited resources to be invested in other ways. In the case of ALA, they rely on 24-by-36-inch tablets by Wacom for much of their drawing. “We’ve eliminated our need to print and scan and trace,” says Nick Aceto. But they’ve also bulked up their processing power to support those digital graphics. “We made an investment in the beginning to get the fastest computers we could get,” he says.



ALISON DUNCAN, ASLA  
**ALISON DUNCAN DESIGN PLLC**  
**LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE +**  
**URBANISM**  
NEW YORK  
EST. 2011  
PUBLIC, URBAN, RESIDENTIAL

“While I have enjoyed working on a range of project typologies, independently, I see that it is best to establish a niche and to become recognized as someone who works on particular typologies in the field, and to build a portfolio of work in those particular areas, whether it be residential, public, institutional, etc. While larger, established firms can be recognized as providing a range of services for a range of typologies of work, it’s harder to sell yourself in that way, even if you have the skills and experience to do so, when you are a small operation.”

For others, it’s the digital side of things that can be minimized. “When I started, the first year or two, I was working with AutoCAD and doing hand-sketched design, but I noticed that to my clients it was more meaningful to do hand sketches,” Csizmadia says. She also works regularly with a network of trusted contractors, which can save on drafting time and costs on her largely residential portfolio of projects. “I don’t have to communicate as much through drawings,” she says, instead relying on the techniques developed and implemented in previous projects.

Marketing is perhaps the greatest challenge landscape architects face when starting a new firm. There are many tools and strategies available, from mailing lists and advertisements to social media and professional networks, but the goal is always the same: to develop a steady flow of projects from clients. Using those strategies effectively requires developing a clear message. “What is the story you want to tell, what are your goals for your organization, and what do you bring to the table?” Egan says.

The Internet is where a lot of firms are now focusing their traditional marketing activities. “Your website is probably the most critical marketing investment today. You have to define what you’re really all about, and it has to have proper keywords so that people can find you,” Zweig says. “The reality is most new clients go to the web and google.”

No firm, and especially not smaller ones, can do everything, which means that a big part of telling your story is highlighting the set of services you provide. For many landscape architects, that scope can be a geographic one—Angell, for instance, focuses on the Low Country of South Carolina and Georgia—with a broader array of services offered. Another route is to focus on one particular subset of practice, such as master planning or ecological restoration. “Specialists get higher fees, and they’re not as restricted geographically,” Zweig says.



KIMBERLY GARZA, ASLA  
**ATLAS LAB**  
SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA  
EST. 2011  
URBAN DESIGN, SOCIAL IMPACT  
DESIGN, PUBLIC ART

“There is a preconception that starting a firm is stressful and hectic—and it definitely is, but it’s also so exciting and rewarding. I think that people tend to focus on the risk associated with stepping into something new, but it is also so invigorating to build something unique to your vision.”

The niche that Csizmadia chose for her firm, Olthia, is centered on the restoration of native habitats in urban and residential areas. A key part of her marketing strategy has been working with like-minded local organizations to host workshops that educate homeowners about ecology and native plants. “I put that messaging out there with my branding, my scopes of service, and what I’m finding is that I’m drawing those people to me that are motivated, that are leaders in their communities, that are advocates for the environment or nature,” she says. Since then, she says, she’s seen her pool of projects expand to include work for churches and spiritual groups, for whom her message of ecological stewardship is especially resonant.

In addition to more tangible marketing efforts like ads or websites, networking and outreach can be important avenues for getting the word out about your firm. Professional networks are important because they can provide education and mentoring, but they aren’t necessarily the place to focus all your time. “Are you hanging out with people who do what you do, or are you hanging out with people who are clients or influencers of the decision-making process to hire your firm?” Zweig asks.

A better route might be to look for opportunities to create relationships in the broader community. Woodroffe has served as president of the Austin Parks Foundation and encourages his staff to

“KNOW YOURSELF  
AND BE AUTHENTIC  
TO YOUR BRAND.”

— DEB MYERS, ASLA

“STAY SCRAPPY  
AND FLEXIBLE  
AND OPEN TO  
OPPORTUNITIES  
THAT ARISE IN  
SOMETIMES  
SURPRISING  
CIRCUMSTANCES.”

—ALISON DUNCAN, ASLA



ROSS ALTHEIMER, ASLA, AND  
MAURA ROCKCASTLE, ASLA

**TEN x TEN STUDIO**

MINNEAPOLIS

EST. 2015

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE,  
URBAN DESIGN

“We believe our approach to low overhead and investment in excellent staff were among the best things we did when we started. I think we could have been more strategic about the importance of mentorship and more realistic about the time that actually takes with some of our initial hires.”

take on similar activities, such as local planning and review boards. “It’s really enabled us to be demonstrable experts in the community. You simply never know who you’re gonna meet,” Woodroffe says. Angell is serving on the board of an environmental advocacy nonprofit, Coastal WildScapes, alongside ecologists and experts from other disciplines, which has in turn led to new connections and new projects.

For landscape architects, a strong connection to place can be especially important. Many of these principals talked about moving home—often to smaller towns and cities outside the design hubs on the coasts—and serving local communities and advocating for their regional ecosystems. That ethic, combined with the upward trend for the landscape architecture field, can also present opportunities for aspiring designers looking to find their niche. “There are not many landscape architecture firms north of Buford, so we’ve really spent time developing those relationships with area engineers,” says Jason Justice, whose firm is based in the foothills of northeast Georgia. His partner, Leigh Justice, concurs. “Now that a lot of municipalities are requiring LA stamps on projects, there’s a pretty good window to get in with development.” ●

KEVAN WILLIAMS IS PURSUING A PHD IN THE CONSTRUCTED ENVIRONMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA.