Ag Department

Landscape Architecture Alumni Focus on the Green

For most of us, going green is a relatively new concept. However, landscape architects have been environmentally responsible for decades.

Texas Tech University's landscape architecture alumni have been making strides within their industry.

Michael Chad Davis is an alumni who is helping his clients stay green. Davis received his bachelor's degree in landscape architecture from Texas Tech in 1994 and has more than 10 years of experience in planning, designing, and constructing landscapes that are both environmentally-prudent and aesthetically-pleasing.

Davis is a licensed Landscape Architect and Irrigator in Texas. He currently leads the Landscape Architecture Group at Parkhill Smith & Cooper, Inc., an engineering, architecture, interior design, and landscape architecture firm with locations in Lubbock, Midland, El Paso, Amarillo, and Las Cruces, New Mexico.

With increasing concerns about water consumption, environmentally friendly designs have become more relevant and important. Customers request these designs not just to be cutting edge, but to account for the vanishing supply of water. Consequently, landscape architects must be well versed in sustainable practices. Michael Howard explains that the green movement is not a foreign concept to landscape architects.

"The funny thing about landscape architecture is that it's always been focused on sustainability," Howard said. "It's a trendy term now, but the reality is that while these other design professions are just now jumping on the bandwagon, landscape architects have always had to deal with water issues and water conservation, and dealing with plants that are native. Those issues are kind of engraved in the discipline; we didn't have to make a lot of adjustments when the green movement started because we were always green."

There are a variety of green organizations that help educate landscape architects make their projects environmentally-responsible and sustainable.

The United States Green Building Council set the universal standard for sustainable and green buildings. They developed the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification process, which guides architects, landscape architects, and engineers on designing sustainable buildings and landscapes.

LEED accreditation has become increasingly important as clients continue to demand green design. To maintain the accreditation, individuals must participate in continuing education, re-certification exams, and must demonstrate knowledge of green practices.

Davis is focused on embracing the green movement and helping other landscape architects change the way they think about their discipline.

"We are seeing more of the whole green infrastructure, the move of the country to get away from highly engineered concrete solutions to looking more at how nature can handle some of our infrastructure needs," Davis said. "Going out onto the edge of undeveloped land and taking land and clearing it for new developments is not an option. The money is not there like it used to be, and there is more of a commitment to going into these blighted areas and trying to improve them versus taking new areas and developing it. It's a landscape architecture renovation."

Four other Texas Tech landscape architecture alumni work alongside Davis. Brent Clifford, Michael Howard, and Jeremy Schwalk are all part of the landscape architecture group at PSC. Among those, Brent Clifford is a LEED accredited professional.

These alumni have worked on a variety of Texas Tech projects, such as the Pfluger Fountain at Memorial Circle, the Flint Avenue Parking Garage, and currently the new Jerry S. Rawls College of Business Administration.

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Michael Howard, ASLA is one of the main landscape architects working on the new Rawls college.

"One of the things we are doing is reducing the water through irrigation as much as possible, Howard said. "We are also capturing on-site stormwater run-off and we are detaining it so it doesn't all flood off the streets and go into the storm system. There are four retention ponds on site and they withhold for a certain period of time a percentage of the rainfall so that in the event of a storm it isn't catastrophic to the city's storm system. We had to contour the land to capture the rainwater."

Jeremy Schwalk, a 2007 graduate of the landscape architecture program strives to design landscapes that are both environmentally-responsible and aesthetically-pleasing.

"Everybody thinks that sustainable landscapes are just going to be yuccas and cactuses," Schwalk said, "but often times we use something called xeriscape. That is landscaping in ways to reduce or eliminate the need for supplemental water use in irrigation. In areas like West Texas, where we don't have a bunch of creeks and rivers, and have limited amounts of rainfall, we design to utilize the water in a responsible way."

If there is one thing that is certain, it's the green movement. Davis recommends students currently in the program should take full advantage of the classes that are offered.

"My advice would be to delve into the environmental planning aspects of landscape architecture, Davis said. "What we're seeing is even at the federal legislation level, is more emphasis on green infrastructure instead of some of the traditional engineering-hard concrete type infrastructure. It's broadening possibilities for landscape architects. It's probably the most rapidly growing opportunity."

While going green is something everyone can participate in, landscape architects are always committed to creating environmentally responsible designs. Texas Tech's commitment to educating landscape architecture students is proven by their success in the real world. T

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