



# PROGRESS



## Hardly slowing down

**W**hen *Landscape Management* featured an article about landscape design 15 years ago at this time, customers valued green space, texture and natural colors. And decks and swimming pools were the amenities of choice.

Some of those preferences have changed today, and some haven't. But there's no doubt hardscaping materials, equipment, trends and techniques have taken giant leaps over the years.

A lot has improved in hardscaping since his early days in the industry, says Dickson DeMarche, FASLA, director of design for Connecticut-based LaurelRock.

DeMarche, who has worked in the field since 1964, says concrete pavers, for one, have made major strides.

"Back in the old days, when I first started practicing, concrete pavers were just beginning to come into play," he says. "When they first came out, they were not very great."

But over the years, concrete pavers became available in many more patterns, styles and colors. The material is much denser and more resistant now as well, DeMarche says. "One of the most important things is, they've improved their durability. Early on, the color would lighten up and you'd see a lot more sand and gravel exposed."

As more manufacturers gradually entered the market, pressure mounted to make each paver better than the last.

In fact, manufacturers changed the industry, says Ed Castro, president of Ed Castro Landscape. Because of manufacturers, today's flooring systems are more modular and concrete pavers make nicer patterns, Castro says.

According to DeMarche, among the most recent improvements in pav-

**The design/build sector has advanced, along with the materials and technology that have shaped it.**

ers is that sealants now come built in. "In the past," he says, "if you wanted the resistance you had to spray [the material] with a sealant after it had been laid down, and it was an additional cost."

Hardscaping materials resemble natural brick more these days as well. Faux brick looks a little more distressed, a little older, and it's more difficult for an untrained eye to distinguish it from real brick, DeMarche says.

### Customers are different today

Just as materials have changed over the years, so have customers' preferences. Water features are nothing new, DeMarche says, but within the last 10 years they have become more popular.

Whereas swimming pools were the "end all, be all" in the 1960s and 1970s, he says, today's residential clients prefer fountains and waterfalls.

Residential customers have always enjoyed pools and gardens, says Castro, whose company will celebrate its 20th anniversary in 2012. What's new today is customers' desire for exterior kitchens and other add-ons that connect them to the outdoors, he says.

When it comes to connecting to the outdoors, sunrooms and screened porches once ruled. Now they've been replaced by outdoor "rooms" featuring cooking areas, fireplaces, water features, stainless steel products, bars and automated lighting that allow residents to lounge as comfortably as though they were inside.

"The interior and exterior should flow and connect," Castro says. That seamlessness is indicative of how hardscaping design has advanced, Castro says.

### Technology helping shape the industry

Technology has played a major role in making outdoor rooms possible and in advancing the hardscaping industry as a whole. Computer-controlled devices have led to awnings that stretch themselves; screens that open with the push of a button; and lighting options where "you can highlight this and downplay that," DeMarche says.

Not only has technology created more options for customers, it also has changed the way design/build professionals work. They no longer have to go to the library to research information nor draft designs by hand. It makes for a much faster process, but there's a lot to be said for the old-fashioned way.

"There used to be down time between design phases," DeMarche says, "...and I think design was better because of that. I would have kind of an 'aha!' moment and all of a sudden I'd say, 'Gee, this is what we could do!' Design being a creative process, you can't just call it up on demand."

Landscape architects are still creative, he says, but they were even more so when their ideas had time to gel.

"Things move at a much faster pace today," DeMarche adds. "You need it when? OK, we can do that."