

Riding the Tide

Bill Orr is young and ambitious. His landscape contracting business, Houston Landscape Associates, is steadily growing while many area landscape contracting businesses are falling by the wayside.

by Maureen Hrehocik, managing editor



An entrance to 6363 Woodway, a Houston complex. Containerized plants add softness to well-manicured turf and bedding plants.

Bill Orr, a Houston landscape contractor, was returning home from work one day a few years ago, when he saw Spot, his dalmatian, in the middle of the road, licking the hand of a complete stranger.

He stopped to talk to the man Spot had befriended. As it turned out, the stranger, a developer, had stopped to admire a piece of landscaping Orr had done and Spot had stopped to check-out the stranger.

From that purely chance meeting, Orr and the developer began a business relationship that resulted in about nine projects for

the then-aspiring landscape contractor.

That type of business relationship was important to Bill Orr back in those leaner days.

After quitting a secure position with a Houston landscape design/build firm, Landscape Design Associates, Orr started his own company, Houston Landscape Associates in 1974.

At first, he was partner with two principals from LDA. The plan was that Orr would supply the ideas and brain power and LDA would provide work for Orr from an already-established cli-

ent list. After six months, though, Orr thought he could handle the business — and the profits — better on his own.

He worked out of his one-bedroom apartment; his drafting table tucked away in a corner. Business-wise, he found that he wasn't an established-enough name to command the type of contracts he needed to stay afloat. That's why any type of help was appreciated, even from his dog. While his profits diminished, his ambition didn't.

Things have changed. Houston Landscape Associates will do about \$1.6 million in business this year and averaged \$1.5 million each of the previous two years. Contracts have been signed already with buildings that have yet to start construction. The 35-year-old has branched out as 50 percent partner in another satellite company, HLA Construction, whose success potential Orr describes as "like sitting on a powder keg."

A thoroughbred

Houston Landscape Associates has carved a unique niche for itself in the competitive Houston landscape contracting scene. While many landscape contractors are languishing at a dead period in the Houston construction boom, Orr's company, mainly because of the quality of its work and attitude toward projects, is moving ahead.

"We're riding the tide," Orr says.

"We have a good sense of taste and we're not a bit bashful about saying to a contractor a change needs to be made," Orr continued. "We're best at more elaborate design plans and projects with more frills, because we pay attention to detail. We're not a mass production-type contractor.

continued on page 60

We've been accused of being too slow, but it pays off in the end."

Orr also said he doesn't believe in bidding low just to get a contract.

"Attitude to me is extremely important," he explained. "We're more interested in making a project a success than in making a profit. I try to price my work high enough to accommodate any changes that may have to be made when we get into it."

That attention to detail and excellence has spawned a very mutually-satisfying relationship with Houston's largest landscape design company, the SWA Group.

Building clientele

Orr shared a client at an office project called Riverway in Houston with SWA. SWA liked what it saw and has used Orr's company frequently since then.

Kevin Shanley, a landscape architect with SWA said, "Bill does very high quality work and that's why we've kept up our relationship with him."

Many local contractors credit SWA with changing the landscape design and contracting face of Houston. Their trademark style is literally everywhere in the city — park-like atmospheres, inviting people to use the landscape, not just look at it; pedestrian bridges interlocking the scores of highrise office and shopping structures; a softening of what was a very sterile and cold downtown Houston area. In other words, sophistication.

Orr's company has also been involved with Joe Russo, a developer. Together, they have worked on three or four "landmark" projects, according to Orr. He is also responsible and particularly proud of his work at Sage Plaza One, another Houston office complex.

Houston Landscape Associates has done the landscaping for numerous Russo office buildings in downtown Houston, including 7500 San Felipe, 1616 Voss and 6363 Woodway.



Bill F. Orr

"The San Felipe building is the perfect example of what we like to do," said Orr. "Joe Russo believes strongly in what the landscape can do in attracting tenants to buildings."

The San Felipe building was also Orr's first taste of "hardscaping," fountains, walkways and pedestrian bridge-type constructions and what lead him into a partnership with Joe Schofield, a contractor. HLA Contracting was born.

"We've been at it for a little less than a year now and it hasn't been easy," Orr commented. "Joe and I have butted heads, but things are falling into place. This company is filling a void in the market."

Orr explained that void through his own company.

"Most of Houston Landscape Associate's competitors haven't figured out how to tackle the hardscape aspect of their work. This left an interesting niche to fill. They usually have to lean on a general contractor to do it. HLA Construction fills that niche. We provide an important convenience to the client."

Business for HLA Construction is, in Orr's words, "as good as I want it to be."

The company did \$3/4 million in business in '83 and Orr is shooting for \$2 to \$3 million in '84.

"The availability of work in this segment of the industry is unbelievable. But, we're going to take it one step at a time."

Orr and Schofield want to get

involved in recreation centers, but aren't known in that market yet.

"Recreation centers are John's bailiwick," said Orr.

Orr characterizes himself as a cautious businessman.

"I'm responsible for sales for HLA Construction and I've purposely been cautious. I don't want to move too fast and undermine what we already have accomplished with the company."

Orr said he and his partner also didn't realize the time commitment the new company would demand.

"I'm not a workaholic," Orr admits. "I'll work 16 hours a day if I need to, but not to the point where my family-life suffers."

Art in the landscape

Orr got his B.S. degree in park administration with an emphasis on landscape architecture from Texas Tech in August of '72.

"I dabbled in business courses for a year and did lousy. I took a year of architecture and did O.K. I took a course in art and did real well and applied it to landscape architecture."

Orr went into landscape contracting for three reasons: he liked it, he knew he could do it, and it was easy. He admits his business sense was learned by the seat of his pants and from consultants he's surrounded himself with who understand him and his company.

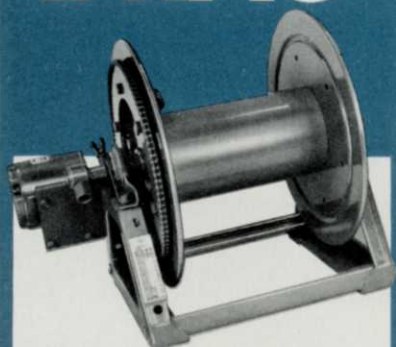
"With most of the consultants I've worked with, we have an almost father-son relationship," said Orr. "I knew I could do the landscape side if I could just get the business side nailed down."

It's people like Warren Purdy and business consultant John Gannon who have congealed the business side of Orr's company.

"Warren realizes that landscape contractors are more doers than thinkers. I searched and searched for an accountant who understood our business and finally found one who does. Same thing with our attorneys. They are the type of people who take a per-

continued on page 96

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ORR from page 60

sonal interest in what we do. Not too many people understand what we do and that ours is a profession that deals with living things."

Calculated ambitions

Orr keeps his own operation lean.

Ed Olson has worked as senior field supervisor and estimator for Orr for about seven years. Linda Crist has taken over about 60 percent of the estimating and does all of the scheduling of material delivery and purchasing. Orr's wife, Diane, is office manager and bookkeeper. There are three foremen in the field, each with five or six laborers. ("We're capable of doubling that capacity overnight," Orr said.) The company owns five pick-up trucks (two are 2-1/2-ton dumps), one Bobcat front-end skid loader with attachments and one 300-gallon spray tank.

"Most of the heavy stuff like grading, hydro-mulching and irrigation, we subcontract out," he said.

His modest office sits on an acre of land on Houston's west side. The backyard is a potpourri of one-of-a-kind plant leftovers, things "we've been too hard-headed to throw away."

Most of Orr's plant material comes from growers in Louisiana, California and Florida. He only grows a few larger containerized trees in the front yard of his office. Orr says his biggest technical problem is the Houston soil condition.

"Everything is clay and lots of bed preparation is necessary which makes it difficult. We are blessed with a good climate, though.

Orr's company is also blessed with a practical and realistic owner.

"I do suffer from blind ambition sometimes. I always knew I could compensate where I failed. But I know my limitations and my reputation is too important to me to go beyond those limits." **WT&T**

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