

# PLANNING FOR PROGRESS

In 1981, ambitious contractors and architects, realizing that growth required mutual respect and cooperation, drew up new plans for progress. Have things changed for the better?

By Terry McIver, associate editor

**T**he early 1980s was a period of reflection for professional landscaping. Forward-thinking landscape architects and contractors met to examine the state of the industry. They realized some changes were in order, and made recommendations to their respective memberships.

The annual Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA) "Crystal Ball Conference" of 1981 resulted in "To Serve the Client," a joint report by ALCA and the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA). It revealed that too often architects and contractors suffered from lack of leadership and apparent mutual mistrust.

According to the report, "the land-

scape contractor has exhibited something of an inferiority complex in his relationship with landscape architects." The architect was considered timid, behind the times and lacking in forceful supervision.

## Where to improve

Improvement would depend on the actions of both groups. The landscape architect, the report read, must "...forcefully vocalize his leadership responsibility in the industry." The contractor must "assist in promoting the landscape architect generally and on a project basis, either as a private landscape architect or as part of a design/build team."

Is today's landscape architect a bet-

ter leader than he was 10 years ago? And is the contractor more apt to accept and appreciate the architect's craft?

Tom Lied of Lied's Nursery Company, Inc., Sussex, Wisc., was on the 1981 committee. He says leadership by landscape architects has improved in the country's more progressive areas, such as on the coasts and in certain Chicago-area markets. "These are the pacesetters when it comes to accepting the landscape architect as an important part of what they do," he says.

According to Lied, landscape architects in these markets have benefitted from the progressiveness of those homeowners and developers.

Lied believes there is a prolifera-

tion of design/build firms in the areas where the architect's image has been bolstered by the general public.

"This," explains Lied, "enables or requires the progressive contractor to build his own staff to serve his clients in an appropriate manner."

Barry Thalden, a private land-

scape architect in St. Louis, says that during the past eight years clients have become much more familiar with the role of the landscape architect. "As they have worked more with them, their comfort level with that leadership has increased.

### More opportunity

"Opportunities for landscape architects continue to grow," says Thalden. "Many practice in areas such as planning, historic preservation, administration, research or education where a built project is not the final project."

A disciplined design/build firm is invariably led by the architect. As a multi-disciplined firm, Lied's operates a professional land planning office to serve its professional clients. A design/build staff serves professional clients in the design/build mode, and a retail design staff deals with clients on the retail landscape level. "We cover the market, but try not to confuse the issue by believing that one service is equal to the other," says Lied.

### A change in plans

A typical complaint of landscape architects—and one which can be used to symbolize the way the two get along—is that contractors alter the original plans without first consulting with the architect. Either the architect can't be reached, or the contractor quite frankly believes he has a better—or less expensive—idea and doesn't need to inform the architect of the change.

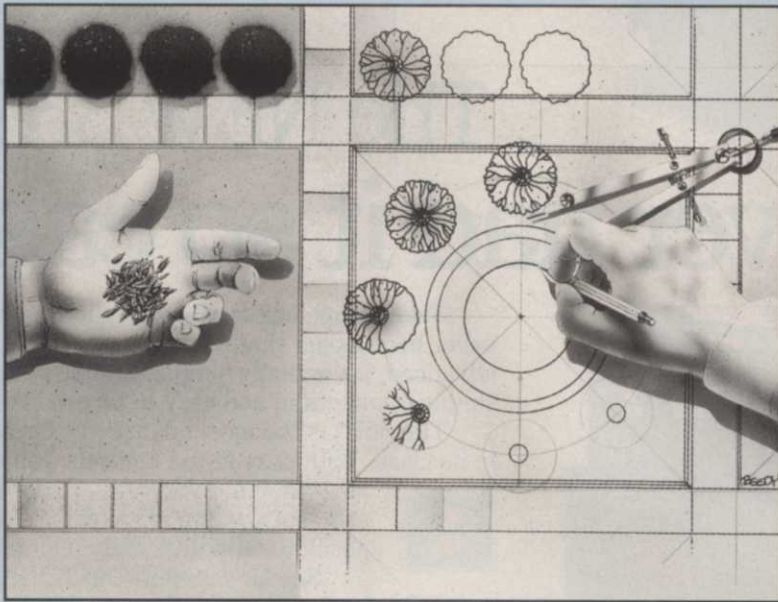
Some contractors will substitute materials to save time or money. As one contractor puts it, "as long as there's no one looking over their shoulder to make sure it's done to spec, they basically take the specs and throw them out the window. Once it's underground, who's going to know?"

The architect has a right to see his plans fulfilled as close to what he has drawn, just as a contractor has a right to submit a bid. In an age of advanced communications, failure to confer prior to a plan change is inexcusable.

Unreported plan changes often signal that the architect has lost control of the project. "If the architect has drawn a set of specifications which detail substitutions—which all of them should—it's up to the architect to tell the contractor to remove (anything that was not specified)," says Richard Chiancone of Anthony J. Chiancone Landscape and Nursery, Inc. of South Euclid, Ohio.

### Contractor communication

"Our feeling," says Chiancone, "is that the client has hired a professional landscape architect who must look out for the client's best interest, have the project put out for bid and have it constructed as drawn." Chiancone submits "99 percent" of his invoices to the owner or developer for approval, to insure that no changes have



## PRESERVATION DEPENDS ON SELF PROMOTION

Apart from what they do to get along with each other, architects and contractors have to be concerned with how they get their message across to the public. Professionals from both groups say part of the struggle for success comes from lack of visibility and image.

### What they say:

**J. Landon Reeve IV:** "The market is more competitive. Companies that are more aggressive in marketing are getting the best shot."

**Lydia Paneri** of Associated Landscapers, Inc., Irvine, Calif.: "We've realized that no two pieces of association literature look the same. We want to make it instantly recognizable as ALCA. Although we hope our members will ascribe to a certain level of ethics, there is no way to say that because they are in ALCA they are a good contractor."

**Dave Kull** of Regional Land

Systems: "The industry has to do a better job of educating clients and prospective clients of what architects do, why it's important and what it costs. Until there is adequate money out there it's not going to change. Unless a developer understands what his landscape costs are going to be when penciling out his development, and includes those costs in his budget, there's not going to be a lot of change."

"Some people who attend our class on architecture realize the work we do, tell us we're worth every penny, and ask us to do a job for them. We also started teaching at the university, which gives us credibility as professionals."

"Local newspapers call us occasionally for information on what's new in the industry. All those things are subtle and don't cost much."

"We're all trying, to reach those clients who want award winning designs."

—Terry McIver □



**Step 1: communicate.** Dave Kull, right, president of Regional Land Systems, discusses plans with company vice president Howard Reynolds.

been made in materials or design.

"If the owner has contacted a landscape architect, give him total supervision of the project."

Harry Kobzeff, president of Kobzeff & Associates, Irvine, Calif., finds that his plans are changed all the time, and says it's "extremely frustrating for an architect who spends a lot of time trying to get things together and to work, then goes out into the field and finds that the contractors are either too busy or too unsophisticated. So they look at the plans and get a general idea and then do it their way."

Architect Walt Young, president of Walt Young Associates, admits that a set of plans may not be as good as they should be. "As far as where some of these problems occur in the field, it probably does start with the plans," he says. But if there's a question, they (contractors) should call us."

### Experience adds up

Young also realizes that some architects probably have not had as much field experience as certain contractors, so they don't understand how things have to be done.

The solution, once again, is to communicate. "It's very important that there are meetings, and each one understands the other's ability."

"Most of the time," relates Dave Kull, president of Regional Land Systems, Irvine, Calif., "the only time we architects deal with a contractor is if there's a problem. This leads to animosity. There's very little opportunity to interface if there's a problem. We need to build the rapport, to let each one know the other's qualifications. When you deal with people only on a crisis basis, it determines your mindset that way.

"Contractors need to communi-



**Tom Lied: Avant-garde, farsighted professionals will move the industry forward.**

cate to architects the installation costs. When we estimate a job, we struggle to get current cost estimating information. We need a better forum between architects, contractors and clients."

"We're working toward the same goal," reminds Howard Reynolds of Regional Land Systems. "To complete a project that looks good and satisfies the client, so both the contractor and architect make money."

### Lack of inspection

Reynolds suggests that architects have done a poor job of promoting field inspections at various times, or going out to pre-bid meetings with contractors, and subsequent meetings throughout the contract's completion. "Work with the contractor," says Reynolds. "Let him know you're going to be inspecting the work. That way, any differences get worked out quickly."

The "Crystal Ball Report" of 1981 described contractors as rugged indi-

vidualists, but not necessarily good businessmen. Since then however, new types of contractors have entered the market. They are more astute business people with a better understanding of the market and its players. They have a more professional attitude, which should lead them to success.

### More caring contractors

"Some landscape architects don't feel too strongly about landscape contractors but I do because I teach them and I know they're going to do a good job after (graduation)," says Prof. Edward C. Martin, Jr. of Mississippi State University. MSU students majoring in landscape contracting must take the first three design courses taken by architecture majors, which helps them understand the objectives of landscape architecture.

"That makes a big difference," he says "compared to someone who has a degree in business but doesn't know the principles and elements of art, or anything about the functionalism of its design."

Contractor Robin Tulleners of Irvine, Calif. has learned that a contractor can guide the architect if he understands what the architect is looking for. Architects, too, he feels, can draw some things that are "pretty corny" or "impossible to build or install," which requires contractor input.

"Communication is the most important ingredient. If each group knows the other's requirements, they'll be much better off."

### Designers as leaders

Some contractors believe the industry is best served when its design professionals lead the way. "In fact," says Lied, "if the industry has avant-garde, farsighted, client-sensitive professionals who are willing to take the risk of moving forward, then the industry moves forward."

The big picture indicates that contractors and architects are working well together, much better than in 1981. Accidents happen, things go wrong—just like they do in any profession. But the best in the business adapt, communicate and get on with it. They know that the summer is too short to become mired in contention.

The more contractors and architects continue to experience different working conditions, there is, says Barry Thalden, much to be mutually understood.

"Good landscape architects and good contractors," he says, "still make the best teams." **LM**