

JOB TALK

Landscape re-design could prove to be 'recession fighter'

Tell developers that they have to do whatever they can to attract and retain tenants.

■ The current economic climate is having varied effects on commercial property owners and homeowners alike. For many, the downturn and uncertainty are prompting careful planning and austere budgeting to control costs, and landscapers are feeling the pinch.

Updating the landscape—whether in the office courtyard or the home's front yard—may be the tonic that keeps tenants happy and revitalizes the buyers' interests.

Steve Brickman, regional vice president of The Brickman Group Ltd., Long Grove, Ill., is a believer in landscape re-designs.

"Popular fashions gradually change in landscaping, just as they do in architecture," says Brickman. "People don't often think about the last time they updated their landscape design, and their present plan may be getting old and obsolete. In simple terms, a new landscape design may be the most cost-effective way to 'remodel' a property."

Brickman realizes the importance of "curb appeal" to the success of the housing market. In the commercial market, says Brickman, "you have to do whatever you can to attract tenants to your development and retain the ones you have. Landscaping may be the first detail that sets you apart from the rest."

According to Brickman, the company has recently seen a surge of contracts from the residential market for landscape renovations and upgrades. While some owners do it just for a new look, many see it as a chance to make the property more attractive to prospective buyers.

"Homeowners may already be savvy to the benefits of improved landscaping," says Brickman. "The Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA) recently polled home appraisers, and 95 percent of those surveyed said attractive landscaping not only enhances the home's sales potential, but adds significantly to its value as well."

A study by the Institute of Urban Studies at the University of Texas at Arlington in 1989 reveals a similar perception in the office market. A poll of brokers and other market professionals noted that landscape design had the strongest affect on occupancy, leading a list of 30 design variables.



The Scott Paper Co., 'before-and-after.' The Brickman Group transformed a simple asphalt square into a parkway, enhancing visual impact.

"Pedestrian amenities," such as walkways, outdoor seating areas and other features usually incorporated in the landscape design came in third. "Public amenities" such as sculpture, fountains and courtyards, ranked fifth.

"An office site with the proper landscaping will attract a better quality of client, will attract them faster, and will keep them longer," says Brickman. "This not only reduces turnover costs—which makes the development a better investment—but keeps the cash flow healthy, which can be quite a feat in these times."

The Scott Paper Co. recently commissioned a Brickman re-design at its headquarters in Tinnicum Township. The facility is 50 percent staff-occupied and 50 percent leased.

"Our leased-space facility—in fact, all of the campus—is more than 20 years old and competing with a couple of new office buildings in the area," says Jack Schink, Scott's corporate real estate leasing manager.

The Brickman team told Scott Paper that a re-design was the best way to go.

"Besides dramatically improving the aesthetic appeal of Scott Plaza, our project demonstrates that we are willing to invest capital to maintain the quality of our facilities," Schink says.

In addition to an array of visual enhancements, some long-term problems were solved. For example, an unusually high water table was lowered, thus eliminating crawl space flooding in the buildings.

"An updated landscape design is a billboard that declares, 'this is a superior and contemporary product,'" says Mark Culichia, a Brickman branch manager, and a registered landscape architect.

"After all," insists Culichia, "you only get one chance to make a good first impression."