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LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN
SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

MAIN COURSE

Lessons from the lake
at Utah's biggest development

OPEN PLANNER

The changing culture of
project management

WOODS GO URBAN

Elizabeth K. Meyer on what we
can learn from landscape labs

ROBERTSON PLAZA

HKLA cracks a puzzle in Los Angeles



LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE

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FOREGROUND



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CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

Agency Landscape + Planning is in on the trend of sharing knowledge to retain good employees, in OFFICE, page 36.

WHO NEEDS TO KNOW?

FIRMS ARE SHARING PROJECT CONTRACTS AND BUDGETS MORE OPENLY ACROSS TEAMS AS A MATTER OF STAFF ENGAGEMENT.

BY BRADFORD MCKEE

Landscape architecture offices are competing for creative, productive talent in spheres much broader than their peer groups in other design offices. This means the stakes are higher to show commitment and earn it back among their staff and new recruits. Entrants to the profession these days show a desire, principals and practice consultants say, for genuine enrollment in their firms and to support the firm's evolution. People want to know more and be able to ask more questions.

Marjanne Pearson is the founder of Talentstar, an organizational strategy consultancy to design firms based in Petaluma, California. With 30-plus years of familiarity with the design fields, she notes a gen-

erational shift toward distributive models of leadership and project management. Strategic knowledge is "not closely held by the directors of a firm, because that's not how it works anymore," Pearson told me. "There's additional delegation to a new level of leadership. It's a new need to look at the energy grid of resources and knowledge so that everyone within the firm has accessibility to allow people to understand the 'why' in the work they're doing.

LAM talked with four management-level landscape architects about their views around sharing knowledge in offices striving to cultivate and hang on to talented people. *These interviews have been edited and condensed.*



PAUL KISSINGER, FASLA,
CEO, **Kissinger Design,**
Dexter, Michigan

SUSANNAH ROSS, ASLA,
director, landscape architect,
Agency Landscape + Planning,
Cambridge, Massachusetts

GREG TUZZOLO, managing
director, **STIMSON,** Cambridge,
Massachusetts

JENNIFER ZELL, ASLA,
director of Los Angeles operations
and director of Regenerative
Design Studio, **MIG,** Los Angeles

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP-LEFT: COURTESY EDSA; COURTESY AGENCY LANDSCAPE + PLANNING; GARRETT STONE; EVAN MATHER; FASLA



LEFT
Paul Kissinger, FASLA, who retired from EDSA after 30 years, thinks it's crucial for project staff to know what is and isn't in the contract.

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What are the basic factors of a typical project that anyone working on it should be able to tell you on their feet?

PAUL KISSINGER, FASLA: They have to know the contract. They have to know what the fees are. And they have to know what the deliverables are. Everybody on the team should know that without a shadow of a doubt. If they don't know the deliverables, and the client calls to ask for *x*, *y*, or *z*, and they just go ahead and do that, well, why did you do that? They say, "Because the client asked." Well, I don't care if the client asks. This is not in our contract. It's kind of basic. "Well, you never showed me the contract. How am I supposed to know that?"

JENNIFER ZELL, ASLA: Everyone who works on a project obviously

needs to know the location, a little bit about the context and who the client is, what the market is, and what our scope of work is. Schedules also, but they always flex. And also, where we are in the range of services—schematic design, design development. Everyone on the project needs to know those basics. And anyone can look to know what the project budget is.

GREG TUZZOLO: I'll focus on the person right out of school: Here is your first project. They need to understand scope and process. Then there are the fees. Not everyone needs to be fully aware of that. That can come, you know, soon. They need to be aware of time management. Our process is designed to be civil and support a work-life balance. We allocate staff

resources based on 42 hours a week. I don't know how firms can chronically overtax their people. Do they plan with the expectation that people are going to work 60 hours a week? Maybe they are?

SUSANNAH ROSS, ASLA: Everybody has access to information about the project. Whether we push it to the folks at the junior level well enough, I kind of wonder, but ideally, they would all know the location, the client, the key partners on the team, the size, the scope. You know, is it a master plan? Is it a downtown plan? Is it going through to construction administration? The fee, we don't hide that from anyone. I don't know that it's something we get into with junior staff, but we don't hide it.

What types of project information are generally privileged only to senior leaders in the firm? And why?

ZELL: Really all project-related information that makes a project manager good at their job is available to them. What's not is more financial—the overall financial picture. I find the more information you have, the more tools you have to manage your project. It's my job to empower and help project managers get good at managing their projects. A lot of the tools are right there in the contract.

ROSS: I was asking [Agency's co-founders] Gina [Ford, FASLA] and Brie [Hensold, Honorary ASLA] this morning: Is there anything we wouldn't tell folks? The only thing we could come up with is if the project has drama on the client side, because that's a confidential matter for the client. Oh, and we're pretty clear if we have a really lean budget on a project. And if we get to the end of a project and we're out of fee, I don't keep that quiet.

RIGHT
Susannah Ross, ASLA, of Agency Landscape + Planning, wants people on a project to know how much or how little budget it has and when there's none left.



COURTESY AGENCY LANDSCAPE + PLANNING

"IF THE PROJECT PAUSES OR SLOWS, [THE] NUMBERS HAVE TO ADJUST, AND THE WORKFLOW HAS TO ADJUST."

—SUSANNAH ROSS, ASLA

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TUZZOLO: Overall firm profitability. Principals' performance. Project portfolio performance. Essentially, like, hey, he or she earned this much this year. Total revenue is generally held pretty close. Certainly personnel stuff and hiring-related stuff is confidential. At the project level, successes and failures generally are shared, sometimes the specifics on project budgets and overages. That's about the boundary, where we kind of say, we'll talk about this in this group and not globally. Once you're a project manager, you can get in and see just about any project.

KISSINGER: I'm oversimplifying the accounting, but if I take the money I've got versus the bills that I have, what I have left is income, or profit, right? That's the number that's not generally shared. It might be shared in a global way, like, "We billed this much money." But if you shared, you know, "We made \$X million last year," people start calculating: *Those guys are making tons of money!* And it's not ever

that straightforward. And I would say the ownership structure of the firm is not shared—and that's not related to project management.

Do project managers generally know, or are they able to know, every critical factor surrounding a given project, e.g., how close it is to budget, or going over, etc.?

TUZZOLO: Project principals and project managers have access to the same information unless there's some high-level conversation that a principal needs to have with another principal. Our principals rely on the project managers to hold the ship together—they have learned to delegate a lot. There's really nothing withheld from the project managers, including the total financial performance of the project. They're required to report on that every week in an overall way. That's a routine thing, and I think it works.

ROSS: We have a sheet that tracks the budget for every project. And we don't do time sheets. That's a huge

thing that people don't understand. We look at a project and the fee and the schedule, and we project out over a year what we're going to be able to bill monthly, and then that translates directly to the work plan we set up. And if the project pauses or slows, those numbers have to adjust, and the workflow has to adjust. And there is no dollar amount per principal that's expected. It's just everyone together kind of pushing the whole firm.

KISSINGER: A hundred percent, project managers have to know [the project's budget status], because if you're relying on the principal as the only one who knows that information, you've got a team that's running blind. So project managers should know where to find the information and be taught how to look at it.

ZELL: We use Deltek Vision, and there are a lot of dashboards and tools and reports you can generate to tell you where you are within the budget.



LEFT
Greg Tuzzolo, a managing director at STIMSON, says specific successes and failures on a given project are shared selectively among other project teams.

But all of the data is sometimes hard for project managers to sift and sort and prioritize. So sharing a lot of information is most beneficial when the project managers have the ability to synthesize it to inform the decisions they make in managing the project and managing others.

Where might communications break down owing to the withholding of certain vital project information? What impact might this breakdown have on the project's success, and on profitability?

KISSINGER: At one firm I know, the model was that you had contract managers and design managers. It's like a circle of kids whispering a secret in the next person's ear. At the end, the message isn't entirely clear. At EDSA, you are managing both contracts and design. You have a principal who is involved from the beginning through the life of a project. If you have a contract-only manager, they're worried about budgets and deliverables. They may or may not be—I never worked to this model—worried about design. And you have a design team

that might not be as in tune with the deliverables as a contract manager. I find it impossible to separate the two.

ZELL: Communications break down when vital project information is withheld. We try to head this off by equipping people with the information they need. I think "vital" is the key word here, and where the impacts show up will be in client expectations. If information is missing and not acted on, client expectations can't be met. Missing information leaves too much gray area, requiring a consultant to

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RIGHT
Jennifer Zell, ASLA, a director of MIG, said that sharing too much budget detail with junior staff can be needlessly burdensome.



fill in the gaps in understanding of client expectations. Shared info gets teams to shared understanding. And not meeting client expectations will always have a ripple effect on a project's bottom line.

ROSS: Project managers do all their own invoices. It occurred to us recently that we didn't really have a good forum for the project managers for reporting back to leadership about how projects are doing, so that's something we're going to institute, though it's nothing we don't already do in a more informal way. Also, we need to do a better job of kicking off internally and getting everybody on the team up

to speed with what the project manager and principal already know, like the history of the project, the marketing, the team, the scope, the site, the schedule. We're often so rushed we just throw people in and get them going without that foundation.

TUZZOLO: The information breakdown I'm experiencing, and we are collectively experiencing, is that everyone now has their own particular approach to working in the office or remotely. It has a kind of chaotic, unpredictable effect on the chain of communication. In an ideal scenario, we're all in a room, right? We're all focused. And the person you're look-

ing to speak to is always available and ready to receive your information. And that's just not reality anymore. At the same time, Zoom has allowed us to do so much more. What would have happened if we'd had COVID in 2010, or 2000? The world would have literally shut down. But we were more profitable than ever during COVID. We got more work done. Because we're visual—or call it mixed media—there's always going to be a fluency question about how information moves from one mode to another. ●

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