

WORK IN PROGRESS

THE STANDARD MODEL OF DESIGN-OFFICE PRACTICE
IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE—KILLER HOURS,
HO-HUM SALARIES, AND OFTEN LITTLE SAY AMONG
STAFF—HAS LONG ASSUMED THE PROFESSION
IS COMPETING WITH ITSELF FOR TALENT.
THAT'S NO LONGER THE CASE.

BY BRADFORD MCKEE

There's quite a lot of stirring these days in landscape architecture offices, and it's enough to make firm owners and leaders nervous in unfamiliar ways. Office leaders have surely heard about the New York architecture firm SHoP, where a group of employees mounted an effort to join a union in protest of the working conditions designers have long taken in stride—they cited relentlessly long hours, lack of transparency, and salaries few would consider fat. (The effort failed.) Bosses are also no doubt alert to a rising tide of job promiscuity among career designers. Though staffers aren't all picking up and moving on to better gigs, many may well be thinking about it. They see novel employment pathways opening amid the pandemic's supercharged sense of virtual mobility, and they've had a good, long spell during lockdowns to reconsider their passions and purpose in work and life. They're scarcely alone in the labor market. Employers across industries have been rocked by droves of departures nationwide since 2020. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that in 2021, employees left jobs in record numbers; several months had more than four million voluntary resignations each. The total of farewell clock-outs for the year was estimated at 38 million people—a kind of Brexit from the payrolls.

Most people aren't quitting work entirely but are seeking change, choice, and fluidity in their careers. Amid the huge upheavals of the past few years, the landscape architecture profession has hardly changed the ways and the weight of its work. Meanwhile, the ground around it has been shifting. The pandemic has forced the mass rearrangement of where and how colleagues work together. The Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and gender movements have blown up to revolution levels, and they are here to stay, because many people find they still get less than full equality in daily life. At everyone's fingertips, digital media is radically expanding individuals' abilities to reach others and to realize their ambitions in ways once inconceivable. People trained in the accepted traditions of landscape architecture, between the new entrants and those approaching midcareer stages, may find they have fresh options—within their chosen profession, outside of it, or in some remix of the two.

For a snapshot of current thinking about professional and personal life among landscape architects and designers, a group of 10 designers participated in a virtual conversation that took place over the course of a week. Seven of the participants work in various project design and execution roles, two are founders of their firms, and one is an associate principal. Their responses to the quality-of-life questions posed give credence and texture to broad movements that employment analysts and design-industry advisers are charting.

This conversation has been edited and condensed.

What kind of work commitment suits you best long term, given your life outside of work?

XI YANG, ASLA: Having quite a few side passions and curiosities outside of design, I would love for my work hours to be much more flexible throughout the week. For example, condensing a 40-hour week to three and a half days, so that I have half of a week (half of a life) to explore and cultivate other parts of me equally.

KENE OKIGBO, ASLA: I align with Xi fairly closely. The mentality of our office is, "As long as you're getting your work done and done well, work when it best fits your schedule." I volunteer a fair bit of my time to different groups, and some of those sessions occur during regular business hours. I tend to make up those "would-be-billable" hours during evenings and weekends when possible.

JEFF CUTLER: I'm a principal of a firm and not an employee. Some of our staff are looking for flexible or reduced hours to meet nonwork commitments. I find this is especially true for employees returning from parental leave. Where possible, we're accommodating these requests from employees. It works best if the employee is flexible with their hours to meet project commitments when required.

PARTICIPANTS

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RIGHT
Jason A. Castillo (left)
and Mahan Rykiel project
landscape architect
Michael Humes, ASLA,
(right) at the grand
opening of Rash Field
Park in Baltimore's
Inner Harbor.



GABRIELLA I. CASTILLO

JASON BERNAGROS: I tend to agree it's important to have flexible work schedules, especially during the pandemic. It's important to have supervisors who understand that their staff have family priorities, and to work around those needs while they balance a healthy workload.

MAGDALENA ARAVENA, ASLA: Like most people, I work best with a flexible schedule during the day and the week. I'm not a morning person, so when I was working under a firm, I preferred to start work later in the mornings. Now, as a sole proprietor, I embrace that and do my more intensive design work during the afternoons and evenings, since I am much more focused during those hours, and my business development or client/collaborator correspondence in the mornings.

JASON A. CASTILLO: Similar to Jeff, I am not a "production" employee but an associate principal at my firm. In conversations with younger staff, the majority lean toward wanting to have leeway or flexibility in their schedules to allow for their nonwork commitments, whatever they may be (e.g., hobbies, volunteering, family, etc.). Personally, I would be open to a reduced workweek (32 hours, or four days a week at 8 or 10 hours a day) to allow for more nonwork activities or interests

or to really and truly decompress each week.

That said, with moves toward a more flexible schedule and hybrid work environment, I do have concerns for younger staff and new hires to be onboarded properly and have the learning opportunities they would have in person at work. A mentoring setup helps to mitigate this distance, but there's something to be said for across-the-table discussion and working, sketching, iterating, etc. with people that cannot be replicated via Zoom. And while we may be working to address these things and foster a more flexible and adaptable work environment, the ability for clients and contractors to do the same or respect these changes remains to be seen.

What was your general sense of the time the profession demands of practitioners when you began your career?

ARAVENA: Because of the truly unrealistic demands in studio throughout school, I thought this was an accurate representation of what the industry would expect from me as a practitioner... and I wasn't totally wrong.

JENN LOW, ASLA: I agree with Magdalena. I thought it was normal. I also based much of my self-worth and commitment as an employee around putting in extra time and being extra accessible to everyone. For a long time, I prided myself in having an

exceptional work endurance. I operated very much on a scarcity mentality and [thought] that production and productivity [comprised] my core value as a colleague and an employee. As I write this, it's also poking at identity issues for me, working as an Asian American woman. My white friends were able to extract themselves from these psychological burdens more easily, and I often felt envious because I didn't see myself having the same autonomy. It was bred from insecurity, too. Also, no one ever told me to stop, or rest, in a way that it felt as if someone cared.

ARAVENA: Yes, definitely have to double down on what Jenn is getting at. Only now after many years have I realized that my experience as a first-generation immigrant left me with the feeling that there is always more I can and should do beyond the 40-hour workweek—to prove my worth and be the "perfect immigrant" and to live up to the many sacrifices of my parents to provide us with a better life. The fact that no one ever, in the seven years I worked under firms, pointed out how much I was overburdening myself with work and service definitely led me to a burnout that almost led me to leave design.

YANG: Going through design school with countless late work nights—partly due to my own perfectionism and sometimes procrastination—I did not expect practicing to be entirely different. While sending out job applications toward the end of my graduate program, I heard rumors of long work hours at a few highly acclaimed firms, accompanied by less-than-ideal compensation but very promising growth opportunities. Those

practices of rumor were intimidating, but sometimes even more attractive to the young minds who want to prove themselves by taking the challenge. My general sense was that, like most other fields, landscape architecture offers and accepts a wide range of work-life arrangements. However, it was also apparent to me that individuals who are willing to work over-40-hour weeks tend to be favored and rewarded by practices and the field.

ADRIANA HALL, STUDENT ASLA: Coming straight out of a studio setting, I expected professional life to be different. I pictured never staying late and being able to leave work at work...but then the pandemic hit, and now we have little separation between work and home. I realize that "leaving work at work" was a bit of an optimistic lens, because it is unrealistic to not stay late during a deadline (like for a documentation set, presentation, etc.) unless you really plan. And sometimes those plans don't go as planned. That, in combination with being a Black woman in a white-male-dominated industry, I felt like I had to put extra pressure on myself to do good work so I wouldn't just become a diversity hire. I would push to do 100 percent all the time even if it took me all night. Now, I feel much more comfortable leaning on other coworkers and asking for help or advice.



L. IRENE COMPADRE, ASLA

OKIGBO: I came into the profession with a bit of a chip on my shoulder. The tasks I most easily excel in weren't what I was hired to do. Speed and efficiency in drafting were very highly regarded, and I felt like I was behind the curve. Because of that, I would typically work late and only bill the time I thought the typical employee would take on a task. The better project managers that I've worked with actively dissuaded this and created a culture where you felt like you could grow into the expectations set for you (and alter those expectations in turn). Now I find myself dissuading young LAs from making the same mistake. There's value in all of their time.

I will say, similar to studio culture, you make the hours you keep. I had peers who rarely had any all-nighters. Then there were those who had all-nighters every project. Today I have coworkers who put in 40 hours on the dot. I also have coworkers who put in well above 50. As long as the expectation is for you to put in a productive 40, but you're free to go above and beyond, I'm okay with it.

evolution of our firm has been to focus on larger and fewer projects in a prime consultant role. This has allowed us to have more control over the design process and project schedule. There are times when we run into a crunch for time and overtime is required—though this may be once or twice a year. Also, because employees aren't overworked, we function well as a team, with other staff offering to assist others when a big deadline approaches.

RIKERRIOUS GETER, ASLA: I knew it would be demanding based on feedback from professors and mentors, but I thought it would ebb and flow more and not be a weekly fire. I felt at the start of my career I had no say over how much I had to work—sometimes I felt like a prisoner, chained to the desk until the project manager allowed me to leave for the night. At that time, I would never make plans after work, because I had no control of my schedule. That is less of an issue now, and I've been able to create a very strict boundary for myself. It only took burning out and almost leaving the company.

BERNAGROS: I entered the profession believing that there would be some long nights working on projects, similar to studio projects during graduate school. I started my LA career

CUTLER: I came to realize that fundamentally we are offering our time and attention to our clients. As projects are becoming more challenging and complex, I see our time and attention as a precious resource worth protecting. The

“YOU MAKE THE HOURS YOU KEEP.”

—KENE OKIGBO, ASLA

with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, so I generally put in extra time on design projects when it was crunch time. Generally, though, I expected there to be an even flow of work.

CASTILLO: I was not the fastest or best designer coming out of school, so I too pushed myself to make up for it by not billing all of my time. I did have a great mentor who always talked me away from that because it caused two issues. One was the devaluation of my time (professionally and personally), and the other was the feeding into expectations. In the grand scheme of things, all that extra effort only served to benefit those ahead and above you.

Have you ever changed your work situation based on the amount of time you were expected to devote to the office, or a failure to compensate you accordingly?

OKIGBO: I've come close. I relied strongly on the salary survey ASLA would generate for members. That was my sharpened sword when I would advocate on my own behalf, and it helped me see that there was a gross discrepancy between my compensation and my contributions to our collective endeavor. I raised the point and continued to do so for a year to be “made whole.” I had my next three options lined up if we couldn't find an amicable and equitable solution. Now I try to encourage anybody and everybody to do the same. It was hellu uncomfortable (still is). But it was worth it (more for the principle of it than the money itself). I felt like I couldn't invite anyone else to join a family that didn't value me.

GETER: I've come close to changing my work situation many times, due to pressure to work late nights and weeks on the regular. I haven't left because most of my friends have stated [they have] similar pressure at their jobs, which makes me conclude the pressure to work late is “normalized.”

CASTILLO: For a time, the perceived expectation that all efforts must be expended to get the work done was how it was. This was typical of the industry and the profession circa mid- to late 1990s and early 2000s. So, be happy for the compensation that you do get! However, as I matured, personally and professionally, and started a family, it became increasingly clear that devotion to work and the associated compensation needed to be reevaluated so that there was some equity or a better balance.

To the extent long hours are sometimes a given, have there been employer policies you found especially conducive to helping retain staff and build employee loyalty?

YANG: We have a comp-day policy for especially intense deadlines like a couple weeks of evening [construction document] pushes. After the deadline, project leads would discuss with team members about a few days to take off in the following



month or two to rejuvenate (apart from paid time off). Other things I've appreciated aside from that policy: public acknowledgment, verbal gratitude, small gestures like a team lunch or gift cards, and consistent visible efforts to reduce chances of long hours—any attempt to openly address the “given” and not turn it into another awkward, unspoken office rule.

I'm co-leading the culture committee in our office, which spent many bittersweet hours planning virtual parties in 2020 and 2021. This year we're planning to research deeply into models of mentorship and work-life balance, which is why this discussion felt especially relevant.

CUTLER: We track all hours worked and any hours worked beyond the typical workweek. Employees at their discretion may use these hours for paid time off or to be paid out.

BERNAGROS: I think it's important to have employers that pay for the hours you work beyond your 40-hour workweek, no questions asked. Also, employers that allow you to take comp time for long work travel or fieldwork are very much appreciated.



JEFF CUTLER

GETER: We also have a comp-time policy. When you work more than 50 hours, any additional time over goes into your comp-time bucket. The issue is that time has to be used within two weeks or it expires, which sounds great in theory, but if you're constantly working more than 50 hours, there is a reason you wouldn't be able to use that time.

CASTILLO: There were no official policies that I can recall, but there have been tacit comp-time opportunities. If there was a heavy lift for a project, project managers would offer up a few days to rest up and act as a thank-you for the extra effort. This was always appreciated, since it did not hit against the scant paid time off we had! Over the course of my career, I have been the recipient of and the provider of small things to keep the motivation going (e.g., free lunches, gift cards, kudos during in-house meetings/events, recognition of effort in front of clients, etc.). These little things are crucial, as they happen in the “now.” Waiting until raise/review time to acknowledge efforts is unfair, untenable, and shows a lack of communication and understanding.

L. IRENE COMPADRE, ASLA: One of the benefits that my firm has offered, even prior to the pandemic, is a flexible

working schedule and the availability of working remotely. As long as team members outline a schedule that centers on our core business hours, and they meet their project obligations, then they are able to set their own schedule. This flexibility has allowed for staff to take on teaching commitments and volunteer projects they might not otherwise have been able to balance within a more rigid schedule. This policy has also allowed us to employ designers who might have often been left out of more traditional firm structures. Despite this flexibility, designers remain responsible for maintaining the firm's high standard of design excellence while collaborating to meet project deadlines. Although there are occasional weeks with tough deadlines and long hours, our team members are able to craft schedules that keep them feeling connected with their other interests and obligations while maintaining a strong commitment to our collective work.

To what degree do you consider landscape architecture a calling, rather than just a job, for which sacrifices are necessary and justified? What are the limits to those sacrifices?

ARAVENA: Relative to other design professions within the industry, we are very commonly underpaid, so to a certain extent, anyone who chooses to practice landscape architecture instead of building architecture (for example) is following their creative calling. This is especially true for those of us who decide to do more community-focused or public work, which is even more low-budget than a private project might be.

LOW: “Callings” and “sacrifices” sound glamorous and are a nice marketing message for the trust-funder who stumbled into landscape architecture based on a romanticized view of the profession, but as a kid of immigrant parents, I just wanted my life to be easier and I wanted lives of others to be easier, too. So, I went into the profession thinking it had a powerful role to play in addressing social and environmental challenges through the built environment, but over 13 years in private practice, there was, and continues to be, very little influence in those areas. To Magdalena's note above, it does bum me out that those who are really doing community-centered and justice work are so undervalued and underfunded, because it's typically BIPOC professionals doing the actual, real work.

HALL: I totally agree with Jenn! I think that words like “calling” and “sacrifice” are very glamorized terms when the sacrifices can be detrimental to your mental health and moral beliefs.

BELOW
Jason Bernagros (left)
helps conduct a design
charrette for the U.S.
Environmental
Protection
Agency.



SPACEPLACE DESIGN INC.

JASON BERNAGROS

“THE WORDS ‘CALLING’ AND ‘SACRIFICE’ ARE LOADED AND LEAD TO A GLAMORIZING OF THE LOSS OF MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL CAPITAL AT THE ALTAR OF DESIGN.”

—JASON A. CASTILLO

YANG: The word “calling” has too many layered connotations for me to relate to in a genuine way. If anything, I prefer to be associated with people and relationships, rather than profession or work—teammates who are undoubtedly the most wonderfully talented and adorable people on Earth, the communities who will live around our projects hopefully many generations onward, the clients who can be intense sometimes but often make our work better at the end of the day. There are limits to how many times I can realistically happily redraw a bench detail.

OKIGBO: I’ll cosign much of what has already been said. To my family (siblings and parents), they see it as something of a “calling.” They often note the passion I have for this profession and the excitement I have around supporting and building communities. I know that I am “sacrificing” personal earning potential to do something that benefits the broad human community. I see it as an *investment* in the expansive “we,” though. I’m dropping coins in somebody else’s kid’s college fund. I don’t know if I would describe myself as called to this profession. Called to service of my fellow human? Yes!

CUTLER: I definitely relate to the idea of landscape architecture as a calling rather than a job. When I

started our studio, I was somewhat naive about what would be involved, and it is both challenging and rewarding. If I knew what was involved prior to starting my own firm, would I do it again? Probably, though it wouldn’t be an easy or obvious decision. The work of landscape architects is getting more challenging and complex. This will demand constant upgrading of skills and approaches over the course of a career. I find this suits me personally. I recognize that not everyone is like this. As much as possible, I try to create a learning environment in our studio and pay for training. We haven’t fully figured it out, but we are trying.

GETER: I’ve always considered myself very passionate about landscape architecture on the grounds of the impact it has on communities and with my interest in underserved communities of color. I believe school allowed me to romanticize community-based work, where my skills were being used to improve the lives of those communities, whenever it was socially or environmentally based. Most of my work over the past six years has been for more affluent communities, which is a complete opposite of who I want to serve. For that reason, I feel like my passion is slowly getting diluted. I think naturally it’s easier for me to make sacrifices (working later) when I’m summarizing community-engagement feedback, and more difficult when a principal asks me to revisit a design study for a client that’s been through countless iterations.

CASTILLO: To me, the words “calling” and “sacrifice” are loaded and lead to a glamorizing of the loss of mental and emotional

capital at the altar of design and the almighty dollar. It sounds great, but in the end, someone is losing out when those are the descriptors.

COMPADRE: Landscape architecture is certainly my calling, but I don’t believe in “work-life balance” as a dichotomy. The work does not end when we stop drawing for the day, and our personal lives do not end when we come back to work. I love my work, and I see it as a great privilege to practice, so it has become something that is woven through everything that I think and make and do. That doesn’t mean that there aren’t stressful deadlines or long nights at the office. But those types of moments are balanced by other calmer and joy-filled moments—all pieces of the design process and each one a part of my life.

Has the pandemic greatly changed (increased or decreased) workloads for you or, have you noted, for colleagues?

LOW: I have felt the pace accelerate over the course of the pandemic, but it might be because I have more focused working time when not actually in an office. I’m with a design research studio now that works on built-environment projects with architects and planners. My studio continues to work mostly remotely, and I do appreciate working from home and being more intentional about our team in-person convenings and travel.



MAGDALENA ARAVENA, ASLA

HALL: I actually began working at my current job online during the pandemic, so that has been a really interesting experience. I think that the workload is the same, but being remote often lengthens the process of completing tasks, as now you have to wait for a response or feedback from your project manager rather than having them going over it with you quickly in person.

YANG: My office has a shared sense that meetings, both with clients or subs and internally, have significantly increased during the pandemic and have not gone back down much since we’re partially back in person.

OKIGBO: We’re definitely busier now. Or at least it feels that way. Different government agencies had expectations of federal infrastructure monies or had receipt of other state or federal funds, so



we saw the RFP wave that many others did. Some existing projects had an influx of funds too. All of this contributes to either (1) actually being more busy, or (2) feeling busier.

CUTLER: At the start of the pandemic, we were fortunate to be awarded a few large projects. These, combined with our existing project commitments, have allowed us to maintain a consistent workflow that is slightly increased from before the pandemic. A challenge unique to our studio was 25 percent of people on our staff having children within a three- to four-month period. This has resulted in an increased workload for me personally, and some staff have had to take on new roles temporarily.

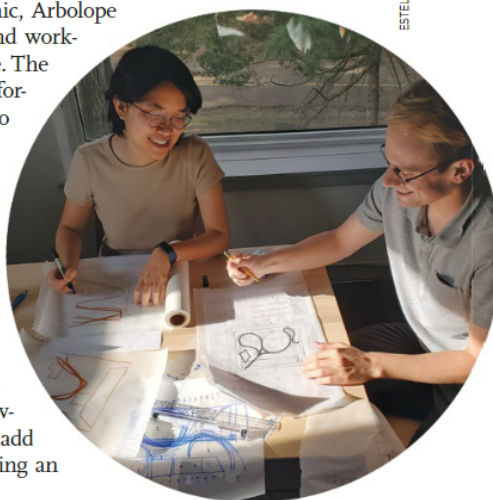
BERNAGROS: My workload has been about the same, but I'm more aware of when I'm available online to connect with colleagues or clients. There is definitely a lot more of a balancing act with home office responsibilities and juggling family responsibilities throughout the week.

ARAVENA: Similar to many others (while I was working under another firm, before launching my own), my workload increased, as did project and internal virtual meetings. I think this was partially due to leadership's fear that work during

the pandemic would slow down or stop, so they were seeking and accepting more projects while at the same time letting staff go and leaving teams shorthanded.

CASTILLO: Personally, and from feedback from others, "work" has increased. I use air quotes for two reasons: (1) There is a general feeling to be "always on," and (2) There is an increase in meetings and calls since the start of the pandemic. This increased "work" has been a primary reason for burnout and added stress.

COMPADRE: During the pandemic, Arbolope is the busiest it has ever been—and working more efficiently than ever before. The schedule flexibility we had already formalized served us well in the shift to remote work. While we were no longer working side by side throughout most of the pandemic, it didn't set us back because we already had mechanisms in place for communicating and sharing our workloads asynchronously. The shift to digital meetings with clients and the heavier use of collaboration tools like Bluebeam and Google Chat have been instrumental in terms of improving overall efficiency. We did need to add some additional procedures, including an



ESTELLO RAGANIT, ASSOCIATE ASLA

GSN

BELOW
Xi Yang, ASLA, (left) sketches for a project with Mackenzie Wendling, Associate ASLA, a landscape designer and her colleague at Agency Landscape + Planning.

OPPOSITE
Rikerrious Geter, ASLA, (center) presents design proposals at a community engagement event in Seattle.



is considered as an investment to build the capacity of the studio.

CASTILLO: The ability to be nimble in production (i.e., using Revit

end-of-day virtual video check-in. But even this became a valuable part of our culture, keeping us feeling connected as an office and signaling an earlier end to the workday.

Principals and managers: What are the greatest ongoing concerns in optimizing the use of your staff's time toward high-quality performance and positive cash flow and profit for your firm?

CUTLER: The work of our studio has changed significantly over the past few years. Many of our projects integrate infrastructure and climate change adaptation. We often find ourselves working in novel areas that I like to describe as the gray area between disciplines. While we may feel that we lack experience on some projects, the reality is a lot of climate change adaptation work is new, and landscape architects are well suited to play a coordinating role on these projects. The challenge is, we often have to educate ourselves quickly on new techniques and methodologies. This environment isn't suited to everyone and strongly influences our hiring decisions when onboarding new employees. We are learning as we go and supporting training for staff. Ideally this training is paid as part of a project, though more often, training is in addition to billable work and

and modeling expertise to cross-coordinate between disciplines, use of GIS and other geospatial data processes, etc.) and to refine visualization and sustainable or resilient methodologies is proving to be key. Having staff who can provide skills and expertise in these areas has proved challenging, but hiring decisions take this into consideration. The firm I am with now currently uses in-house expertise via lunch-and-learns and specialty committees to elevate the overall knowledge base and expertise of the firm. These activities are viewed as an investment in staff and the bottom line, and the time for such things is allowed to be accounted for in their time sheets.

COMPADRE: It's an interesting balancing act. We find ourselves caught between our ambitions, values, size, and being a relatively young practice. As a firm, we have made it our mission from day one to apply a consistently high level of design across all projects we take on, regardless of funding. Community projects and social-ecological benefit work with limited funding streams get



the same attention that our more traditionally funded work does. And this presents challenges to our bottom line, yet the lights stay on, and we're growing.

The best advice I can give to anyone else juggling this challenge is to empower your staff as much as possible. Be transparent as to why you are working on each project. Be forthcoming about fees, and make sure your staff participates in the full design process, including meetings with clients and the community. Make sure to support your team by helping them develop on their unique professional and educational journey, and share profits. These are the things that have made the difference at Arbolope Studio.

What are the signs that you need to improve how you assign or allocate person power across the demands of your projects? How easy are these problems to fix in the moment?

CUTLER: We are a small studio (12 people), and we likely have fewer projects than a typical landscape architecture studio. As with most problems, communication between firm leaders and employees is critical to finding good solutions.



KENE OKIGBO, ASLA

LOW: A slightly different question comes up for me here. First, I don't think these problems can be fixed in the moment. What comes up for me is how much a studio leader is willing to advocate for their team as a partner in a project. Because if we don't push in that direction, we're always going to be dealing with a set of expectations that doesn't match the given time, resources, and capacity. In less successful circumstances, we are told to do whatever it takes to make the client happy based on their perceived metrics of success—which is a lot, because historically, we've given a lot for very little. Work is being done *to us*.

In more successful spaces, leadership recognizes its relationship as that of a partner and advocates as one, so there's more accountability on both sides in regard to tracking capacity, pushing back to clients or the architect on what should be done, given all of the things to be done, given the time and the resources allocated. We have a problem with slowing down, overproducing but not thinking more about why and what for. Staff have a little power by the time the work lands on their desk, but if you're a good leader, you exercise those moments to stop, assess with your team, and then go back to the client as needed to decide what makes sense and is reasonable.

LEA SCHUSTER

CASTILLO: As Jenn noted, "problems can(not) be fixed in the moment." It takes a holistic approach and a long view of the nature of the work being done and the client base. This goes to establishing the in-house expertise, the approach to projects, and the manner in which they're managed. Past that, she is also spot-on that project managers and firm leaders need to advocate for their teams and push back on unrealistic demands. Without some rebalancing of the current status quo, there is the risk of losing talented professionals forever because we did not listen or fight hard enough to make it better.

Do compensation and advancement over time tend to reflect the amounts of work required beyond typical business hours, say 40 to 50 hours a week?

LOW: If compared to the typical architect, probably yes, but that's not a good metric to work with. Overall, I think the field is very far from it, or there isn't consistent policy among firms, whether big or small, in which there's a clear path toward increased salary or promotion. It was always opaque to me, and advancement correlated to those who were able to stick it out for 10-plus years or was based on personality versus my actual contribution and hours dedicated to a firm. In comparison to friends and family who work in specialized fields (tech, public health, non-built environment design disciplines, research, etc.) that also demand a lot of higher education to get entry into, it's nowhere near equivalent to the number of hours spent working versus compensation and advancement opportunities.

ARAVENA: I agree with Jenn. In my firsthand experience, as well as in conversations with peers, compensation and advancement (or usually lack thereof) are very often political or based on the employee's ability to self-advocate. There is still a significant disparity throughout the industry in compensation and advancement between cis white men and minority professionals.

CASTILLO: Directly observed and through anecdotal reference from peers, I would say that compensation and advancement have been all over the board. A lot has stemmed from what Jenn has said, a lack of consistent policy that outlines skills and expectations that can adequately lead to the next level of salary and positional improvement. There is also the matter of politics. As much as structures may be in place or talked about, some advancement happens due to favoritism or other nonquantifiable reasons that stifle the potential of those being passed up.

Given that design execution and project delivery can be unpredictable (especially in landscape), what broad changes would you like to see across the profession in terms of work-life expectations?

LOW: I see this more as a root cause issue, and I think there's a lot of dysfunctional systems and



JENN LOW, ASLA

the profession than for the individual employees who are getting jaded in the process, because the individual can move on. There are other jobs and careers out there where people can go to be more valued and paid better. That's basically what I did, and now I work in an equity-centered design practice.

HALL: I think it would be most beneficial to stray away from traditions and try new things. Because academic studio life and firms are so closely linked, that student lifestyle can carry over into a professional setting. Breaking traditions allows designers to try to implement new systems and processes that could streamline the work-life balance. The expression of boundaries is another thing to consider. As an entry-level designer, I always feel nervous when drawing a boundary because I'm afraid that it will have consequences. Eventually I found out that upper level LAs are very understanding and relate. Boundaries are integral to make sure that your work-life balance is even. The problem is that everyone isn't always receptive to them. So maybe if designers are encouraged to express those boundaries up front, then their work can flow around them instead of breaking through them.

OKIGBO: Going off of what Adriana said, one thing that we've talked about but have not yet executed is a simple boundaries Excel document. I have coworkers who are open to an 8:00 p.m. text message about a project. I have coworkers who have personal responsibilities that pick up at 4:30 p.m. who would rather not think about work until the next morning. The idea

processes embedded in studio/firm workflows and collaboration that don't allow us to get to the life-balance goals we want to achieve. More investment in internal processes across the board to work together better, including more mentorship so there is more shared management across staff, improving collaborative processes (design school doesn't teach you how to work together as a team), better communication processes for working together, and more transparent policies when it comes to avenues for professional growth, better salaries, and promotion.

Speaking to my first point, I believe if you are truly working together as a team, you can work in healthier ways and have more successful outcomes. That doesn't mean you don't have your triage moments, when you still need to do deep, thoughtful work, but there's a lot embedded in our existing processes that we haven't questioned, processes that are very unsustainable, and we expect younger folks to just go through the same growing pains, because that's what you do to get experience. It's more of a loss for

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started with "Do you prefer email, chat, or call?" but could easily extend more broadly. As an example: "Kene, 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., email or chat; 5:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., text or email; after 8:00 p.m., emergencies only."

GETER: It's been stated: BOUNDARIES. We shouldn't be ashamed that we want to do great design work, but within a 40-hour week, to allow ourselves to maximize our mental and physical health and spend quality time with our loved ones. We need to dismantle the notion that Employee A loves this profession more than Employee B just because Employee A constantly works 60-hour weeks.

BERNAGROS: I think that all LAs, regardless of their experience, should take time to be both a mentor and mentee. This helps build healthy working relationships among colleagues. I think it's also important that people respect the work-life balance needs of all employees, regardless of their seniority.

YANG: I absolutely agree on the importance of boundaries, and of senior staff setting good examples for entry-level profes-

sionals. Could this be a new criterion for professional awards? On top of design excellence, sustainability, and community engagement, which are all externally focused, perhaps we can have an internal humanistic perspective that examines the process of design or design team experience and health? Projects and firms should be incentivized and encouraged by the field to incorporate work-life balance.

ARAVENA: I'll state it again for those in the back... BOUNDARIES. As Adriana mentioned, setting those boundaries as an entry-level designer can be so intimidating, so having a system in place like Kene mentioned would break down that barrier in creating a healthier work environment for all! What leadership and the industry as a whole don't harp on enough is the fact that a healthy designer is a more creative designer. The amount of soul and brain power that design can take up is so draining and cumulative, and being able to find some relief from that with time allotted for other creative outlets, volunteer service, fellowship, or family time could make a huge difference in the propensity for burnout seen in the industry today.

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