

# PERSPECTIVE

**I**N MY FOURTH OUT OF SEVEN semesters in the master of landscape architecture (MLA) program at the University of Georgia (UGA) in 2001, I was ready to quit and nearly did. My frustration was with the lack of a principled and consistent environmental foundation throughout the program. But rather than sitting around complaining, I joined with a group of like-minded students, organized as a group called Students and Educators for Ecological Design and Sustainability (SEEDS), to do something about it.

I had come to UGA expecting, if not immersion in, at least full support for environmental responsibility in design. After being disheartened by my interview with the then-head of the graduate program, I went to look up MLA thesis and BLA senior project titles in the school's library and discovered a worryingly significant percentage of topics on golf courses and resorts. On the other hand, I was encouraged to enroll by unscheduled drop-in chats with two professors whose research in cultural landscapes and sustainability interested me.

As I progressed through the program, my thinking deepened and broadened to incorporate social and cultural responsibility, and I developed a passion for cities and urban landscapes. This kind of learning is what made the UGA program great: It opened my mind and gave me a solid theoretical base. Certainly the sheer number of faculty members in the landscape architecture program helped. I am particularly grateful to Darrel Morrison, FASLA, as well as several other faculty members, all with different interests but all working from a principled foundation, for the quality of education I received.

But there were still frustrations. I bypassed the "plant materials" class in the landscape architecture program because it focused mostly on the decorative character of plants, highlighted nonnative species, and seemed to be taught without regard to ecology and environmental soundness. Instead I took courses in botany, ecology, and geography and landscape architecture electives on plant communities. Some of the horticulture classes, though, seemed close to the "plant materials" model—I thought if I heard "glossy green foliage" praised one more time I was going to throw up!

In construction and engineering classes, we learned how to disrupt topography to plunk down a flat site and compute cut and fill, with only rare discussions of why that might not be a responsible goal. We learned how to engineer streets and trails with uniform slopes, with no regard to fitting into existing situations gracefully or respecting the functional ranges of variability in slope. Learning how to engineer drainage, it seemed,



## HOW I STOPPED SEETHING AND STARTED A SUSTAINABILITY CONFERENCE

At the University of Georgia, we took charge of our own education.

By Nancy Aten, Associate ASLA

was much simpler than figuring out how to fully value rainfall.

I admit I was rebellious, being somewhat older than my fellow students and with a full career behind me. I sensed there were classmates with similar frustrations, but most of them just went along, probably because they were exhausted by the workload or thought that as landscape architects they just needed to know how to design irrigation systems or simply accepted that the faculty knew best.

I had early on become involved in SEEDS, founded in 1999 by student David Schroeder with faculty adviser Henry Methvin. An early project of SEEDS was the charrette-designed native plants community garden adjoining the landscape architecture building. Another project involved the rehabilitation of Tanyard Creek through campus, leading to a joint landscape architecture-ecology

summer design studio and to recommendations for alternative stormwater management being partially adopted by the city government and UGA.

Encouraged by Professor Methvin, we proposed a conference for the first two days of the fall semester, linked to the inaugural year of the new College of Environment and Design. Through lectures, roundtables, a charrette, an exhibit, and receptions, participants would share practices related to ecologically responsible design—how to design and work as well as teach and learn.

We wanted to change the world, of (Continued on Page 158)

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(Continued from Page 160) course. By taking a first step, we hoped to infuse our fellow students, faculty, and community with ideas cultivated in an intense and intimate setting but with the depth and lasting effects of a real academic partnership.

We must have sounded a little full of ourselves and a little naive. When we took our idea to the faculty, we got some nods and the occasional smile of support but no jumping up and down. I understood the hesitation of faculty who see students move through every few years with a perpetual crop of new ideas and their inclination to wait for critical mass. Determination and persistence mattered, even in the face of our own semester calendars and final projects. We had started the effort in fall 2001 but were not able to get down to specifics such as committee assignments and budgets until the following August. Stephanie Shelton and I eventually served as cochairs; about six other students formed the committee core, and others provided vital help along the way.

We invited seven national speakers: Kim Sorvig, Bill Thompson, FASLA, Robert Grese, ASLA, from the University of Michigan, Bart Johnson from the University of Oregon, Dennis Ruth of Rural Studio, Doug Allen, ASLA, from Georgia Tech, and Daniel Winterbottom, ASLA, from the University of Washington. We began with authors of books and articles we liked or whose work we'd heard of, were encouraged by supportive responses to our queries, and ultimately determined the seven based on schedules and logistics. We set a budget range of \$8,000 to \$17,000. At the very least, we figured, it would cost \$400 for travel and a \$200 honorarium for the speakers. We planned for attendance in the hundreds and funding in equal thirds from practitioners, grants, and the university. We squeaked in a final budget of about \$7,400.

Fund-raising was foreign to us and rather difficult. Despite letters to alumni, firms, and philanthropic groups, most of our support came through the university and from friends. We raised \$1,800 from the Institute of Ecology and its former parent, Franklin College; \$500 from UGA Student Activities; \$1,000 from three local or regional landscape architecture firms; \$600 from Georgia ASLA and Northeast Georgia ASLA; \$2,000 from individual faculty and friends; and \$1,500 from a local philanthropic organization. We got in-kind support from our school—the Owens Library in particular—and many volunteers among students, faculty, and staff, especially on the spot in the final days of preparation. But we got no direct financial support from our own school.

We saved money thanks to the grace of the speakers—all traveled as inexpensively as they could and accepted a very small honorarium (a couple even turned that down). We also saved money by printing at our Owens Library, by housing speakers with faculty members (this was not only cost saving but a pleasure for all), by getting significantly reduced prices from a supportive local caterer and food suppliers, and by obtaining last-minute donations of items needed.

Ideas from some of the faculty were good and plentiful and came with real help, too. Professor Iain Firth, FASLA, hosted a faculty-speaker roundtable discussion during the conference. Professor Methvin, with another group of students, in collaboration with the university architects, pulled together a community sustainable design charrette for the new arts campus during the conference.

We asked suppliers of green building and landscape supplies to set up a very modest exhibit of green roofs, alternative paving, and other environmental design elements that might not otherwise be available to students. A local native plants nursery charged us almost nothing for half a pickup bed full of native trees, shrubs, and plants with which we set up native plant community vignettes in the exhibit. That afternoon three helpful students, who just walked in to help, built the boxes to hold the plants.

**S**PEAKERS ARRIVED ON SATURDAY; sessions began Sunday and continued until Tuesday afternoon. We did get attendance in the hundreds, if low hundreds; the disappointment of not getting full School of Environmental Design (SED) participation was countered by seeing the mayor, local architects, and community members show up for lectures or for the charrette. We issued invitations through the school and the institute, taking advantage of e-mail, posters, personal announcements at meetings, and word of mouth.

A few student committee members joined the faculty-speaker roundtable on Sunday to listen. At one point during the conversation, I stopped just listening and was compelled to push, to ask whether all of our course descriptions could be required to include a foundation in environmental sustainability. Requiring that framework step, I said, would help build the real foundation. One professor (who has since taken a leadership role in the administration) said no. If we required that everywhere, we'd be giving up Design (capital D), or maybe recreation, or residential work, or urban work, or historic preservation—as if those, along with sustainability, were all discrete themes.

I wasn't quick enough to respond carefully then, but as benign as this may have sounded, I think it was, and perhaps still is, the root of this problem at the school. There must be core principles—of environmental responsibility, social responsibility, cultural responsibility—that resonate throughout the program. Someone doing residential design should still have that foundation, as should someone doing recreational work, urban work, or graphic design. Having that foundation allows one to more fully consider the issues and make conscious, informed, sometimes difficult choices in his or her work.

**D**ID THE SEEDS CONFERENCE have any lasting effects at UGA? In the semester following that conference, I think five new faculty were hired. The timing was primarily a coincidence of retirements, but I was pleased with several of the new

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faculty and I'm optimistic for the future of the program. I remain concerned about the way plants and ecology are taught (and let's hope the statement by one of the faculty that "plants are like bricks" no longer reflects the attitude) and disappointed that the formation in 2001 of a new college joining Environmental Design with the Institute of Ecology did not work out.

As for me, I now have the best job in the world. I run my own business in Milwaukee, and my largest project is a contract with the nonprofit Menomonee Valley Partners to transform a 140-acre urban brownfield site into industrial businesses with living-wage jobs, healthy riparian corridor restoration, environmentally responsible public space that filters stormwater, and natural areas for environmental education programming. I act as an owner's representative and liaison between parties for planning and implementation, for construction oversight, and for native landscape maintenance. I've designed small landscapes within the site, I worked—with collaboration and support from the city's forestry agency—to develop a native species palette for the valley, and I am developing next-phase restoration plans. I use common sense to push for sustainability details where I can. Sometimes I have to search for examples on the Internet, wishing these had been the rule rather than the exception in school, so I'd have a stronger knowledge base.

What UGA's SED did best for me was to open my mind about the meaning of the work, to provide me with several strong faculty

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mentors in specialties ranging from ecological restoration to urban planning to historic preservation, to give me great classmates to learn with, and to make available the larger UGA framework from which I could draw—the departments of ecology, botany, and geography and

UGA's continuing education art classes.

The lessons of the SEEDS conference continue to serve me well. I learned to value:

- *Persistence* over time and with a heartfelt vision. Now, I never give up on finding the most sustainable details.

- *A community in which to mutually test ideas* as I work with the valley's mix of businesses, agencies, developers, fishermen, contractors, kids, bikers, neighborhood groups, and artists.

- *Give-and-take among colleagues*. One week I've got time to help with an organization's grant proposal; another week I get time from colleagues to brainstorm pedestrian bridge concepts.

- *The importance of ideas*. Making time for lectures and community charrettes and reading journals and books in and outside the field make my work better.

- *Trusting in possibilities*—and the value of taking one step. [LAW](#)

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