

The Resilient Practice: Designing Careers and Firms That Sustain People

Moderated by ASLA President Brad McCauley, FASLA, PLA, this third installment of the Groundwork series drew 281 registered participants for a candid, unscripted conversation about one of the profession's most persistent challenges: what happens when a landscape architect needs to step away, and how do firms and individuals design the transition in and out?

The conversation had its origin in an audience question submitted during Groundwork Session 1, *Starting Strong*, earlier in 2026. Someone asked: "Can we talk about women in the profession after having children?" The question opened a thread that didn't close. Months later, it became the seed of this session — expanded to include other types of caregiving, burnout and creative re-sparking, flexible work structures, and the challenge of small firms navigating absence.

"It's not just for new parents," McCauley noted in his opening. "It's for the principal who's been running hard for 25 years. It's for the landscape architect sandwiched between raising kids and caring for aging parents. It's the small firm owner who has no backup when someone walks out the door. All of these are versions of the same question."

Four panelists joined the conversation:

- **Claire Agre**, ASLA, PLA, Cofounder, Unknown Studio
- **L. Irène Compadre**, ASLA, PLA, Founding Principal and Design Director, Arbolope Studio
- **Jen Cross**, PLA, ASLA, CLARB, Principal Landscape Architect, HDR
- **Matthew Macchietto**, ASLA, PLA, Principal and Kansas City Civic Studio Leader, Hoerr Schaudt Landscape Architects

A pre-session poll confirmed the session's reach: the largest group of respondents identified as firm leaders trying to figure out how to support their teams; nearly 20% were anticipating a major transition soon. As McCauley observed: "This is a career-long conversation, whether you're anticipating something, in the middle of it, or looking back."

The Moment Things Change

Landscape architects arrive at a turning point in different ways. Some transitions are triggered by caregiving — a new child, an aging parent, a health crisis. Some build slowly through compounding demands. Some begin with a structural shift: a promotion that changes the relationship between hours and output.

What the panelists shared was not a single type of moment, but a common pattern: the decision rarely comes all at once.

Agre's turning point was not the logistics of managing two children and a demanding career. It was the erosion of authority that made those logistics impossible. "If you want people to be able to juggle all these things, you need to give them authority to run their worlds. When that didn't happen — repeatedly — it was just too much."

For Macchietto, a promotion to principal coincided with becoming a parent for the first time. "I could invest all time, all hours into the work. Suddenly, time was a lot more precious and finite." As part of a two-dad household, he noted that shared domestic responsibility required active negotiation — not default assumptions.

Cross described multiple inflection points across a decade of parenting three children: early inflexibility at her first firm, and later, as a firm leader, the recognition that school schedules and family obligations don't align with a 9-to-5 world. "I had to ask: how do we build a team that can actually buffer all these things?"

For Compadre, flexibility wasn't a response to crisis — it was a design decision made from the start, born from a desire to both teach and practice. The pandemic accelerated it. "For the first time in my life, I was ending the workday at 5 o'clock. The world was falling apart, but we were in this bubble of finally having a forced end of day. It showed us there was more to a rounded profession than just working all the time."

The panelists also identified a shared cultural backdrop: the professional normalization of overwork. "We wear it like a badge of honor," said McCauley. "And we need to stop romanticizing all-nighters."

To find an authority figure who spoke about respecting boundaries, Agre reached back to her education. She described a professor who required everybody to turn in their project materials at noon the day before the final deadline.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The decision to step back is rarely singular. It builds through denied flexibility, compounding demands, or a moment when something finally has to give.
- Firm culture shapes whether that turning point leads to a sustainable transition or an exit.
- The profession's studio culture carries a deep inheritance of overwork. It surfaces in practice unless actively countered.
- ASLA data shows that getting licensed early correlates with stronger long-term retention, higher earnings, and greater career resilience.

The Space Between Full Speed and Full Stop

Not every transition is a clean break. The most common version — and often the hardest to navigate — is the middle ground: reduced hours, flexible schedules, staying in a role while carrying less at work. The challenge is that this territory has few established norms.

"The expectations are less clear," McCauley noted. "The norms don't exist yet."

WHAT MAKES FLEXIBILITY WORK

Compadre's firm, Arbolope Studio, has tested nearly every configuration: mornings only, three days a week, split arrangements with other firms, remote staff across time zones. Her conclusion: "Clear communication is the thing that works best. When we just 'check in when we check in,' it falls apart. When we have a pattern, it works fine."

Cross described successfully onboarding senior-level landscape architects at 20 or 30 hours per week — and finding that the accommodation made her firm more thoughtful about everyone's workload. "I'd much rather say: what can we do to make this work and keep you here?"

WHAT MAKES IT FAIL

Agre identified a pressure point that generated strong chat response: reduced hours can create resentment when the workload doesn't actually shrink — it just shifts. "The 30-hour person means 30 hours, and the full-time person means 55? As leaders, we have to make sure resentments aren't building."

McCauley added a structural note from his firm's ramp-back program: spreading reduced hours across the week — rather than concentrating them on fewer days — keeps clients covered and teams functional. "If something sits for five days and there's no coverage, it can become an issue," he said.

PAY STRUCTURE AS A DESIGN TOOL

Compadre described a deliberate choice to pay hourly rather than on salary. The reality of the numbers leads to a human understanding. "When you pay overtime for hours worked over 80 biweekly, there's a real cost to me as a firm owner when people work too much. It humanizes time. It makes you think carefully about what you're taking on."

NONLINEAR PATHS

The conversation broadened to include landscape architects who came to the profession later in life, or who are navigating nonlinear careers. "Not everyone arrives at 22 or retires at 65," said McCauley. Prior experience — from adjacent fields, caregiving, or other careers — carries value. The question is how firms and the profession make room for it.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Flexible work succeeds when expectations are explicit, communication is regular, and the person has enough professional experience to operate with some autonomy.
- Reduced hours must mean reduced scope. The same workload compressed into fewer hours or shifted to other teammates creates resentment and eventual burnout across the team.

- Spreading reduced-hour time across the week, rather than concentrating it, serves clients and team continuity better.
- Hourly pay structures can create accountability around time that salaried arrangements — without a ceiling — often don't.
- The profession is gaining practitioners who arrive by nonlinear paths. Their prior experience is an asset; the work is to build them up as landscape architects, not to treat non-linearity as a deficit.

The Business of Resilient Practice

If the individual experience of stepping away is shaped by what firms have — or haven't — built, what does the firm's side of this look like?

Panelists returned to a consistent sequence: policy first, culture second, communication third.

POLICY AS FOUNDATION

Agre was direct: "Put a really generous policy in place. Make it the same for everyone — birth parent, foster parent, partner, adoptive parent — all the same. And then, as a leader, take it yourself. You can't force people, but it should be highly encouraged."

Her firm provides six months of leave, structured so that clients are communicated with proactively and team redundancy is built before anyone steps away.

Compadre pointed to the individual variation beneath the policy: "Everybody's need is a little bit different. Some people don't want to be completely out for three months and then right back. Listening carefully — and adapting what you can to individual cases — matters."

THE COST OF LOSING SOMEONE

Cross framed the business case plainly: losing an experienced employee can cost close to or more than their full annual salary, when recruiting, onboarding, client relationship continuity, and institutional knowledge are factored in. "It's significant. And losing a great employee is never an easy thing."

Compadre put it more personally: "For someone who's been with you for a long time, the cost is a little bit of your soul."

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A written family leave policy — equitable across all types of parenthood and applicable to principals and staff alike — is among the most impactful structural changes a firm can make.
- Policy without culture is hollow. Leaders must model the behavior they want to normalize.
- Proactive communication with clients about transitions protects relationships and firm reputation.
- Small firms can build coverage resilience through team-based project ownership: copy the whole team on communications, avoid single points of knowledge, design for someone's absence before it happens.

- Retaining a good employee — even at reduced capacity — almost always costs less than losing and replacing them.

What the Room Was Asking

The session chat reflected a profession thinking in real time. Several themes emerged from questions and reactions that weren't fully addressed in the discussion:

- **Salary structure and the 40-hour floor without a ceiling.** Many attendees noted the contradiction of salaried employment that treats 40 hours as a minimum but has no maximum. The question: isn't salary supposed to allow for flexible scheduling, not just unlimited hours?
- **Flexibility beyond parenthood.** Cross raised this directly: "Other parts of our lives are equally important. How do we legitimize other reasons for flexibility?" Multiple attendees echoed it.

Universal Takeaways

While every panelist brought a different context — from an 11-person studio to a national firm, from new parent to 20-year veteran — several ideas held across all of them:

- **Resilience is a design problem.** Landscape architects apply sophisticated systems thinking to the built environment. The same thinking applies to how careers and firms are structured.
- **Set expectations before you need them.** Once a pattern forms, it's hard to reset. The time to define limits is before someone asks you to exceed them.
- **Ask for what you need.** Landscape architects are trained to listen to communities, to name problems, to invite collaboration. That same practice applies at the interpersonal scale.
- **Know yourself across the arc of your career.** What a person can sustain at 28 is different from what they can sustain at 46. Ignoring that shift is costly.

McCauley closed the session with this: "The fact that we're naming it — that we're treating the resilience of our careers and our firms as something worth designing — it matters. The data tells us we're losing people. The stories we heard today tell us we don't have to."

Groundwork is ASLA's Presidential Forum series — candid, practitioner-led conversations on the issues actively shaping landscape architecture. Learn more and access recordings at asla.org/groundwork.