

Starting Strong: Integrating Emerging Landscape Architects into Practice

Moderated by ASLA President Brad McCauley, FASLA, PLA, this first installment of the Groundwork series drew 265 registered participants for a candid, unscripted conversation about one of the profession's most consistent challenges: what does it mean to enter landscape architecture today — and what do firms and practitioners owe each other in that moment?

Groundwork launched in 2025 as ASLA's practitioner conversation series — no slides, no scripts, peer-driven, and deliberately informal. This first session of the 2026 series asked five practitioners from firms of different sizes and structures to speak honestly about what starting a career in this profession actually looks like, and what the gap between education and practice still demands.

"Most of the guidance written about starting out in this profession is written for the firms that don't need it," McCauley observed. "We want to talk to everyone else."

Five panelists joined the conversation:

- **Robb Berg**, FASLA, PLA, president at Design Workshop
- **Terry Berkbuegler**, ASLA, PLA, senior vice president at Confluence
- **Olivia Bussey**, ASLA, PLA, principal at Curtis & Rogers Design Studio, Inc.
- **Gina Ford**, FASLA, PLA, principal and co-founder at Agency Landscape + Planning
- **Madeline Steigerwald**, ASLA, PLA, senior landscape Architect at Dix.Hite + Partners

A pre-session poll confirmed the room's range: roughly a third of attendees were emerging professionals within their first 10 years of practice; a quarter identified as firm owners or principals. Students, mid-career practitioners, and public sector members made up the rest. McCauley used the results directly. "We've got people on both sides of the desk here — the person trying to figure out how to start, and the person trying to figure out how to bring them in. That's the conversation."

What Day One Actually Looks Like

The session opened by asking panelists to describe their own first days — and what they've observed since about what good onboarding actually requires.

The answers covered a wide range. Berg described Design Workshop's structured approach: a peer buddy system, a pre-loaded HR portal, monthly orientation sessions for new hires. Steigerwald described her first job in an office of four where her duties beyond landscape architecture included answering phones, moving computer servers and other office manager tasks. "There wasn't a whole lot of onboarding," she said. "It was task by task."

The contrast was deliberate. McCauley named the structural condition behind it: the median ASLA firm size is four people, and 80% to 90% of firms have fewer than 10 employees. Most landscape architects don't start at a firm with an HR department. The small firm is the default experience — and it is the least served by existing guidance.

What the panelists agreed on: the logistical details of first days matter less than what they communicate. A new hire who is given real work, included in conversations, and trusted early will build skills. One who is sidelined while they wait for a formal system to activate may not stay long enough to use them.

Switching perspectives to what new hires need to bring, Ford put it plainly: culture and enthusiasm matter more than portfolio in the first exchange. "Your portfolio gets you in the door. After that, it's whether someone wants to be in the trenches with you." She added a counterweight: not all enthusiasm looks alike. The quieter contributors — careful observers, methodical workers, thoughtful questioners — bring real value. Energy is not a synonym for extroversion.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Most practitioners enter the profession at small firms with limited onboarding infrastructure. Existing resources and guidance should reflect that reality, not the exception.
- Culture signals in the first days — who explains things, who checks in, who includes a new hire in the actual work — shape retention more than formal onboarding systems.
- Portfolio quality matters for getting the interview. Mission alignment, curiosity, and willingness matter for everything that follows.

What Holds Up — and What Doesn't

The conversation moved into what works consistently in building a strong early career, and where the profession still struggles to find answers. This territory showed that firm sizes, career stages, and regions matter less than you would initially think.

ON IMPOSTER SYNDROME

In the session's sharpest exchange, the panel debated how to support new practitioners when they simply do not have the knowledge. Ford said the term and what it embodies drives her crazy. "We don't expect emerging professionals and new professionals to know everything, and I think it's actually really damaging to go into a practice thinking you have to know everything," she said. "I think what's most important is that you are comfortable with your not knowing, and comfortable to ask."

Berg called "fake it till you make it" actively dangerous. Bussey reframed where confidence actually comes from: not from performative certainty that you don't have, but from leaders who believe in you and support you. Berkbuegler closed the discussion with a word of advice for all: "It doesn't go away. If it does, then maybe you should ask, 'Am I really stretching, and am I exploring new territory?'"

ON MENTORSHIP

Berkbuegler was direct: the mentorship that works happens in real time, on projects, in conversation — not through formal matching programs. Steigerwald described a practical model: a peer buddy for day-

to-day questions, a supervisor for IDP and career goals. Berkbuegler also extended the frame: strong mentors don't have to be landscape architects. They don't have to be designers at all.

ON IN-PERSON VS. REMOTE

Berg made the case for studio presence: osmosis, listening to client calls, collective problem-solving. Ford acknowledged the tension — firm owners want to offer flexibility and also recognize something changes when people aren't in the room together.

McCauley described his own observation: the youngest members of his team, in a hybrid environment, are choosing to come in every day. "The human skills that will outlast AI are learned in person. Communication, consensus-building, accountability — those aren't learnable through Slack."

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Imposter syndrome is a condition of a practitioner who is still growing. The useful response from firms is belief and real work, not reassurance.
- The best mentorship is informal, project-based, and often initiated by the mentee. Formal programs are most effective when they supplement real relationships, not substitute for them.
- Great mentors don't have to be landscape architects. The profession is full of practitioners whose strongest influences came from outside it.
- Early career presence in a studio environment — alongside colleagues, in the middle of actual work — builds professional judgment that is difficult to replicate remotely.

The Gaps We Don't Talk About Enough

The session's final segment moved into territory that doesn't always surface in professional development conversations.

ON WOMEN LEAVING THE PROFESSION

A pre-submitted audience question opened a thread that shifted the room. McCauley named the ASLA data: female members are the majority in the early career years. By the mid-30s, that inverts. Women are leaving the profession in significant numbers at exactly the point when family decisions typically peak.

Ford recommended *On Ramps, Off Ramps* by Sylvia Ann Hewlett and described the failure mode: employees who are pregnant or returning from leave get quietly moved to smaller projects, go invisible, and are never fully brought back. The transition is avoided rather than managed.

McCauley described Site Design Group's ramp-back program — flexible, individual-led, not prescribed — and noted near-100% retention across roughly a dozen parental leaves in recent years. Berkbuegler observed that hybrid and remote capability, accelerated by the pandemic, has made flexible return-to-work more structurally possible than it's ever been.

"You'll probably see more on this soon," McCauley said. That thread did not close. It became the seed of Session 3.

ON GETTING A FIRST JOB — AND NOT GETTING GHOSTED

The session ended with practical guidance. Ford: don't send cold emails to firm leaders. Berg: show up. Go visit. Ask for a tour. McCauley offered a specific approach: target alumni from your university. They have a built-in reason to respond — and they remember what it was like to be where you are.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ASLA data shows a significant dropout of women from the profession in their mid-30s. Firms that manage transitions actively — with ramp-back structures and genuine flexibility — retain people.
- Hybrid and remote infrastructure makes flexible return-to-work more achievable today than in prior generations. The barrier now is less often logistics.
- Job searching works better with warmth and shared context than with volume. University alumni, conference contacts, and mutual connections have a built-in reason to engage.

What the Room Was Asking

Questions submitted before the session reveal what the audience carried into the room that the conversation didn't fully reach.

ONBOARDING AT SMALL FIRMS

The most consistent ask was operational: first-day structure, first-90-days benchmarks, design standards, accountability without micromanagement. The session named the small firm as the norm; the audience wanted guidance written specifically for it.

BILLABILITY EXPECTATIONS FOR NEW HIRES

One question was precise: "Our engineer leadership expects 90% billability from new hires, but 60% seems more realistic — what's actually reasonable?" This question didn't reach the stage. It reflects a real and unresolved tension across small and mid-size practice.

NON-LINEAR ENTRY INTO THE PROFESSION

Questions came from practitioners re-entering after long absences, professionals transitioning from adjacent fields, international graduates navigating U.S. hiring norms, and people pursuing graduate degrees while working full time.

AI IN EARLY CAREER

Multiple questions touched on AI literacy: what firms expect new hires to already know, what authorship means when AI can generate site plans and renderings, how to build relevant skills when the tools are shifting. The session touched AI only in passing.

THE INTERIOR QUESTIONS

How to say "I don't know" without losing credibility. How to ask for help when everyone around you is busy. How to advocate for mentorship when no program exists. These were the questions submitted anonymously because they can't easily be said out loud.

Universal Takeaways

- **The small firm is the norm, not the exception.** Profession-wide guidance — on onboarding, mentorship, expectations, leave — should be written for the firm of four, not the firm of four hundred.

- **Culture is set early and held long.** The signals a new hire gives and receives in the first days and weeks establish the pattern. Changing that pattern later is possible, but harder.
- **Imposter syndrome is a sign of a practitioner still growing.** The useful response to it is not reassurance. It's real work, real responsibility, and a leader who makes their belief visible.
- **The leave question is also a starting strong question.** The ASLA data on women leaving the profession in their mid-30s is not a mid-career problem. It is seeded in early-career culture — in whether flexibility is named, modeled, and possible before it's urgently needed.

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.