the OMS* round table: inside the true small firm

the skills, sorrows and joys of running and profiting from a micro landscape architecture firm

“It is foremost that you love what you do and be happy doing it. Or all the heartaches will not be worth it.”
Duane Christopher, ASLA
DFC&A, ROCK HILL SC

“Make technology your friend: make it work for you instead of the other way around”
Mike Heacox, ASLA
LUCIOLE DESIGN INC, SACRAMENTO CA

“If green spaces inspire us all, our profession is itself an inspiration!”
Annette Heacox ASLA
LUCIOLE DESIGN INC, SACRAMENTO CA

“Choosing the business entity that’s right for you can ensure future success.”
Chris Thompson, ASLA
NATURE FORMS LLC, SPARTANBURG SC

* OMS = One Man or Woman Show
Learning Objectives

Learn to weigh the options for setting up a micro firm and operate it on a day-to-day basis.

Learn how to use marketing and advertising to get work.

Become familiar with workflows, office systems, digital tools, and other tools for making your designs reality.

Understand the emotional realities of running a micro firm.

Business Aspects | Chris Thompson, ASLA

STRUCTURE

I would consider throwing the SBA’s definition out of the window when thinking about micro firms. The SBA considers a small firm one that earns under 7 million dollars annually. Small firms by this definition could easily have several departments and a staff of up to 100 employees. A micro firm is not as well defined in the US as in other countries, but I would consider 5 employees or less a micro firm. I consider a micro-firm as a family. I care about my employees and know each on a personal level, but as with any good business, I try not to let emotions play with business. This is a critical mistake plaguing many small and large businesses. Employees are investments, and in a micro-firm, they represent a huge percentage of the company’s value. Although small in size and gross revenue, Micro firms still face the same hurdles and regulations that larger firms face. The Business structure of the company is a critical element that will guide your micro-firm into the future.

Nature Forms, LLC is organized as a Limited Liability Company. Options vary by state and your decision may be impacted by current laws and future legislation.

Insurance is another critical factor for any business, especially for a micro firm. You will most likely need general liability just to rent an office space. Professional Liability Insurance is another critical decision. Some clients and potential clients will not even talk to you unless you are insured. There are two thought processes that companies face when considering professional liability insurance:

A small company with no insurance policy and limited assets may be less likely to be sued due to a very small chance of doing anything but closing the business.

On the other hand, the insurance could give you peace of mind in an uncertain situation. Many projects require professional liability insurance, and governmental projects nearly always require proof of professional liability insurance.

Does the potential public work outweigh the costs of insurance? Only you can decide what is right for your company.

As I mentioned, the business structure is a critical element and should be researched from many angles. You need to be familiar with your state’s laws concerning practice as well as business structure as they will help guide you to your decision. Although I have worked as a sole proprietor as a designer in the 1990’s, I found that a formal separate entity was the direction I wanted to pursue. This led me to either an LLC or a Corporation. Corporations are further classified as C-Corporations and S-Corporations. An S-Corp may be a good solution for your micro-firm. Corporations are more formal, and as such carry additional burdens. In many states, including South Carolina, corporations must file an annual report with the Secretary of State. LLCs are not bound to this requirement. Until recently, an LLC could not legally practice Landscape Architecture in South Carolina due to wording in the law. The Landscape Architectural law was written before the law allowing the creation of LLCs.

In Virginia, the price of your corporate registration necessary to obtain your certificate of authorization is determined by the number of authorized shares of stock in your charter or
Incorporation documents. Our attorney set up our previous company with 100,000 shares of stock. He said the number of shares had no relevancy and did not matter. In South Carolina, it did not, in Virginia, it had a great impact. For 1-5000 shares the fee was $100, for 100,000 shares the fee was $670. In most states, a sole proprietor can operate under his or her own license, without the need for an additional firm license (Certificate of Authorization). In some states the laws allow for single owner LLCs to operate under their personal license. I highly recommend researching any states you currently work in or intend to work in as the laws may impact your decisions.

Even a one man show structured as an LLC may have to obtain a Certificate of Authorization to provide Landscape Architectural Services under his or her company. One again you wear many hats; you are the accounting department, the human resources department, the face of the company, the man (or woman) behind the curtain, and last but not least, you are in charge of the finances. Basically, everything falls onto you. Your two most important allies are your attorney and your accountant. Even if you don’t use them for everything, keep them close and take professional advice.

**FINANCIAL**

When researching accounting methods, I decided to use QuickBooks. I was familiar with the software, and it makes it easy to understand the key financial elements facing your company. The most important element that I see in any small business is integration. All parts need to function together. I have seen companies, many large companies, use a multitude of applications making a chore out of daily, weekly and monthly administration. Once again check your state and federal laws to see how your company will be affected. To help with the integration, I administer payroll using the QuickBooks payroll system for my employees, but use draws for my pay. I would rather pay myself as an employee, and will most likely make the election to file as an S-Corporation in the future, but as you will learn as a small business owner, it is easy to let some tasks slip through the cracks. The option of and LLC filing as an S-Corp allows the simple business structure of an LLC while providing the tax benefits currently in place for a corporation.

It saves me time from having to import and export into and out of another system, and keeps everything in one place. My employee(s) can view their pay stubs online, get digital w-2 forms at the end of the year and it only takes me about 5 minutes to approve, process and send payroll. I also use online expense program and timesheet programs that synchronize directly with QuickBooks to eliminate any weekly administration on my part. Invoicing is critical, but easy. In about 15 minutes twice monthly, I can prepare, review and send invoices via mail, email or both. As checks come in, it is easy to mark the invoices as paid, deposit and receive a digital scanned image from the bank. It is your firm, and you are liable for everything. I record most important phone conversations in the event that I need them. If you do this you should check the laws in your state. South Carolina allows phone recordings as long as one party on the call is aware of the recording.

Getting a bank account was one of the first things I did when starting Nature Forms. But, there were a few things that had to happen prior to meeting with a banker. Many banks require that you have your articles of incorporation or organization filed and approved by the state. They may also require a Federal EIN or Employee Identification Number. If you are a Corporation or an LLC your company is an entity, just like a person, it needs a unique identification number just as you have your Social Security Number. This helps to further distinguish your personal finances from your micro-firms finances. With these items in hand, I was able to get a company bank account in under an hour. I consider online banking a must for any business. Being a micro firm, I do many administrative tasks on the road, or late at night. The ability to do this while away from my desk helps me focus on billable work while in the office.

Financial Reserve is unique in a micro firm. You have the opportunity to run a very lean firm and minimize waste. Although it is harder to get Small Business Loans than it used to be, there are many options to minimize the need for a tremendous reserve. Small firms need a small reserve. Large Firms need a Large Reserve. Luckily a micro firm needs a micro reserve.

**RELATIONSHIPS**

I believe that the relationships you generate in a Micro-Firm must be stronger than in a larger company setting. You are the marketing division, you are the designer, and you are the administration staff. Your clients deal directly with you for every aspect of a project.

**Large firms need a large reserve.**

**Luckily, a micro firm needs a micro reserve.**

**X FACTOR**

The often overlooked or forgotten variables that can take down a firm in the blink of an eye include weather, health and several other hidden killers. Even with proper planning, adequate resources and a steady workload, you and your firm may not be safe from unfortunate surprises.

**KEY POINTS**

- **Be goal oriented** - Set goals for the week, month, year and beyond
- **Be persistent** - Don't give up
- **Be dynamic** - If you can’t reach one goal, adjust the path. Alter your path to succeed.
- **Be fearless** - You have the skills and knowledge, don’t back down
If green spaces inspire us all, our profession is itself an inspiration!

According to what my friends already mentioned, you may have noticed that you have to be multidisciplinary, chameleon-like. You must embrace a chaotic life with grace and eagerness. It works for some of us, perhaps not for others.

Having great financial skills, technical and personal skills matters.

Let's talk about my favorite aspects: artistic and creative!

I will organize my talk around three referenced basic shapes and colors in symbolic language: the blue circle for imagination, the red square for creation down to earth answers and the yellow triangle for intelligence and relational aspect of our profession.

Participation of audience

Who feels that he or she is primarily artistic? Technical? Public oriented? We all have our preferences and natural orientations.

I believe our profession is a special one, as much an art as a science. It's a way of being in the world.

My story

Why am I here today? Long ago I wanted to be a pure artist.

I was 11 years old when I first read about landscape architecture. I found the profession a perfect mix of art, technical and social skills, with nature at the heart of it.

I was hooked.

My father wouldn't have accepted very well my vocation of “starving artist”. In landscape architecture, I found the perfect disguise for expressing what my heart wanted: being an artist.

Artistic aspects: Blue circle: imagination

As artists, we have the gift to create an emotion. The power of an emotion doesn't require words. It is stronger. Through an emotion we can reach and design a place where our client wants to be!

We don't sell things but lifestyles! It takes more than a sales speech! We have to make them experience and feel a space before it is physically built. We draw, show pictures, meet clients at built projects, and bring them into the dream.

Of course, landscape architects are artists “sans filet”. There are days where we can't draw! You still have to somehow perform for your clients. Draw fewer perspectives that day or with humor you can announce that you are not in your best day for drawing, after crumpling up several unsuccessful sketches! We are only human and people understand.

Being creative: Red Square

Proposing an answer dealing with the reality and hard facts, of exposure, soil, plant material, lifestyles, climate etc.

Creation touches all aspects of our practice: the finances and administrative ones, the technical and the human skills. You have to be creative on the following choices:

- How do you set up your firm?
- What fits best your model for finances?
- What tools of production are you using and why?
- How do you handle your clients?
- How do you maintain a family life aside from your profession?

You have to be a chameleon, and morph constantly from one color of the practice to the other:

Advantages:

- Keeps you on the edge, can never settle in one way.
- Develop quickly changing skills of behaviors: adapt to each client.
- Mentally diverse with unique answers: surprise your client
- Truly propose life changing solutions to your clients and an adequate flow to the project

Drawbacks:

- Can be tiring, to morph constantly.
- Hard to become specialized or go in depth in one direction
- Some days you just can’t perform well. Take the day off!

Inspirational: Yellow triangle

The intelligence of making a sale with "WIND": ideas! Having the experience to interact with clients.

Be bold. I said it before and I will again. Be bold, have the courage to be different, to believe in yourself, to propose new solutions. It’s the opposite of being shy. Be a free spirit!

What sets you apart is who you are, an individual with unique skills and temper always ready to give solutions to individual challenges.

We are problem solvers among our peers with a delicate balance and understanding of human and natural systems. Art enables us to sublimate our client lifestyle, adding a sophisticated touch.

Life is a big circus. Don’t take anything seriously, we are all performing so have fun and deliver a great show!
Duane Christopher ASLA: The Human Aspect

It is foremost that you love what you do and be happy doing it. Or all the heartaches will not be worth it.

Your day to day life will be geared towards creating a marketable image for people to recognize, and to be different than others in the design field.

Being different from the landscape contractor, different, from the landscape nursery, different from your fellow LA firms and Architectural and Engineering firms.

One of the aspects that I have pursued throughout my career is community involvement. It has not always helped, but on the other hand if you are not out in the public eye no one will see you.

Public involvement can be through civic groups and community boards and commissions. These serve several purposes, you are giving back to the community a particular professional expertise or interest that you have ie: Planning Commission, Greenways, Trees, Land Use Policies, and Zoning. Also public service as an elected position is really getting you name out there.

Taking public policy positions will bring media attention and allow one to be the "expert" in your community. As an example for a while the media would come to my office and ask questions about the weather and drought. Also writing editorials on planning, environmental, architectural, and recreation issues will show readers that you don't mow lawns as a profession.

The niche for your firm will be dependent on your area in the country, what you really like to do, and what the market availability is, or in other words what kind of work is out there for you. You only know that by traveling and talking to contractors, developers, architects, and engineers in your area. You need to know all of these people on a first name basis. It takes time to do get to know these people and companies.

The market research will be communicating with your allied professionals, cold calls, and use common sense.

Being in the public forum is free advertisement and markets your expertise while providing a public service. This may include speaking at public hearings on areas of expertise that you may have, IE: Greenways and Trails, Parks, Stormwater, Wetlands, Zoning, Land Use, the list is almost endless. Be involved all the time if your schedule allows, the more the better.

You are involved in your community by being on boards and commissions, civic organizations, Rotary, Kiwanis, Masons, and other civic organizations. I was on boards that I had a high interest level in, for example I was on the Ballet Board for over ten years and served as President for half the time. I love dancing and at the same time people got to know who I was and what I did for a living.

The more you can be involved the more chances people will recognize you in that role. It takes a lot of time no doubt about that.

I think an organization like the Chamber of Commerce is good, but remember you get out of it what you put in. If you don't have time to be involved then don't join. Just having your name on a roster is a waste of money in my opinion.

My most recent organization has been USGBC. I have enjoyed the learning and the friendships.

My Firm.

I am in private practice and have been a sole proprietorship since breaking up a partnership in 1985. My work is 99% private sector. For me it has been about 50-50 commercial to residential. That includes single family house design in the mix.

I have had the opportunity to have a financial stake in a couple of projects as part of compensation instead of all cash. I have not been successful in that arrangement yet.

I did design a subdivision and sold the project to a National Developer when we were not able to borrow the money to develop the project, which took nearly 3 years and sold it just before 911.

Freedom to do it your way comes with the risk that work is not always there and steady.

Need to be diversified financially with other sources of income, that may mean a spouse working or other revenue source such as teaching, or other professional associated interest.

Freedom to “do it your way” comes with the risk that work is not always there.

Duane Christopher ASLA: The Human Aspect
Technology

What tools will you use to implement your designs, run your office and track where the money goes? What hardware - computers, cameras, equipment - will make your work easier and more efficient? What equipment will expand your scope of services?

Software

Finding the right software for your needs isn’t easy, but by choosing carefully you can find affordable, efficient solutions.

Business Software

QuickBooks | AccountEdge
Accounting software is pretty versatile. These programs not only keep the books, they might also let you process credit cards, track clients, and follow project milestones. They’re still not a replacement for a good accountant, in my opinion. I’m a landscape architect, not an accountant!

Spreadsheet: Excel | Numbers
Nothing beats a good old-fashioned spreadsheet for simple number crunching. You can run your books with either of these programs, but I find that a dedicated accounting program works better.

Microsoft Access | FileMaker Pro
These tools let you create your own databases. They’re better than spreadsheets for looking up data, linking databases, and filtering lots of information.

If you’re ambitious, you can create your own invoicing system in a way that makes sense to you. There’s almost no limit to what you can create: integrate client tracking, invoicing, transmittals, time sheets, cost estimates... There’s packaged software that does all this, but you’ll have to learn their logic - and you’ll miss all the fun of another geeky project.

SalesForce
I haven’t used this, but if you’re into tracking everyone this looks like it can keep you up to date on every possible lead, contact, client and acquaintance you meet.

Adobe Creative Suite (CS)
You now have to subscribe. This can make a dent in your budget. It made a dent in ours, so we abandoned this package.

Microsoft Publisher
If you’re not heavy into fine-tuned graphic layouts, this can get the job done.

Word processor: Pages, Word
Word processors have moved beyond their former limits to embrace page layout. This paper was done in Pages on a Mac.

CAD programs
Use your CAD program for layouts. It’s not simple to create multi-page presentations, but it’s great for large scale presentations.

Raster graphics programs
Better to avoid these for print. Use them for image processing and leave the layout to other programs. Why? Prohibitive file sizes!

We’re using Pixelmator for image editing, Lightroom for photo processing and management.

Vector graphics programs
These work well for single page layouts, giving you fine control over everything on the page. However, they’re not so great at multi-page documents - so better to use them for logos and line drawings if you’re not doing your presentation in CAD.

We use iDraw for logos and other vector based art.

Done by others
Yes, you can pay someone to do your graphics. But that’s not much fun and worse, you might get something that looks like an ad for an insurance company instead of a your creative design firm!

Plan Preparation Tools

How will you prepare your plans?

AutoCAD | VectorWorks
These are complete CAD solutions, with steep learning curves.

SketchUp Pro
It’s possible to prepare plan sets in SketchUp, and even around $500 it’s less expensive than a full-blown CAD program.

Hand drawn
Drawing by hand might fit your style better. In this world of CAD, you might even stand out from your competition. Better yet, combine traditional hand graphics with page layout software. It’s fairly simple to mix computer technology and traditional sketching, giving you the best of both worlds.

GIS
Geographic Information Systems don’t just have to be for the Big Guys. Many cities have free downloadable GIS files with lots of interesting data that can be read by a CAD program.

Sometimes the files are so large that it seems the program has crashed. Sometimes it has, but when everything works, you can get some solid data on the community surrounding your site.
Hardware

how much do you need?

Computer
Yeah, this is obvious. But what kind of computer? Desktop? Portable? Notebook? I use a desktop with multiple screens, since it makes my work go faster. I could just as easily plug my second screen into my portable, however. I just like the idea of being able to instantly grab the portable and run out the door, no unplugging needed.

If you're even thinking of dealing with video, you'll need lots of storage space. One short segment in high definition will chew through about a gigabyte. You'll also need a computer that can handle video processing in real time, stuffed full of RAM (16 Gb is not too much!).

Data Storage
Your computer will die. Your hard drive will fail. That's their destiny. Your job is to make sure everything is backed up. Constantly. In as many places as possible. You're not being paranoid. You're saving yourself hours or days of aggravation.

Active projects go onto an external drive and into the Cloud. One program backs up critical data daily to the cloud, and another puts backup files on an external drive, daily.

You can back up to DVD, but it's slow. Right now, with 2TB drives running a bit over $100, do you really want to feed disks into a slot for hours? I don't have a solution to the question of how to back up the back ups for archives, in case someone calls me ten years later.

My old DVDs, coupled with a cataloging program, still work - but project files were much, much smaller then.

Buying last year's technology might be more than adequate for your needs

Tablet
There's nothing better for communicating. You can go on site, integrate photos and text in your notes, then publish them to the Cloud for everyone to read.

You can even sketch over site photos, then pass the thing to a client who might have trouble understanding you as you spout inspired wisdom, waving your hands in the air.

You can load a level, a distance finder, a compass, even an app that lets you scan a leaf with the camera and get a plant ID (at least in Boston).

Your tablet can turn you into a mobile blogger, so you can post updates directly from your job site as long as you have an Internet connection.

CAD software exists for tablets, but that screen is just a bit too small for comfort. Maybe if you have good eyes and tiny fingers, you can get something done. Otherwise, I'll stick to my desktop or laptop.

Camera
Your tablet has a camera. Is that good enough? For notes, yes. For publication, no. You'll need something with a large sensor - either a DSLR or a professional grade mirrorless camera. The advantage of mirrorless is you get to keep interchangeable lenses yet shed a lot of weight and bulk.

Your tablet also does video. Your camera probably does, too. But what if you want a time lapse video of a project? In the rain? Underwater? No problem. Action cams work great for this - they're not just good for BASE jumpers. You can put the thing on your head and walk through a site. The time lapse function can work for motion/use studies à la William Whyte. Action cams are tiny, so you can just throw one in your bag in case you might need it.

Printers
Do you need a large format printer? Maybe. Nothing beats the convenience of being able to print a check set late at night, on demand - or run off a quick copy for a contractor whose cat shredded his one and only copy of the planting plan.

For general office work, we use a laser printer. Black and white, affordable, quick, efficient.

Color inkjets are nice, but the cartridges are just too expensive. Our color documents tend to be large, so we run them off on the plotter anyway.

Scanners
Good flatbed scanners used to be easy to find, but now the trend is for all-in-one machines. I don't want an all-in-one, because the ink cartridges are too expensive.

Sometimes these things are useful. If you have a new plotter, there might be a scan head attachment available.

We've more or less gone over to shooting plan images with a macro lens on a DSLR. One shot and you get the whole plan, no stuffing it into a scanner and assembling it in a photo composition program. The method is quick and dirty; no substitute for a surveyor's CAD file, but it's useful when you're evaluating a project and don't need a high level of accuracy.

You'll need to set the image file to a scale, typically by finding a known distance in the image and applying a scale factor.
Building a web site:

Register your domain
Before building a site, you'll need somewhere to put it: a web hosting company's server. You check to see if your desired domain is available. If it is, you simply pay on line and it's yours. You can register several domains and link them all to one main site. Typically you can do this at the same time you sign up with a hosting service. You'll then pay a yearly fee for the domain, unless it's included with hosting, and a fee for hosting your site.

Dreamweaver | Freeway
These are full-featured web authoring programs. To use them, you create your site on your computer and then upload it to your domain. Dreamweaver is kind of like sitting down in the cockpit of a 787 and having to fly. Complicated, but you'll get great results once you figure things out.

Freeway more closely resembles a traditional page layout program, so it could be more familiar. It also comes in an "express" version for less money.

Make sure you read Google's Search Engine Optimization guidelines (SEO for short) before you create your site. The guide is straightforward, and should help you rank high enough to be seen, eventually (there's a delay between the time your new site arrives on the Net and the time where Google indexes it for all the world to find).

Blog sites & templates
You have another option: use a blogging site as your main web site and skip the complicated design process.

Blogging:

WordPress | Blogspot | Blogger
Using a blog site, you can do everything in the Cloud with templates. These blog sites are free, and you simply create pages and upload your content. You have less control over the look and feel, but you can throw something together quickly and get going. You can also associate a blog such as WordPress with your own domain, so it will appear at Your_domain.com/blog (you'll have to pay a hosting service and domain registration fees, however).

Keep your entries short, entertaining and memorable. If the information is useful, you'll get more hits.

Done by others
You can give up and pay someone. Updates can get expensive, and there might be a delay between the time you give your webmaster the information and the time it appears online.

Social Media:

The pursuit of "likes", tweets, pins...
Social media, it seems, are a necessary evil. Rather than just doing my work creating spaces and places, I have to root out methods to increase likes, hits, eyeballs, whatever.

There are a lot of techniques and contorted paths to the attainment of enough likes to actually benefit your company. I certainly don't know them. It seems that everyone who likes our page is already a client or a colleague.

There is probably a balance between excessive tweeting, facebooking and linkedinning and long stretches of inactivity. I personally hide postings from others that I feel are too frequent or repetitive.

Once you're in business, you'll probably get all kinds of telemarketing calls promising to make you the most liked person in Facebook. Sounds scammy.

Listings:

Getting found
The first listing you need to worry about is where you place in the major search engines: Google and Bing.

These sites are keyword based, so make sure you use terms that a potential client would likely use if they were trying to find you but did not know your name. So, think of descriptive words, starting with "landscape architect" and your region. Then add words that make you unique, your area of practice, your approach, your specialty. Terms like historical restoration, habitat management, beer gardens. Whatever you do should be woven into your site so it will get indexed by a search engine and pulled to the top of the list.

If you did your SEO work well, you should be somewhere on the first page, using the terms you defined as search criteria. If not, keep tweaking. Remember that there's at least a week's delay between a change to your site and a change to your ranking.

Just because your site ranks well in search engines doesn't mean that people are looking at it. You might think that just because search terms like your city, landscape architect, and design bring your page to the top of Google that people will see your site and call.

Some will. Others won't.

They're off on an aggregator site, looking at all kinds of pretty pictures. If you're not there, they won't see you. If you are there and they like your work, odds are good that they'll contact you without visiting your web site.

So, you need to pass more time uploading your project images to LinkedIn, Houzz, Pinterest, wherever. The more the better, it seems.

With all this, where will you find the time to do landscape architecture? I'd say give up television until you're so famous that you no longer need to sweat away at a computer, adding images, captions, anecdotes and other banalities in the quest for new projects.
Biographies

Duane Christopher, ASLA

Duane grew up in the Finger Lakes area of New York and graduated from Lansing High and Cornell University. He then moved to Venice, Florida. After working for two years in Florida, for the oldest family Landscape Architecture and Contracting firm, Reasoner’s, he moved to Rock Hill, in March of 1979.

He is a licensed, registered Landscape Architect and a Residential Building Designer and has been in private practice since 1981. He is registered in the states of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia.

The great percentage of his professional time is devoted to the fields of residential architecture, landscape architecture with all environmental affiliations that go with landscape architecture.

He has served in many different commissions locally and served the York Soil, Water Conservation District since 1982, where he has been a full commissioner since 1992.

He participates in the Nutcracker Ballet with York County Ballet and has been involved with other productions with his church, St. John’s Methodist in Rock Hill.

Duane has been married to his wife, Karen for 25 plus years and has one daughter, Michelle.

In 1999, Duane was an extra in the locally shot movie “The Patriot,” which came out in 2000 and was nominated for three Academy Awards.

Annette Heacox, ASLA

Annette brings a French multicultural view to Luciole Design inc. She earned her first landscape architecture degree in France, before moving to California for her masters degree in landscape architecture in 1990 from Cal Poly, Pomona.

After working at Befu-Donan Associates in Pasadena, a private firm specializing in parks and schools, she moved back to France.

In France, she worked as a landscape architect for the City of Argenteuil, where she took charge of the Plan Vert (Green Plan). This work involved designing and updating the city’s public open spaces, then linking them with a greenbelt and trail system.

She penned the layout of the public garden surrounding the new City Hall and created a tropical rainforest exhibit in the city’s library.

As part of her work, she regularly prepared presentations, held public workshops and communicated details of the new Green Plan to City managers and its inhabitants.

After completion of the Plan Vert, Annette moved to Disneyland Paris, helping to create the first Flower Festival. She coordinated new ideas to develop a new method for topiary construction. Her work involved coordinating various experts and communicating design information to stakeholders in both English and French.

At Luciole Design, she continues to design private & open spaces, having worked on parks, church grounds, and apartment complexes.

Annette is currently working with local artists and activists to plan and create a Water Festival to educate the general public in Summer 2014. She rows (crew) and is a fine artist working in watercolors & acrylics.
Mike Heacox, ASLA

Mike’s original background is in biological sciences. He began studies in biology, then switched to environmental studies, earning a bachelor’s degree from UC Santa Cruz in 1986, where he also studied natural science illustration. He continued his ecological approach to design at Cal Poly, studying regenerative design principles with John Lyle, earning a master’s in landscape architecture in 1990. This background has allowed him to deal with complex ecological issues as a landscape architect, giving him a good working knowledge of local species and habitats.

Mike worked on a number of planned urban developments in Orange County, then moved on to Befu-Donan where he worked on parks and schools. After moving to France with Annette, he began designing office parks and mixed use developments. Later, he worked on a more international scale, creating preliminary designs for a hotel in Ethiopia, touristic development plans to interpret the rich architectural heritage of Jordan, designing the façade lighting for a gallery and theater in Geneva, Taman Suropati park in Jakarta and other projects. During this time, he added the skills of lighting designer to his repertoire, learning from French experts how to artfully apply light to gardens, façades and sculptures.

Mike served as president of the California Sierra Chapter of the ASLA in the past. He also taught graphics and design as a lecturer in the University of California’s landscape architecture program. He currently volunteers some time for the California Native Plant Society, and is active in a local rowing club.

At Luciole Design, Mike runs the computer systems, photographs projects for publication and continually searches for better, more efficient solutions to running a micro-firm and doing production drawings. He’s the company’s web designer, too... and a landscape architect, of course.

In whatever free time he has left, Mike makes artisan sourdough bread, prepares anti-stress meals, does an occasional painting and rows like mad while keeping an eye open for interesting birds.

Chris Thompson, ASLA

Chris Thompson, ASLA is the founding principal and a practicing landscape architect at Nature Forms, L.L.C. Having worked at Edward Pinkney/Associates Ltd. in Hilton Head South Carolina, he gained a foundation that helped boost him on this journey.

He embraces the theory that great design is not limited by the canvas; and design is the magical element that inspires boundless creation. His love for trees finally took root when he studied to become an ISA Certified Arborist to give him more flexibility in the ongoing protection of the trees in and around his community.

He has held numerous positions with his state ASLA chapter and has been heavily involved with many legislative endeavors concerning the practice of the profession in South Carolina. In 2012 he was appointed to the South Carolina Board of Landscape Architectural Examiners by South Carolina Governor, Nikki Haley. Chris also teaches Computer Aided Design in the Landscape Architecture Department at Clemson University and Landscape Design as well as Advanced CAD and Plant Materials at Spartanburg Community College.

In October of last year, Chris’s life was changed forever as his first child Harper was welcomed to our worldly garden. He makes a point to walk through the landscapes with her so she can one day appreciate the growing world that we inhabit.