New Buffalo, Michigan was the site in early September of the second annual XTreme LA, a three-day charrette sponsored by outdoor furniture manufacturer Landscape Forms and attended by twenty-seven young landscape architects named best in class by their firms. They came from both coasts, the heartland and Canada to this former Lake Michigan railroad town where new condos block the water views of vintage bungalows, the marina now hosts 36-foot sailboats, and a casino just off the highway vies for attention and dollars with the modest beachfront and downtown. Their challenge was to develop a master plan for the city that would foster population diversity and a mix of residential and commercial development and better integrate key focal points including the marina, beachfront park, retail and entertainment to make New Buffalo a better place to live, work and play.

Co-hosts for the event were Bill Main, Honorary ASLA and President, Landscape Forms and Susan Everett, FASLA, Executive Director, Landscape Architecture Foundation. Participants were divided into three groups, led by distinguished design professionals Kathleen Garcia, FASLA, ASLA, LEED® AP, Principal, Wallace, Roberts & Todd, Inc., San Diego, CA; Tom Oslund, FASLA, ASLA, Principal, oslund. and.assoc., Minneapolis, MN and Chicago, IL; and Kendra Taylor, ASLA, and Alexander Lamis, AIA, Robert A.M. Stern Architects, NYNY.

The three groups working intensively and independently arrived at complementary conclusions. All started with the natural environment, developing innovative planning and design solutions for preserving the natural resources and restoring the ecological balance of this extraordinarily situated place, and then addressed strategies, driven by those solutions, for reviving a vibrant downtown, expressing the town’s history and culture, and protecting the quality of life for year-round residents as well as seasonal property owners. The impressive results were reported in two online Metropolis articles. (A Tale of Two Cities 9/15/08 and 9/17/08)

In talking to team members and leaders throughout the event we had the sense of a profession at a critical time. We followed up in conversations with the landscape architects who led the teams and with five participants chosen to reflect the diversity of location, education and professional interests represented by this gifted group to get their take on what’s happening in the profession. What follows is a snapshot of the profession as seen through the eyes of several generations of landscape architects practicing and teaching today.
IT'S A GOOD TIME TO BE A LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT.

That's the consensus among all those we talked to. What's behind the optimism? The growing awareness of environmental issues by clients, other design practitioners and the general public has focused attention on concerns at the heart of the profession. Tom Oslund sums it up, “No matter how old you are, in this profession you grow up with a model around sustainability. It's nothing new for us. It's just taken 60 years for people to recognize that.” The complexity of the issues and the level of problem-solving required to address these challenges call for sophisticated systems thinking in which landscape architects are trained and tested. “There’s an awareness that infrastructure solutions are not just engineering,” Kathy Garcia says. “The profession is growing as we become more adept at crossing over disciplines. This is a spectacular opportunity and we shouldn’t let it get away from us.” Garcia sees more specialization within the profession precisely because landscape architects are doing more in-depth problem solving and are being called on for more specialized knowledge. She envisions great opportunities for partnering with companies specialized in the sciences to bring science into practice. “The types of work we are doing are moving us into those realms,” she explains.

Clients are changing the way they approach projects with a resulting increase in opportunities for landscape architects to take leading roles. “Instead of just bringing in a big name architect clients are saying, Let's look at this holistically. What does this project want to be and who is the best person to work on that?” Tom Oslund says. “You’re seeing smaller offices being chosen over some very large practices because they will go to a place that’s more innovative and experimental.” In the last five years Oslund, who heads a twelve-person practice, has been asked to select architects to work on major projects. His picks include Jean Nouvel for Minneapolis’s new Guthrie Theater. He explains, “We get in on the ground floor to help a cultural or academic institution with master planning ideas and then stay on as the conscience of the master plan.” Kendra Taylor concurs. “There is interesting work-intellectually and conceptually-being done by a lot more firms than previously. And not just the big architecture and landscape architecture names.” From her perspective as a landscape architect practicing in a major architectural firm Taylor sees landscape architects getting more involved in architecture projects, to positive effect. “Landscape architecture is less about making an object than about making connections between things. So the result is less warping of the site to fit a pre-existing idea.”

Technology is having a profound influence on the profession. The use of computer-based tools like CADD for planning and design is only part of the story. The immediate access to information is accelerating research and enabling multiple approaches to projects, global communication of data and information is making real-time collaboration across disciplines and distances common practice, and the virtual transcending of geographic location is expanding options for practitioners. “The internet has had a huge impact on small offices like ours by letting us work on projects all over the world,” Tom Oslund explains.

THE NEXT GENERATION OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS IS AN IMPRESSIVE GROUP.

“Like their predecessors, today’s landscape architects are incredibly idealistic,” Susan Everett says. “But they are quite sophisticated and more targeted to a specific approach or specific place than we have seen in the past.” Kathy Garcia observes, “The cream of the crop have always been independent thinkers. I think now there’s more cream.”

The young landscape architects we talked to came to the profession for different reasons and by different paths, but they all find the seeds of their choice in childhood experiences.
Megan Holder (LEED® AP, Texas A&M Univ., BLA, 2004) is a member of the HOK Planning Group in Atlanta, where she focuses on community and campus master plans, mixed-use town centers, and streetscapes. “My early interest in art still informs everything I do, everyday,” she says. Although she began studying architecture, she soon changed her field of study because “landscape architecture includes anything outside the building and gives me a much broader palette to work with.”

Om Khurjekar (ASLA, Univ. of Pune, India, BA, Arch., 1998; Morgan State Univ., BLA, 2001) joined Hord Coplan Macht, Inc. in 2001 where he practices landscape architecture with a special interest in the intersection of the built and natural environments. He keeps a small architect’s model of the home in India that sparked his childhood passion “to do something like this someday.” After practicing architecture in India he came to the US to pursue a master’s degree, wandered into a landscape architecture studio and changed his course of study. He explains, “I always felt that these were not two different things but two leaves of the same branch.”

Timothy Terway (ASLA, Penn State Univ., BLA 2005; MIT, MCP 2007) joined EDAW in New York in 2007. He is a planner, ecological and urban designer within the firm’s environmental and urban design practice teams. Tim grew up in Pottsville, PA, a coal-mining town where, from the age of six, he rode a dirt bike through landscape “radically altered by the hand of man.” The experience informed his choice of landscape architecture, a discipline he defines as “the study of man and its interaction with the environment at multiple scales.”

Like Om Khurjekar, some landscape architects are choosing the profession after working in other fields. “The strength of the profession is that a lot of new people are coming from different points of view,” Tom Oslund says. “It’s interesting to see the students I’ve had in the last 5 years—geographers, writers, lawyers—all finding landscape architecture as a second career. They have experience dealing with public realm issues or environmental issues or finance. There’s a real maturing of the profession.”

Landscape architects in the current generation are tech-savvy and often more adept at navigating and manipulating technology than more senior practitioners with whom they work. And they are international in perspective. “These young professionals are much more global in their awareness,” Kathy Garcia explains. “Many have traveled, in person and via the internet. They’re attuned to ideas from around the world.” They are also global in origin. “We have people from over 60 countries working at the Stern office,” Kendra Taylor reports. “Our staff is really enriched by people coming from all parts of the world to work here.” That can be a two-way street. Some young professionals like Megan Holder make career choices targeted to help them see the world. “You don’t become a landscape architect to get rich and I knew HOK would take me to places that I couldn’t afford on my own, especially so early in my career,” she says. “Working for this firm has really expanded my experience. It’s so exciting. You can come in to work on Monday and be told, On Tuesday we need you to go to India.”

When it comes to interdisciplinary collaboration, young professionals may have the outside edge. They understand how to work in teams and seem to find it easy. “For older generations the culture shift is sometimes hard,” Holder says. “For people in my peer group, it’s the culture we’ve been brought up in. We’re used to a much more collaborative process.” Erin Jacobs has worked as a team member on a variety of projects at a variety of scales. “You realize the ideal of the team when you’re working on systems,” she explains.

The eager embrace of system thinking is a singular mantra of these young landscape architects who are recognized as up-and-coming leaders of their profession. (Susan Everett confirms that this focus is prominent among current landscape architecture students as well, noting that the 2008 Olmstead Scholar was honored for her work on integrated infrastructure.) Their ability to make significant contributions on large, complex projects is impressive. Two years ago Megan Holder, with two senior landscape architects and three urban planners, began working on the master plan for KAUST, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Thuwal, Saudi Arabia. The project went on to become the largest in HOK history, encompassing the master plan for the university and town center and landscape architecture for parks, streetscapes and neighborhoods. 754 full-time employees were eventually assigned to the project, 25 to 35% of them younger designers. The university and entire town are scheduled to open in the fall of 2009. Holder who saw many of her own ideas implemented calls it “a career defining experience.”
Om Khurjekar works on projects that integrate architecture and landscape architecture. “The urban landscapes I do follow the concept of integrating the indoors with the outdoors. In urban situations, the indoor and outdoor spaces are so knit together, so close to each other, it’s very important to think about them as complimentary systems.” His projects include West Shore Park, Inner Harbor Baltimore and a garden at Baltimore’s Sinai Cancer Center that bridges design and healing.

Erin Jacobs believes “Ecological design is the future of the profession. It’s where we have to go.” She has worked on numerous master plans, including the New Century Ranch Master Plan, Bend, Oregon and is particularly interested in the environmental impacts of design and construction. “The construction process is responsible for 13-18% of a building’s lifetime carbon output and 100% of the landscape carbon output,” she explains. As part of a Methun team she is working with the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center to identify carbon outputs and provide measurable numbers for materials and activities to enable a rigorous systems approach to design and construction. An advocate of post-occupancy studies that document how ecological strategies such as green roofs actually perform, she says, “Having the numbers on how a strategy helps with utilities lets us use that to get other people on board with sustainable strategies.”

Tim Terway has been tapped by EDAW to help build a practice line bridging ecology, urban studies and planning at the firm. He is Project Manager and Ecological Designer for the Idlewild Experimental Research and Education Center in Queens, NY, a 224-acre wetland preserve near JFK Airport. And he is Project Manager, Planner and Urban Designer for a vision plan designed to guide infrastructure investment of over 1 billion dollars by New York City Economic Development Corporation in sustainable strategies to support industry along a 2.5 mile-long industrial waterfront while preserving public access. A self-described “techno-geek” with an existential commitment to sustainability he is co-founder of Symbiologic, a subscription-based website that leverages the Web as a platform for selective, protected data sharing between stakeholders to facilitate environmental performance and increase profitability. His goal is to use what he calls “a shared behind-the-wall service that can be elaborated from the bottom up,” to create dynamic databases that identify companies with waster streams that other companies can use to produce, thus closing the sustainability loop. An advocate of Citizen Science, an approach that espouses user-generated vs. think tank content, he has created a prototype for a product that gathers and dispenses bottom up information at public wifi locations on ecological indicators including trash production, electricity consumption and water usage for people interested in the environment.

Andy Wilcox, ASLA, RLA, earned a BA in landscape architecture from California State Polytechnic Univ., Pomona, and MLA from the University of Southern California. His interest in art combined with an appreciation for the natural world nurtured in a childhood of family camping in national parks, led him to the profession. An Assistant Professor in the Department of Landscape Architecture, at Cal Poly, Pomona, he has practiced as a landscape architect in his own and other small firms. But after returning to graduate school his career took a different path. “Very few people were doing anything I believed in,” he says. “I saw teaching as an opportunity to have a wider impact on the profession. Not just teaching students the skills that will get them employed, but making them believe they can make a difference.” His goal is helping students become critical thinkers, “completely and inclusively” who are adept at understanding complex systems, “so they worry less about the borders and boundaries and more about how a project itself could change larger patterns.” He must be doing something right. Of the five Cal Poly, Pomona projects that received 2008 ASLA student awards, he was the faculty advisor on three. Wilcox sees landscape architecture poised to make significant long-term changes. Eschewing sustainability in favor of a more muscular approach, he couches the challenge in terms of adaptation and regeneration. And he views Landscape Urbanism, the theoretical framework that posits the landscape rather than architecture as the organizing principle of the
city, “as the only theory around that has the legs to carry this off, because it repositions what we do as framers of much larger systems and ultimately ways of living and occupying cities.”

Despite great stride by landscape architects into expanded areas of practice, significant opportunities for high-level participation by young professionals early in their careers, and emerging theories that are energizing landscape architecture education, good news about the profession isn’t reaching a sufficient number of recruits. LAF President, Susan Everett reports, “Work in the profession is expanding and becoming more interesting but the number of professionals entering the field is not keeping pace. We’re not even replacing retirees.” She explains that students who choose landscape architecture as a major are likely to know someone who works in the profession. But many students don’t know what landscape architects do and finding landscape architecture within academia isn’t always easy. While some colleges and universities offer it in schools of architecture and design, others incorporate it into environmental science or agriculture programs. LAF, ASLA and other professional organizations are currently working together on initiatives for attracting superior candidates and growing the profession.

For the people on the inside, it’s an exhilarating moment. Kendra Taylor says, “It’s a great time to enter the profession. Very exciting stuff is going on.” Tim Terway says, “The work is changing under our feet as more people see the need to make intelligent decisions about how we relate to the natural environment. Landscape architects are now valued for their ability to understand the interconnectedness of things. Landscape architecture is a profession that lets us tackle the problems of our time.”