

# THE NO-COLLAR JOB

BY ZOÉ EDGECOMB

Michael Van Valkenburgh's essay for *LAM* in May 2009 offered unlucky recent landscape architecture grads welcome commiseration and advice in finding work. In the national news, too, graduates are being encouraged to apply for an expanded range of jobs. There is no question that working in a field vaguely related to the one you studied is better than not working at all, and can in fact be truly beneficial to your career. However, there is another possibility that has been largely absent from the discussion: starting your own business. For my part, this has meant the gradual development of a small design/build practice. Elements of my work fall into both the white and blue-collar categories, but as my own employer, I have essentially created a "no-collar" job.

## AS DESIGNERS, WE'RE PROBLEM SOLVERS. WHY NOT CREATE OUR OWN JOBS?

Starting a landscape design/build business was not what I had in mind when I decided to go to graduate school. Like many of my colleagues, I studied architecture and landscape architecture in the hopes of finding a career that involved plenty of creativity and allowed for the expression of an ethical stance. I had spent my youth avoiding office jobs like poison ivy, but I was ready for full time with benefits, even if it meant a good bit of sedentary work. By the time I graduated in December 2008, the economy had crashed. I went back to my old restaurant job. When long-time customers asked the inevitable "Can you help us with our backyard?" question, I stopped rolling my eyes and answered with an enthusiastic "yes." When asked who might install the design, I offered my own services and rounded up fellow unemployed grads to help. Once I showed up at an office building under renovation with a simple rain garden design I had worked up over a weekend. The owner liked it and hired me to install it. Eventually I went legit and obtained a Class A contractor's license.

As designers, we're problem solvers. We may be a collaborative bunch, but as a profession, we are leaders, not followers. We have ideas. Why not generate some of them in the service of our own livelihoods? Starting a business is not easy, especially when resources are limited; but just as we perform diligent site analysis with each new project, we need to evaluate our own assets (as we would existing conditions, history, a budget) and our market (the context, the client). In my case, I had construction experience and an undergraduate degree in sculpture, a good personal

reputation in my hometown, and a perception that there might be a market for good design at the level of the individual and small organization. My customers want something more aesthetically sophisticated and ecologically informed than what they can get from the local garden center, but cannot afford to hire a licensed landscape architect. I am happily filling that niche.

Sometimes I wonder if my decision to abandon the job search and go out on my own is heresy: Am I devaluing my MLA degree by wielding a rake and a shovel? Am I confirming stereotypes by being a "landscaper" as well as a landscape designer? True, I'll never be licensed if I continue along this path. And true, I'm reducing my competitiveness for a future office position as I limit my knowledge of digital programs to what is essential for my work. I'll also admit that I have some qualms about displacing laborers whose skills might be more appropriate for some of my work. However, when landscape architecture firms are displacing their own by hiring rotating low-wage interns (see Rachel Hill's letter in the June issue), those of us with massive debt must do what we can.

Designing small, affordable landscapes and working in the field has given me nuts-and-bolts experience that meets and probably exceeds what I would have learned as an intern in front of a computer. I've had to learn a lot about running a business generally: writing contracts; dealing with taxes, licenses, and insurance; and deciding when and how to collaborate with others. I'm creating databases of locally appropriate plants and materials. I can now identify not only most of the garden plants I see, but also the weeds. I can bend steel edging to my will. Low budgets have become not only realities, but means of inspiration. And perhaps most important, the idea of landscape as process is apparent to me every day, as I continue to visit and work on previous built projects.

There is a movement in Europe among interns and temporary workers who call themselves "precarious." The word precarity derives from "precarious" and "insecurity." It applies to all of us who aspire to, but cannot find, secure jobs. One of the positive things about our individualistic American society is that it is much easier here to go out on one's own. I still hope someday to work in a landscape architecture office that values my degrees and my unusual skill set. For now, I am just thankful that I have fulfilling work that truly immerses me in landscape, and pays the bills to boot. ●

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