



## A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

### *Bridging the Communication Gap between Landscape Architects (LAs) and Municipal Arborists (MAs)*

*Photos: Michelle Buckstrup*

**Steve Shurtz, FASLA**

*Director of Landscape & Forestry,  
East Baton Rouge City-Parish*

I started my professional life as a landscape architect and became an arborist and community forester almost by default. One day I woke up and realized that for years I had been struggling to maintain an urban forest in my town without an appropriate range of skills. As I pursued my arboricultural training, I found myself much better able to effectively apply the design concepts I had learned as a landscape architect. I think that the ability to see both sides of the LA/MA issue has been a benefit for me in my career. I understand the complaints of each side, yet I know firsthand the positives of each.

LAs are, by definition, designers. They are trained to manipulate the natural environment in ways that are ecologically and aesthetically pleasing. MAs, on the other hand, are generally trained in the preservation and management of natural plant and environmental communities. While the differences are sometimes subtle, they do exist and they tend to act as barriers to good communication between the two groups. Part of the problem, as I see it, is that the two professions have developed from unique and originally unrelated sources. Landscape architecture grew out of



horticulture, engineering and architecture, whereas community forestry grew initially from agricultural forestry.

With the rise of “urban forestry” in the 1970s, the forestry community began to recognize the need to apply forest management concepts in urban areas. Some of this management included such things as species selection, planting plans, and various other components of what had been traditionally thought of (especially by landscape architects) as “design”. Hence the friction. We are combatants in a classic “turf battle”.

The time has come, though, for the two sides to reconcile their differences and learn to support each other as vital parts of the urban forestry team. LAs need to learn from MAs the requirements of planting and nurturing trees in urban environments. LAs’ planting details, root space allocations, and tree installation techniques have not always respected modern arboricultural knowledge. On the other hand, MAs are typically not skilled nor trained in the areas of aesthetic design and urban planning.

I have been involved with several successful partnerships. In every case, the LA and the MA were equal partners on the design/development team. As a landscape architect friend once told me, “LAs tend to be generalists, while arborists tend to be specialists.” The most successful partnerships have been those in which each member of the team was able to learn from the other and to respect the knowledge and abilities of the other.

My city recently completed a \$65 million art center downtown, which features a large urban plaza designed by a very prominent

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national LA firm. Within the proposed plaza are six mature live oaks (*Quercus virginiana*) designated by our city for protection during the design, development, and construction of the project.

The LAs' initial plaza design called for serious encroachment into the trees' root zones and failed to respect the existing topography of the site, particularly as it related to existing root development. However, after several site visits and collaborative sessions, I was able to work with the design team to create a revised plan that respected both the designers' original concept and the needs of the trees.

As a result, the LAs have repeatedly thanked me for helping them fulfill their vision and I have been fortunate to have worked hand-in-hand with a major design firm and have, indeed, learned a few new tricks myself.

**Len Phillips, FASLA**

*Town of Wellesley Landscape Architect & Park and Tree Division Superintendent 1978–2000*  
*Editor Emeritus, City Trees*  
*Author and Lecturer*

I find it very interesting that Municipal Arborists find Landscape Architects to be an "enemy". As a trained LA, I never heard about this until I became a superintendent of parks and trees. I now realize that this perception is only that of municipal arborists; LAs have no idea that arborists feel this way.

When I started my job as the superintendent, my assistant, who was trained as an arborist, told me on the day I started that he was

going to have a difficult time working for a LA. As time passed, we not only became close friends, we also developed a deep respect for each other's profession. After six months on the job, my assistant told me he no longer had a difficult time working with me, because he had completed his job of training me to think like an arborist.

I found that one of the answers to cooperation began with listening to what the arborist had to say and listening to him describe the mistakes I made. Conversely, the arborist listened to me while I described the effect I wanted to achieve with the design and then he understood where I was coming from. Finally we worked together to develop a plan that considered my design concept in harmony with his skills for dealing with the tree.

After joining the SMA, I discovered that I was not alone. There are several

LAs serving as MAs within the Society. I feel that in a sense we are special individuals because not only have we been taught how to work with trees, we can use our creativity to provide a compromise that is better for both groups.

**Jim Urban, FASLA**

*James Urban and Associates*  
*Author and Lecturer*

Based on the people I meet at the lectures I give, I think we are making progress. I see more and more LAs at urban forestry conferences. What I recommend to new or would-be LAs is that they need to develop a better understanding of trees and soils than they get in most LA programs. At the same time, the landscape architecture profession is so broad, that not all LAs can specialize in trees and soils and should bring in arborists as consultants much like they do with specialists in irrigation, historical preservation, or green roofs. The recognition of the importance of the arborist's specialty has lagged behind these other specialties.

For the MAs' part, I think they need to market themselves better to LAs, because it's going to take active marketing to get LAs to fully recognize the importance of the arborist's services. I recommend MAs go to regional ASLA meetings as both speakers and attendees and offer to write for the regional newsletters. Write about a project you did in that region or a technical issue. Also, MAs and LAs can sponsor joint meetings. Don't wait for the LAs to come to you!

If I was looking for an issue that could serve as a clean vehicle for this kind of win-win relationship, it would be the issue of nursery stock quality—especially tree pruning and planting depth. Too-deep planting is real, it's serious, and it's something that affects us all. If we can get this figured out, the LAs will look better to clients and the arborists will have less work in the end.

A piece of advice for MAs: be careful about commingling aesthetic concepts with tree care concepts. For example, if you are concerned about trees being planted too close together, address the LA from the tree-health perspective. If you go into aesthetics, you're on the LA's turf, and it won't go over well unless you know the LA really well. Stay with the technical and you'll be heard.

Another suggestion is that if you're going to be the technical expert, be the technical expert. Be conversant with the facts and avoid hyperbole. A bit of humility helps, since there is so much we still don't know about trees. Stick to the facts when you know them, but also say when you don't. My mantra is that it's all about the soil, and arborists in general can be weak in that area, so I recommend really delving into soils in a serious way.

**Gordon Mann,**

*Public Works Superintendent for Redwood City, California*

I work with a great LA, Suzette Murphy, who is contracted by Redwood City. She knows a good deal about trees but frequently consults me about tree selection and other issues. She will frequently say to city planners and developers, "You need to check with Mr. Mann on this."

The LA-MA relationship is more adversarial than it should be, and there are several reasons for this. Some LAs don't do a site inspection before they do their design, so they're working with topography but haven't considered other factors like existing plants, hydrology, proximity of buildings, and adjacent property impacts. MAs recognize how critical site inspection is and are affected by the consequences of landscape designs that don't include one.

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Another problem MAs experience with LAs is that some LAs design for immediate impact, which means that trees are often specified too close together. Ten or fifteen years down the road, it's the MA who has to deal with the maintenance headaches. I would like the LA's design to include a specific maintenance plan that deals with steps to thin out the landscape over time to finally achieve the desired look. This would enable original placement for spacing of the mature permanent plants with fillers in between and provide the expectation that some installed materials will need to be removed on a scheduled basis.

Along these lines, LAs can sometimes be behind on specifying trees that arborists no longer use because of pest problems and other issues. For instance, here in CA, some LAs still specify the 'Raywood' ash (*Fraxinus oxycarpa* 'Raywood') even though it has been found to be notoriously susceptible to *Diplodia* blight. Many MAs now prefer to use 'Autumn Purple' white ash (*Fraxinus americana* 'Autumn Purple') instead of 'Raywood'. LAs could benefit from keeping abreast of these changes and/or consulting an arborist that does.

For the MA's part, we could be more flexible and settle for less-than-perfect spacing and tree preservation. Sometimes "tree removal avoidance" is a more realistic goal than "tree preservation". Instead of zero tolerance for the root pruning that an LA's design would necessitate, we can recognize that trees can withstand a certain amount of root pruning if follow-up care is planned.

Both MAs and LAs should partner together to guide the nursery industry toward developing better plant material with regard to growing specifications and species availability. We both want to use plants in our respective professions. Often, the desired plants aren't available or grown.

### Ralph Sievert,

*Director of Forestry for the Minneapolis, MN, Park and Recreation Board*

It used to be that development projects would pop up in Minneapolis and our department would be caught by surprise. Now we're an integral part of the city's site and plan review group that includes LAs, and we are backed up by the Minneapolis Urban Forest Policy. We attend all the meetings for development that will entail takedowns or planting in the ROW. Developers now get their plans returned from city hall with a stamp that says, "You must contact the Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board's Forestry Section before proceeding." Then we work with developers before plans are implemented.

Fortunately for us, the LAs here have been great partners in the review process. They are eager to find out from us what the best tree selections are for a given project. We can veto their plans for trees in the ROW, but this is seldom necessary because they have

been so conscientious. Sometimes we have to be more firm with out-of-town LAs, but the local LAs are almost universally eager to work with us.

In order to learn from one another and be heard, I think MAs need to insert themselves into the process as we did with the Site Plan and Review Committee. In general, we need to go where the LAs are. We also need to bring them in. Here in Minneapolis, we invite LAs to participate in our Shade Tree Short Course as both participants and lecturers. LAs do talks for our Green Expo as well. Several fine LAs serve on the Minnesota Shade Tree Advisory Committee, which is our urban forest council. Those meetings are very productive because LAs and MAs mingle and LAs do talks, oftentimes for CEU credits for certified arborists. The challenge is to get more MAs doing talks for the LA groups.

One example of good collaboration here is the major renovation of Lake Street, the original city center of Minneapolis. Hundreds of trees will be planted. We are working with LA Andrew Caddock, and his firm, Close Landscape Architecture, has been eager to make sure we buy into the design. Faced with the possibility of woefully small tree grates, we encouraged them to look at structural soil. They were open to learning about structural soil and will specify it for extensive use in this project. 🌿

