

## Q&A with an industry expert – Tom Mortensen, RLA, ASLA, National Survey & Engineering, a division of R.A. Smith & Associates, Inc.

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**Revitalization e-Digest** discusses the landscape architecture industry and how it has been impacted by sustainable design with Tom Mortensen, ASLA, registered landscape architect at National Survey & Engineering, a division of R.A. Smith & Associates, Inc.

**Q: Prior to joining National Survey & Engineering, you owned your own landscape architecture business. What knowledge from that experience has contributed to your current career?**

**A:** When I started my design business back in 1994, most landscape architects in my market were sales people designing landscape plans for free, or almost free, strictly to sell the construction job. I had very little competition because what I offered was unique. My unbiased, neutral, creative approach to site design was backed by 15 solid years of working in the trenches, literally.

Having my own design firm helped me understand the dynamic of listening and developing trust in a client/consultant relationship. Most pitfalls and successes in business are based on communication. Many design professionals do not effectively interact with clients to establish a rapport, so their services are doomed to be treated as a commodity.

**Q: What emerging trends have you witnessed during your career in the landscape architecture industry?**

**A:** Trends in this profession tend to respond to, or are a step ahead of, trends in the expected aesthetic. For example, back in 1990 or so, a new style of landscape design became known as the "New American Garden Style," which was pioneered by the talents and passions of Wolfgang Oehme and James Van Sweden. Their designs were inspired by natural patterns—bold and dramatic. They used ornamental grasses and native and naturalized plant selections to create and define spaces. It was a new aesthetic. Now we see it being used everywhere.

Other ongoing trends are—of course—sustainable design, green roofs, restoration, trail planning, and healing gardens, among others.

One of the challenges for the profession is the outreach and understanding, credibility, awareness, and the perception of what we actually do as landscape architects. The general public, as well as many allied professionals, do not realize that the work of landscape architects goes well beyond planting design. Landscape architects provide site planning, land planning, space planning, and many other facets of design that overlap into the realm of engineering, site development, architecture, and art.

**Q: How has the growing practice of sustainable design and the "green" movement affected your job responsibilities? How do you think it has affected the landscape architecture industry as a whole?**

**A:** Sustainability and green design have become the expected norm of design not only for buildings, architecture, and efficient mechanical systems, but in my profession as well. Now that these principles have been embraced by the masses, native landscapes and sustainable site planning principles have gained a well-deserved respect and a better understanding in the mainstream. With this emergence of interest also comes a make-believe bandwagon approach known as "green washing." This concept is a watered-down attempt to artificially connect to the eco-friendly, green, and sustainable movement. Under this approach a project is labeled "green" for beneficial marketing purposes, as long as it is inexpensive and doesn't create any delays. Time, awareness, and public demands will most certainly separate the real green from the faux green.

As time goes on, I think my profession will see more and more design opportunities that embrace real sustainability because the methods will be proven.

**Q: What types of sustainable features do you often incorporate into a project?**

**A:** Native and sustainable landscapes are not a new trend; they've just become more understood and are gaining more exposure over time. In fact, the core principles of sustainable site design are as old as earth itself. In my designs, I try to use natural patterns of the region and proper plantings for specific situations, and I relax the normal knee-jerk design method. I challenge those municipal landscape ordinances which mandate landscape requirements that are unsustainable and horticulturally unsound. Offering outside-the-box options to a client can have amazing results. What comes to mind is a large retail project that I recently designed with no lawn on it. While this is unheard of in the retail industry, I would hope that this will become the norm, where appropriate, within five years.

**Q: How would you predict the landscape architecture industry to change in the next five to 10 years?**

**A:** My profession has changed dramatically since the early days of my career, and I expect that trend to continue. Nationally, I see a lot more outreach and an awareness of our contributions to the built and natural environments. I can only hope that we break further out of the public-perceived horticultural design and more into the realm of collaborative planning and design. Those who design, sell, and/or build landscapes strictly for aesthetic purposes will always be there. However, as more people become aware of the breadth of the profession and its impact on everyday life, the recognition and understanding of landscape architecture will increase public awareness.

Currently, many states have registration and licensure requirements for landscape architects. Some have adopted practice law, which means you can only practice landscape architecture if you are registered in that state. Others states have title law, which means you must be registered in that state to use the title, "landscape architect."

My home state of Wisconsin has title law and is currently trying to further define the title of landscape architect for purposes of adopting practice law. The wording of the original bill has been met with resistance by surveyors, engineers, and planners because they read it as a grab of their market share. While this is clearly not the intent, the legislation has been misinterpreted. This will be an ongoing challenge for my profession nationally, yet it will create more of an awareness that will ultimately affect my profession in a positive way.

**Q: Urban redevelopment is taking place all over the country. As an urban planner and park planner, how has this affected your career, as well as the industry?**

**A:** I am seeing a lot more opportunities for urban infill and redevelopment, along with incentives proposed by municipalities to encourage businesses to develop there and people to live there. This has spurred a whole new creative way of looking at design, spatial relationships, horticulture, engineering, and pedestrian-scale amenities.

Many site designs are incorporating a transit component such as walking or biking to short- and long-term visit destinations that include dining, shopping, and doing business. With these concepts comes a higher expectation of aesthetic. There is also more open-minded awareness to new ideas that in the past were merely looked at as "fancy" or "unnecessary," mainly because of the expectation level of the users.

In many cases, the public participation process has become part of the expected planning process rather than the exception. Neighborhood groups are forming and taking ownership of their communities. Landscape architects and planners are challenged to break away from the "expert model" and listen to the people who live there, rather than subscribing to or encouraging concepts they learned at the latest professional conference. The public is another reviewing body that, in some cases, carries more weight than the municipality. It has kept us on our toes. The process has also become less academia-based and much more grass roots.

**Q: What types of projects do you most enjoy, why?**

**A:** It's not necessarily the type of project, per se, that I enjoy the most, but rather the type of process for a project. Whether it's an entry feature for a residential development, a 200-acre regional park master plan, a streetscape, a retail development, or a native landscape design, the key components for my personal project enjoyment are the early involvement, collaboration, and mutual respect among the team members.

The energy and outcome of a project that engages in a collaborative design process can be very rewarding. Other benefits to this are more efficient communications and a lot less rework, which streamlines the process and ultimately costs less in fees than the alternative. There is also a lot of shared learning that takes place when the consultants are all working together and openly.

Since these collaborative design processes and principles are not being taught in colleges, it is up to the real world and actively working design professionals to step up, reach out, and have some fun working together. But just as we learned in kindergarten, we have to play fair, share the crayons, and don't eat the glue. Oh yeah, and leave your ego at the door.

**Company name:** National Survey & Engineering, a division of R.A. Smith & Associates, Inc.

**Headquarters:** Brookfield, Wis.

**Number of offices:** Six

**Total number of employees:** 250

**Year firm was established:** 1978

**Total billings for last fiscal year:** \$25.6 million

**Areas of practice:** Municipal and private-sector civil engineering, traffic and transportation engineering, land surveying, landscape architecture, planning, construction services, 3-D visualization and animation, and GIS/technical services.

**Website address:** [www.nsa.com](http://www.nsa.com), [www.rasmith.com](http://www.rasmith.com)