

Building Scene

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★ 10

Design discipline seeks an earlier role in planning

"OK, the development complies with the community master plan, we've got architectural renderings and construction blueprints, the civil engineering specs are done. I think we're ready to go, but I can't help but feel we're forgetting something."

"What about landscaping?"

"Oh, I don't know, I suppose we could have a guy come out and throw some sod down and plant a couple of trees and bushes..."

By Gerald Frawley
staff writer

The sound you just heard was the scream of landscape architects everywhere.

As development has evolved over the years, the design disciplines of architecture, civil engineering and community planning have become more involved in the early planning process.

In recent years, landscape architects have become more involved too, but sadly, landscape architects say, they are still often not called until the late stages of a project.

The Michigan chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects is taking steps to change that. At the chapter's January meeting, the society sponsored a panel discussion with the theme "Common Ground - Creative Endorsements Between Design Disciplines."

The intent of the discussion was to emphasize the importance of each

discipline in the design process. Jack Goodnoe, president of the MASLA, said.

The issue is deeper than landscape architects being ignored, he said. "Landscape architects can be myopic about what (they) do."

The point behind MASLA and Goodnoe's efforts is not to point fingers, he said. "I wouldn't want to characterize it based on a negative assumption."

As the development process stands, the lines between the disciplines are blurred. "Rather than dispute the overlaps, we should use them and try to come up with better designs."

Still, he admits, part of the focus of the seminar was to raise awareness about the importance of the landscape architecture. "The optimum result of any project is to have as many perspectives as possible."

A long-term goal of the profession is to convince the decision makers — the developers — that what they do has merit, Goodnoe said.

"In the long term, we feel we can save (the developer) money."

A project that involves the landscape architect in the planning process earlier will reduce grading, minimize landscape budgets, help site buildings so they are less costly to erect, and result in more efficient road and utility systems.

"Mistakes in the infrastructure can lead to large operation and maintenance costs later," he said.

Landscape architects sometimes



feel they are considered decorators — they're there to dress up a building's exterior after it's been designed.

That overlooks other areas of expertise the landscape architect brings to the project. "Ignored environmental, urban planning and

recreational planning expertise," he said.

Nicholas Lomako, a planner with engineering, planning firm Wade Trim/Impact, said he wouldn't say, nor does he think many landscape architects feel a need to take on a

more important role in the planning process.

"I think it's more a question of working in isolation." On some projects, each member of the design team does tend to work without input from others.

It's understandable, therefore,

that landscape architects, as a member of the design team, would want to be brought into the planning process earlier.

"There's a grain of truth to that."

Two of the biggest obstacles to the

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Overall business climate influences development scene

By Doug Funke
staff writer

Michigan has public relations problems, although not insurmountable, when it comes to attracting business to the state.

Real estate investment trusts seeded by pension funds may finance more commercial projects in the future.

Conscientious office owners keep their financial houses in order and negotiate with tenants and lenders, if necessary, in down times.

Building owners shouldn't be as eager to eat remodeling costs for tenants as they may have been.

Those were some observations recently presented by a panel of heavy hitters on the local development scene to Commercial Real Estate Women, a professional association.

"We're a very maligned area," said Robert A. DeMatia, president of a Plymouth-based construction design and management firm. "It hurts us in Michigan when other firms look at what they can get down South compared to what they can get here."

"Other states have a bag of giveaways for customers," DeMatia added. "The first question I get when I visit businesses in other areas is what do you give? What are the tax benefits? What about job training?"

BUSINESS AND governmental leaders here should respond with a solid, unrelenting campaign, he said. DeMatia described how he managed to retain a client with the hard sell on a weekend's notice.

"The existing sales force here, we said, would be in a safe harbor. They wouldn't have to relocate their families. They could stay with their friends."

"We actively stressed the productivity of northern workers versus southern workers. You can find (quantitative) information like that," DeMatia said.

"Michigan has a lot of manufacturing about it and is considered a union state. What percentage of workers do you think are union? The low 20 percent — that's the figure we've heard," he added.

Other panelists were:

• Michael G. Damone, president of Damone/Andrew in Troy, a developer and manager of light industrial and office properties.

• Douglas M. Etkin, president of

Etkin Equities, a Southfield real estate development company.

• Richard W. Horn, general manager of Duke Associates, a developer of office, industrial and retail projects.

INSURANCE COMPANIES have financed a majority of his projects, Damone said, but they're getting a little gun-shy with rating services scrutinizing their portfolios.

Banks here always have been strict, and savings and loans are essentially out of the commercial lending business, he added.

"Some pension funds invested in closed or open-ended (stock) funds feel locked in," Damone said. "Now, there's talk about real estate investment trusts."

Some tenants not aware of an owner's financial requirements are getting a little too full of themselves, he observed.

"We had a request for proposal (to bid) for a 1,200-square-foot tenant. I thought this was carrying it just a little too far."

Not all owners have clean hands, though, Damone added.

"We've done a lot of work for troubled properties. In each case buildings are in a chaotic position, tenants are unhappy, taxes aren't paid. Tenants have suffered tremendously."

Etkin picked up on that theme.

OFFER TO reduce rents a little and make improvements in exchange for lease extensions, he advised. Banks may be willing to re-negotiate interest rates with owners if owners are willing to pump more of their own money into a building when the economy sours and rates fall.

"You have to be aware of tenants' needs," Etkin said. "We believe in spending money before tenants want you to spend money. That way you get satisfaction."

"If you're prepared to put new money into a deal, a lender will listen," he said of refinancing. "But if you don't pay taxes or utility bills, you won't have credibility."

Etkin prefers to have space empty than give it away.

Horn told the gathering that owners can no longer afford to remodel to a tenant's specifications and just get their money back. The numbers don't support that now.



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