

The History of SWA Group

For nearly 50 years, SWA Group has produced outstanding work recognized with more than 460 awards. A collaborative group practice of landscape architects, urban designers, and planners, the firm has worked in 47 states, the District of Columbia, and more than 40 countries. Over the course of its history, SWA has developed an international reputation for its commitment to design excellence.

The parent firm of SWA Group was Sasaki, Walker and Associates, established in 1957 in Watertown, Massachusetts by Hideo Sasaki and Peter Walker. While serving as chair of Harvard's department of landscape architecture, Sasaki became a colleague of other Harvard design professionals and began collaborations that ultimately became his legacy.

In 1959, Walker opened a regional office of Sasaki, Walker and Associates in San Francisco, initially to complete planning and landscape design of Foothill College in Los Altos in collaboration with architects Ernest J. Kump and Masten and Hurd. For the next 15 years, Walker and his associates built a collaborative practice that thrived in the high-energy atmosphere of the growing economy. Walker continued Sasaki's belief in the integration of the building professions, but preferred to keep the disciplines of architecture and landscape architecture separate unlike Sasaki's office, which today offers both.

SWA's repeat clients in the 1960's included not only architects such as McCue, Boone, Tomsick (MBT), Frank Gehry and SOM, but also builders and developers who had previously hired engineers to lay out site plans. Such clients began to recognize the importance of design solutions that created value through sensitivity to site and integration of open space amenities. Bellwether projects of that era include Foothill College, Golden Gateway, Del Mesa Carmel, Fashion Island, and Weyerhaeuser Headquarters.

In the 1970's, the firm officially changed its name to SWA Group in order to reinforce its emerging group practice philosophy. Several of the senior principals were able to develop more fully as professionals and began to become involved with larger-scale issues of landscape design and committed to the ideal of "fitting into" the land. SWA undertook master planning and landscape design projects of major significance and that set the precedent for others to come: Woodbridge, Elkhorn/Sun Valley Resort, Irvine Ranch, and Regency, Omaha. Some of these projects incorporated principles of new urbanism before that term was coined. SWA was responsible for master planning of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area as well as other government-owned parks and open space. Noteworthy design projects included Concord Performing Arts Center and the headquarters buildings of Fireman's Fund and Security Pacific National Bank. During this decade, SWA collaborated with high-profile architects including IM Pei, Phillip Johnson, Kohn Pedersen Fox, William Turnbull, and Charles Moore.

In 1974, Calvin Platt moved into the role of President as Peter Walker returned to Harvard. Platt, who also studied at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard, brought to the firm a professional and business model that supported multiple studios. With the emergence of new generations of designers, new ideals and philosophies also emerged. Increasingly, associates and principals moved from highly focused, specialized roles to the role of a generalist who could cover many aspects of the planning and design process. Also in 1974, SWA became an employee-owned company through means of establishing an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP). This innovative ownership arrangement was one of the first of its kind on the West Coast and was set up with the help of the founder of the ESOP movement, Louis Kelso.

During the 1980s, SWA's private and public work continued to grow nationally with the establishment of multiple offices throughout the United States and women began to more fully enter the principal ranks. In 1983 Peter Walker left the firm to form his own smaller office. In 1988, Calvin Platt became CEO and William Callaway selected as president of SWA. Offices were turned over to the third generation of leaders.

By the end of the 1980s, SWA had established a reputation, both in this country and abroad, for a fine crafting of the parts that go to make up the whole of a place, a city, or a region. In addition to high-profile built projects such as Williams Square, Harlequin Plaza, Burnett Park, Transco Tower, and Arizona Center, SWA had also undertaken extensive large-scale planning for both land development and natural resource planning projects represented by First Colony, Magee Ranch, and Newport Coast. Alameda Village was an early example of brownfield development in California. SWA provided urban design and planning services to assist in the transformation of the West End Historic District of Dallas. Award-winning corporate work was carried out for IBM, Hewlett Packard and Apple Computer. The Hyatt Regency Scottsdale set a new standard for resort hotels and significant work began on the redevelopment of the Stanford University campus.

During the 1990s SWA expanded significantly into global markets, particularly as the U.S. recession of the early 1990s curtailed domestic work. By 1995, almost 40% of SWA's work was being done outside of the United States. Beginning in Hong Kong and Japan, projects expanded throughout Asia, Asia-Minor, Latin America, Europe and the Middle East. Key international projects included Filinvest Corporate City in Manila, Sun City Retirement Communities in Japan, and Centro Oberhausen in Oberhausen Germany. Other particularly well-received domestic and international projects included planning and design work on the corporate campuses of Silicon Graphics, Intel, Exxon, Hewlett Packard, and Federal Express; civic work at the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas and Worldwide Plaza in New York; redevelopment of the cities of Anaheim and Houston; university campus work at Stanford, SMU, and Tokyo University; large-scale environmental work (both paid and pro-bono) on the bayou system in Houston and wetland restoration in Baytown, Texas; new community work for the new communities of Mountain House, California and Lagoa dos Ingleses (Brazil); entertainment venues for Disney, Universal Studios and Dreamworks; and resort work for Las Ventanas Al Paraiso (in Baja California) and the restoration of the Beverly Hills Hotel. During the decade, SWA projects received over 130 awards. In 1996

Kalvin Platt became the Chairman of the Board and Bill Callaway, who had been involved in company leadership since 1988, became the stand-alone president.

During the 2000s, SWA has continued to build on its reputation as one of the world's leaders in the fields of landscape architecture, planning and urban design. During the first three years of the new millennium the firm's projects won 64 awards. It received an ASLA Centennial Medallion for its work on Silicon Graphic's Amphitheater Technology Center, an ASLA National Award of Excellence for the Westlake Corporate Campus in Westlake, Texas, and an American Public Works Association's Project of the Year Award for Lewis Avenue Corridor in Las Vegas, Nevada. In addition to its work in the United States, SWA expanded its projects in China (25% of its workload), Russia, and Mexico. SWA continued to do work in Japan (a series of award-winning senior-living communities), France, Greece, Taiwan, Korea, Thailand, the Caribbean and other locales throughout the world. The scope of its work also broadened. During the new decade SWA was involved in leading a multi-disciplinary planning team to refurbish portions of the San Antonio River, designing the Mississippi River's first significant interpretive center (Tunica, Mississippi), designing the grounds for the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee, as well as designing "green rooftops" for the world headquarters of Ford Motor's Premier Auto Group and the San Francisco Academy of Science. SWA provided master plans for some of the most innovative and environmentally sustainable communities in southern California: Santaluz in San Diego County and Shady Canyon in Orange County. With respect to foreign work, SWA designed Nanhai, China's Citizen's Plaza (a mixed-use corridor comparable in scale to New York City's Central Park) and provided urban planning and design for the redevelopment of the waterfront of one of China's national treasures, West Lake in Hangzhou province. SWA continued its work for universities (Stanford University, University of the Pacific), urban mixed-use projects (Santana Row in San Jose, California, and Merrick Park in Coral Gables, Florida), new towns (Mountain House and River Islands in northern California), corporate facilities (Radio Shack Corporate Headquarters in Ft. Worth, Texas and Federal Express World Headquarters in Memphis, Tennessee), as well as resort projects (Desert Ridge in Phoenix, Arizona and Lucayan Beach Resort on Grand Bahama Island) SWA opened a new full-service office in San Francisco, California and a representative office in Shanghai, China. During 2003, William Callaway became the CEO of SWA, and Kevin Shanley (trained at Harvard's Graduate School of Design and Santa Clara University) became its president.

Today the firm operates six offices – Sausalito, San Francisco and Laguna Beach, California, Houston and Dallas, Texas, and Shanghai, China. Younger principals now lead SWA's offices, and their values and goals are setting the tone. Their combined social, environmental and aesthetic concerns all bring to bear on their project work and the firm remains committed to professional excellence.