

## THE HISTORY OF DESIGN WORKSHOP

Classmates at Utah State, Joe Porter and Don Ensign often spoke of forming a landscape design firm together. After graduate school at Illinois and Michigan respectively, they ended up as professors at North Carolina State in 1969. Along with founding partners, Dick Wilkinson, and Vince Foote, they created Design Workshop as an effort to give real-world experience to landscape architecture students. Wilkinson and Foote, thought of the workshop's value as purely educational, while the other two wanted to effect change from within the powerful development industry. There was an amicable parting of the ways and Joe Porter and Don Ensign created Design Workshop, Inc. naming it for the process of collaboration they wished to foster.

The firm's initial work was with The Rouse Company at Columbia, Maryland, where the partners learned about the design of new communities and managing the complexity of such undertakings. With a 1972 residential development plan for the Pine Island Gun Club in North Carolina, the partners got a rigorous introduction to public policy, the complexity of integrating different scales of planning and the design challenges of reconciling the environment with economics. The island's ecosystem became the framework for preserving the decades-old hunting club, a plan that has succeeded in keeping 6,000 acres of Pine Island preserved and protected as a sanctuary by the Audubon Society.

That ecology-based project led the partners in an unexpected direction, and brought the attention of visionary developer George Mitchell, developer of The Woodlands in Houston, Texas. Mitchell hired Design Workshop in 1974 to design the ski area and base village of Owl Creek near Aspen, Colorado. Highly influenced by McHarg's *Design With Nature*, understanding of the site's ecology supported the firm's design of an auto-free village on a very small portion of the site between Aspen and Snowmass. Wildlife corridors were preserved and the design introduced ideas that were innovative for the time, including a transit system and a central parking garage. While defeated politically, the plan's careful balance of growth and environment became a model for future development in Pitkin County, significantly influencing the land-use regulations later adopted in and around Aspen. Ski resort work that followed benefited from the growing firm's continuing emphasis on holistic thinking, including projects in Europe and the original planning in Canada for Blackcomb, one of the world's most popular and sustainable ski resorts.

Seeing great potential in the West, the partners relocated to Aspen in 1974. The inter-mountain West was the great "empty quarter" of America with twenty-five percent of the land area and five percent of the country's population. Here was a vast landscape which at time had very few examples of landscape architecture outside of the impressive efforts of the National Park Service and Forest Service, and even fewer landscape architecture firms. It is a region possessed by all Americans and dominated by great public landscapes and parks. The last three decades this region has been one of the fastest growing in country. As a result projects in the West are often played out on both a national stage and in an extraordinarily complex local context where traditional economies of agriculture, timber harvesting, and mining, give way to new economies. With one project in hand, Joe and Don, founded a firm which in 35 years has grown to over 200 employees, the largest in the region and one of the largest in the country.

The firm earned an impressive reputation for its ski-area projects. The lessons from that period, however, went far beyond developing in a sustainable manner in the mountains. The firm's staff also began to see that, in order to carry their values through a project, they would need to go beyond ideas, plans and designs, building their skills to take the work through implementation. In 1978, they got their chance with a project where everything they had learned came together, where thinking and practice merged seamlessly, in the Kananaskis Valley of the Canadian Rockies. Led by Richard Shaw, another Utah State graduate who joined the firm in 1976 after attending Harvard's Graduate School of Design, the creation of this resort village in the largely undeveloped valley was a 10-year-long landmark project for Design Workshop. Here it became clear that the firm's ideals would work at a large scale on a complex project if the process were carefully managed through design development, public process, and construction. Richard's emphasis on built work also led to a substantial practice in garden design.

Kananaskis laid the foundation for many of the firm's most successful projects to come, including a series of new communities during the 1980s. These began at The Meadows in Castle Rock, Colorado, south of Denver. Plans and designs for that development included village clusters and innovative infrastructure, including riparian drainage spines. The same developer hired the firm to work on Estrella, near Phoenix, which led to creating the original master plan and design for the 20,000 acre development of Summerlin along the western edge of Las Vegas.

In early 1979, LSU graduate, Kurt Culbertson, joined the firm following business school. In 1985, Bill Kane, former Pitkin County Planning Director, and one of the world's great mountain planners became partner in Design Workshop. He greatly influenced the firm's resort design, but also brought a strong emphasis on smart growth. That year, Becky Zimmermann also joined the firm, serving first as Director of Marketing, and then following graduate school building Design Workshop's capabilities in market research and financial analysis. More importantly, she built upon a foundation of resort design to expand the firm's capabilities in tourism planning. Becky Zimmermann, who joined the firm in 1985, built a foundation in market and financial analysis but also expanded the firms' foundation in resort planning to address issues of tourism planning, another of the West's great economies. Plans for the 10,000 acre Pikes Peak Watershed, the Clark County Wetlands Master Plans, and the entire north shore of Lake Tahoe were notable examples of this work. Increasing workload in the Desert Southwest led to a Phoenix office in 1987.

In 1989, Kurt Culbertson became President of the firm with Porter as Chairman. In response to recessions of the period, Design Workshop began to expand its focus beyond its core business of resort design. An emphasis was placed upon building upon the traditional economies of the West, mining, railroads, and public lands. A year later the firm's efforts in South America began. Joining with fellow LSU classmate Sergio Santana, Culbertson, with Porter began the master plan for Aguas Claras, the restoration and redevelopment of a massive iron ore mine near Belo Horizonte, Brasil. In response to this work the firm opened a Sao Paulo office in 1992. This effort along with the regional plan for the 100,000 acre, Minas Gerais mining district began the firm's substantial commitment to both mined land reclamation projects and brownfield redevelopment knowledge which translated well to the great mining regions of the American West. Subsequent projects in South America led to the creation of offices in Bolivia and Chile, pioneering efforts which expanded the reach of landscape architecture to the continent.

The firm also focused on regional planning at a vast scale. Winning competition entries for the vast Tama region surrounding Tokyo and the Sorochi tourism district of Hokaido expanded the firm's experience at this scale. The Bow Canmore visual assessment study created a management strategy for the forty mile corridor from Calgary to Banff. The national award-winning Flathead County master plan addressed growth pressures and natural resource preservation issues in a 3.2 million acre landscape, an area equal in size to the State of Massachusetts. A plan for Canyon Forest Village and the High Desert new community in New Mexico, in 1990 launched the firm's significant commitment to sustainable development, creating some of the first green building standards in America.

The implementation of High Desert led to the opening of offices in Albuquerque and Santa Fe in 1995. Continuing to work in the mountain towns of the West led to the opening of offices Vail, Colorado in 1995, and Jackson, Wyoming and Lake Tahoe in 1997.

In 1996, Todd Johnson, joined Design Workshop. Todd's influence was immediate, particularly in the area of urban design. Teaming with Greg Ochis, Todd created the award winning master plan for Riverfront Park, the redevelopment of the old Denver railyards. Master plans for the redevelopment of the Phoenix and Calgary railyards followed as well as for Union Park, a sixty-acre transformation of the Las Vegas Union Pacific yard.

In 2000, the firm returned to its roots with the opening of an office in Salt Lake City, Utah. Led by Terrall Budge, a graduate of Utah State and Harvard GSD, the firm has been responsible for downtown redevelopment plans for the city, as well as, the Daybreak new community, a 30,000 acre master planned community carved from the brownfields of the Kennecott Copper Mine. Daybreak makes extensive use of bioswale stormwater management and green building systems, perhaps the largest such application in the United States.

A board retreat in Santa Fe in 2000 was a watershed moment for the firm. It was at this meeting that Design Workshop conceived and committed to a concept called Legacy. A commitment to Legacy is an effort to re-integrate the various specializations within the profession into a unified whole. Under this concept successful projects must succeed environmentally, economically, artistically, and socially. Here was a commitment to a synthetic approach to the profession and knowledge as a whole. To support this effort, Design Workshop has moved beyond the environmentally based metrics of LEED to include similar standards for economic, community, and artistic performance.

In recent years the firm has worked to realize the Legacy principles. Major projects currently include Valle San Pedro in Baja, California, a 30,000 acre master planned community which seeks to provide affordable housing for Mexico's burgeoning middle class. Kendall Yards is a 78 acre brownfield redevelopment in Spokane, Washington, which guides the return of the city to its historic waterfront through mixed use development and public open space. The Gates Redevelopment in Denver, Colorado, transforms an abandoned rubber factory into 6 million square feet of LEED certified development, focused on the creation of East Vanderbilt Park. Design Workshop's efforts, on behalf of the Nevada Department of Transportation, has provided design guidelines for over 2,200 hundred miles of roadways within the state. The award-winning master plan for the Lair of the Golden Bear provides sustainable development guidelines for the retreat campus of the University of California.

Mary Fox joined Design Workshop in 1996 as Human Resource Director a reflection of the firm's commitment to personal development and well-being. The practice has kept education as a cornerstone of the practice, establishing a corporate university in 2001, Design U, which encourages a culture of ongoing learning. Designers are expected to return to graduate school at some point in their careers, and the firm continues to explore ways to participate in and engage the academy both through teaching and joint research.

In 2002, Greg Ochis assumed the position of President. A year later, Design Workshop made a commitment to becoming a truly national firm opening its first office outside of the west in Asheville, North Carolina. The great Blue Ridge corridor from Pittsburgh to Atlanta faces tremendous growth pressure much as the Rocky Mountain west had in the two preceding decades. Master plans for the 8,000 acre Virginia Hot Springs and Callaway Gardens in Atlanta highlight the work of the Asheville office. The firm now operates from offices in Aspen, Denver, Salt Lake, Phoenix, Lake Tahoe, Santa Fe, and Asheville.

In 2006, the firm created an employee stock ownership plan (ESOP) initially transferring fifteen percent of its stock to its employees. By sharing risk and reward broadly, Design Workshop believes that the concept of collaboration envisioned by Joe Porter and Don Ensign thirty-eight years ago has been truly realized. These new stockholders representing the fifth generation are emblematic of the future of the firm and the profession and represent Design Workshop's greatest legacy.

