

WHAT'S
HAPPENING?
WHAT'S ON
YOUR MIND?
WHAT DO
YOU WANT
TO TALK ABOUT?

MIXED MEDIA

DESIGN FIRMS ARE (FINALLY) USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR MARKETING, BUT IN THE ERA OF PHYSICAL ISOLATION, IT HAS ALSO BECOME A KIND OF SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE.

BY TIMOTHY A. SCHULER

GINA FORD, FASLA, wants me to know that she was asked to get on Twitter. It was early 2011, and the marketing team at Sasaki, where Ford was a principal at the time, felt that the firm needed to be more active on social media and also needed a fresh voice. "I was one of the only principals that was on Facebook actively. I think that's why they thought I was fertile ground," she says.

What Ford didn't anticipate was how comfortable she would feel online compared to some of the other environments in which she found herself. "As a woman who doesn't like traditional networking, social media was a place that I could channel my energy and be myself," she says. This was especially true "when I started in the early 2000s," she says, "being the only woman in these big rooms

with businessmen in suits.” By the time Ford left Sasaki to start her own firm, Agency Landscape + Planning in Cambridge, Massachusetts, she was highly involved in helping craft the firm’s external messaging, including on social media.

With Agency, which Ford founded with Brie Hensold, Honorary ASLA, in 2017, she wanted to try something different. The firm has an express focus on social and environmental justice, and Ford wanted that to be reflected across the firm’s social media channels. “We wanted social media to be an expression of our culture,” she says. Prior to that, Ford says she had been “a little understated” in the role feminism played in how she approached practice. “I don’t shield the world from that anymore. I’m very proud that feminism is part of what we do.”

Agency’s social media feeds are full of stylish illustrations, snapshots from site visits, and photos of community events, but also articles about race and gender, critiques of design culture, and celebrations of design heroes—an ode to the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg or an interactive star chart of Ford’s most influential mentors and teachers designed for Women in Design Boston.

The looser, more personal—and more political—approach has earned Agency a sizable online audience. The firm has nearly 3,000 followers on Instagram, about the same number that follow Ford’s personal Twitter account, which makes her one of the more visible and vocal landscape practitioners on the platform. (Ford is infamous

for calling out publications that refer to landscape architects as architects.) That visibility has paid off in speaking gigs and interview requests in mainstream outlets. On the day she and I spoke, Ford was quoted in a *New York Times* article about the omission of female landscape architects from the larger landscape discourse, inspired by the theme of the Cultural Landscape Foundation’s *Landslide 2020: Women Take the Lead*.

“People say to me all the time, ‘Does Agency hire a PR firm? Because you guys are always in the news,’” Ford says. “And I’m like, that is 10 years of hand-over-fist slogging through a very consistent point of view on social media.” That word choice—slog—is not incidental. Social media can feel demoralizing, she says. “The first few years I was doing [it], it did feel like I was screaming into a black hole. And I think that’s where a lot of firms go wrong. You can’t post something and expect an immediate return. That’s not the way social media works. You post, you post, you post, you post, you post; someone’s like, ‘Oh, she’s into that thing’; and then five years down the road, they’re writing a piece about that thing and they’re like, ‘Oh, we should talk to that girl who’s always posting about that thing.’ It’s a long game that a lot of people don’t want to play—or don’t even know to play.”

HOW TO PLAY THE GAME of social media is a question landscape architects are increasingly asking. What 10 years ago was the domain of a few early adopters is now a pillar of many firms’ business development and marketing strategies. And yet, for a lot of landscape architects, social

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—GINA FORD, FASLA, AGENCY LANDSCAPE + PLANNING



SARAH COOPER/ASAP FOR THE FASLA

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media can be an intimidating realm, a place governed by mysterious rules and algorithms, each platform distinct in identity and user base. Although books on social media marketing abound, there are few resources tailored to design firms. Which is why, two years ago, Land8, an online social network for landscape architects, launched the Land8 Social Media Awards in Landscape Architecture.

“Everyone’s always asking, what are social media best practices?” says Matt Alcide, Affiliate ASLA, Land8’s editor and managing partner. “And it’s always evolving—there’s really no one right answer—but we said, let’s put together a list of firms and individuals really excelling at social media. And then we turned that into an awards program.”

Each year, Alcide and his partner at Land8, Daniel Martin, Honorary ASLA, recognize the top 10 social media accounts in three categories: firms, individuals, and allied organizations. As an awards program, it’s fairly informal. Participants self-nominate, and there’s no jury. Alcide and Martin select the winners themselves based on criteria such as number of followers, quality of content, and level of engagement. Still, Alcide says the awards program has helped further the discussion about how landscape architecture firms can best use social media.

At the 2019 Conference on Landscape Architecture in San Diego, Alcide moderated a session on social media called “Designing High-Performing (Digital) Landscapes: Social Media’s Place in Land-

scape Architecture,” which was reconstituted as a webinar for the Land8 Virtual Conference in April 2020. For both events, Alcide was joined by Catherine Saunders, Affiliate ASLA, a senior associate and digital media director at TBG Partners in Austin, Texas, and Emma Tardella, Affiliate ASLA, the marketing manager at NAK Design Strategies in Toronto. TBG and NAK were the first- and second-place firms in Land8’s 2019 social media awards, respectively. The women discussed their own experiences with social media as well as tips on how to engage followers, manage workloads, and track performance. (The full webinar is available for free at land8.com.)

Both times, the event began with a poll. Participants, almost all of whom were landscape architects, were asked which social media platforms they personally use. Out of roughly 90 respondents, 35 percent said they use Instagram, 30 percent Facebook, 26 percent LinkedIn, and 9 percent Twitter. Participants were also asked which platform they use most often. This time Instagram was far and away the winner. More than 60 percent cited it as their most-used social media platform, followed by Facebook (24 percent), LinkedIn (13 percent), and Twitter (2.3 percent).

The results support a strategy both Saunders and Tardella embrace, which is to focus their time and energy on Instagram. Both firms maintain a limited presence on the other platforms, but Saunders and Tardella say they spend roughly 90 percent of the time they devote to social media on creating posts for Instagram, where each has

“AS THIS BEING

amassed an audience of more than 10,000 followers. As the most visual of the platforms, it's an ideal fit, they say, for a profession whose work is often presented through visual means: sketches, renderings, landscape photography.

When it comes to developing and implementing a social media strategy, Saunders recommends starting with a few basic questions: What are your objectives? How will those objectives be met and measured? She also recommends that firms think about which social media accounts they personally enjoy and why. These kinds of questions can help lay the groundwork for a firm's overall social media strategy and build buy-in from firm leadership.

Before Saunders joined TBG in 2014, the firm's social media presence was haphazard at best. “The nicest way to describe it would be scattered,” she says. “We were on Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram, but there was no real strategy behind anything anyone was doing.” Quality control was nonexistent. Now, all of the firm's social media content is routed through Saunders and her team, and TBG's Instagram feed is highly curated, a mixture of current project work, job openings, and extolments of the value of landscape design.

Unlike other forms of marketing, audience engagement with social media can be tracked using a platform's built-in analytics or aggregate services like Sprout Social. Saunders says it's important to evaluate performance and make tweaks as needed; if a particular type of post consistently has low engagement, assume your followers aren't interested

in that kind of content. And a person might be surprised by what gets the most traction. Ford says Agency's most popular Instagram posts—“by a long shot”—are drawings and photos of new hires. “It's funny, we'll look back at the last three months on our Google analytics, and the top story, beyond the main home page, is like, ‘Welcome Jamaica, our summer intern!’” she says, laughing.

Alcide says the most successful firms treat social media as a form of storytelling. “The ones that really excel are the ones that show a behind-the-scenes look, the people, the design process, before and after—peeling back the curtain, if you will,” he says. He also notes that, while there are endless strategies for increasing engagement and growing the size of a company's audience, the first step for anyone should be to simply start posting. “People are hesitant because they don't have the perfect content, or know the right strategy or the right hashtags. Just be active.”

The most common question Alcide gets is, why invest in social media at all? What's the benefit? He says a lot of firms think of social media as a distraction, an endeavor that takes time away from billable activities like design or energy away from the firm's website. But Alcide says the power of social media is that it allows firms to reach people where they already spend a great deal of time. “People are using social media every day,” Alcide says. “They're not checking your website every day.”

More than 70 percent of Americans have an active social media profile. Sixty-three percent check

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—CATHERINE SAUNDERS, AFFILIATE ASLA, TBG PARTNERS

Instagram daily. Worldwide, on any given day, 10 billion pieces of information are swapped, posted, and shared across Facebook timelines. Amid the pandemic, social media use has ballooned. A *New York Times* analysis found web traffic to Facebook jumped 27 percent between January and March 2020. Of course, the amount of time spent on social media likely has tapered off as large numbers of Americans have returned to work or school. But even at pre-pandemic levels, the size and nature of platforms like Facebook and Instagram make them invaluable as marketing tools for designers, especially when projecting into the future.

“Social media's big reach for us, when we talk about [a return on investment], is really about [investing

in] our next generation of clients,” explains Bill Odle, ASLA, the president of TBG and a principal in the Houston office. “They may not be cutting the checks today, but they will be in the future.” The “new normal” created by COVID-19—remote work, virtual meetings, community engagement facilitated via platforms like Facebook Live—only makes social media that much more vital.

“Pre-COVID, there were so many landscape architecture firms that were not on social media, and some of them are still not,” Saunders says. “As this world changes, being on social media will be critical. It's no longer optional.”

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PHOTO: KATE STICKLEY

THOUGH IT IS OFTEN a primary driver, business development is not the sole benefit to maintaining an active social media presence. Multiple firms reported that these platforms can be powerful recruiting tools. And not just students regularly reach out to the firm via Instagram and cite TBG’s social media accounts in interviews. Ford, of Agency, says she and her team have had similar experiences.

Social media can also help strengthen relationships internally, connecting designers in separate locations—and now home offices—and serving as an informal forum. Kate Stickley, ASLA, a founding partner at Arterra Landscape Architects in San Francisco and Healdsburg, California, says that in the absence of shared office space, with pattern books and sample libraries, Instagram has become a convenient repository for design inspiration and precedent studies. “It’s easy to grab stuff and share and say, this is what I’m thinking,” Stickley says. “It’s made not working side by side easier.”

Instagram also plays a role in Arterra’s weekly meetings. Every Monday, the firm’s 17 employees share an image that inspires them. It’s a practice Stickley and her partner Gretchen Whittier, ASLA, instituted in February 2020, when the team could still meet in person, as a way to facilitate broader conversations about design. A lot of the images that staffers share come from Instagram and then have a second life in the firm’s own feed, as part of a collage assembled from that week’s visual

discoveries, arranged to highlight relationships and themes that emerged in the course of the discussion. “It’s been far more successful than we ever imagined,” Stickley says of the meeting. “We thought of this as team building and an opening of perspectives, but it’s been way deeper than that.” Among other things, Stickley says, it has revealed new dimensions and facets of her staff. “As a manager and a design mentor, I’m going to approach [some people] differently now.”

Large firms also are finding ways to involve design staff in social media efforts. At TBG, which has 115 employees scattered across four cities, Saunders developed a “social media correspondent” program, which launched in 2019. Designers and other staff members apply to be one of the firm’s 10 correspondents, who are then responsible for producing four pieces of social media content per month. Each studio in each office has at least one correspondent, ensuring geographic representation. “It’s a way for us to be sure that we’re telling stories from all across our offices and not favoring one over the other,” Saunders says.

Bill Odle says the correspondent program has helped staff members feel more invested in the firm’s public image. “The buzz of social media in our firm has gone from a quiet, off-to-the-side thing to a leadership opportunity for these correspondents,” he says. “Everybody wants to be a part of it.”

“It’s a huge part of the culture of the firm,” Saunders adds. “Especially during this time of isolation,

it's helped keep morale up a little bit. [Team members] are still producing amazing project work, so continuing to share that work has been nice."

ONE OF THE CHALLENGES with thinking about social media in terms of best practices is that the most successful and engaging accounts are those that accurately and authentically reflect a design firm's culture. It's less a matter of dos and don'ts and more a matter of being yourself, even if that "self" is a group of 10, 20, or 100 people. In other words, what works for one firm may not work for another.

For example, a lot of experts generally recommend making social media the domain of a dedicated staff member, say, a marketing person, who can ensure consistency and manage the overall strategy. But Kate Stickle, of Arterra, bucked that wisdom when, two years ago, having initially outsourced social media operations to a marketing person, she began posting from the Arterra account. "She did a fine job," Stickle says of the manager, "but it was really when we started getting a more personal perspective that we started doing [well]." The firm now has 4,636 followers on Instagram, compared to fewer than 500 just a few years ago. Arterra's posts include beautiful details from built gardens, but also progress and process photographs, representing an informality that is "very intentional," Stickle says. There's a difference, she says, when the person writing the post is the same person doing the design work, "when it's like, 'Oh my God, this is finally getting built!' I think it comes through."

There is also evidence that, despite the results of Land's poll, platforms besides Instagram can be extremely valuable for landscape architects hoping to grow their audience. Dave Lustberg, ASLA, is the CEO of Arterial, which focuses on street design in and around its home base of Montclair, New Jersey. Lustberg was an early adopter of Twitter, but he found decision makers like city officials weren't on the platform. But they were on LinkedIn. "We saw that as an opportunity right out of the gate and started actively posting on LinkedIn," Lustberg says. "It was kind of a vacuum at the time," and before long, he says, "I would run into colleagues, and they would say, 'You guys seem like you're really busy. Wow!' They knew everything we were doing. LinkedIn has been an interesting and underrated platform for us."

Twitter is perhaps the most confounding social media platform for designers. In Land's poll, Twitter had the lowest number of regular users and was almost no one's most-used platform. (Globally, Twitter has about one-third of the users that Instagram does.) So it's fair to wonder whether the platform is as wise an investment for social media managers. But Gina Ford describes Twitter as the "intellectual sphere" of the design professions. "You go to Twitter because you want to feel like you're in contact with the ideas and the idea makers directly," she says. "Instagram, in so many ways, is only a visual medium. You don't get into conversations, you don't get into ideas very deeply. It's very shallow by comparison." This is partially because of the architecture of Twitter

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itself, which makes it easy to share tweets and build chains of ideas. Threads on Twitter often read like miniature treatises. “Twitter is where we see ourselves positioning ideas, having conversations,” Ford says.

Agency is the rare landscape design firm that is as active on Twitter as it is on Instagram. The company has 825 followers, a solid showing for a firm of its size (for comparison, SWA Group has 3,500 followers; SCAPE 5,184; and Nelson Byrd Woltz, 1,182). When Ford and Hensold first founded Agency, they developed a sort of unified theory of how to think about social media. “[There was a] really clear matrix that we had in our minds that we eventually codified for our team,” Ford says, “which was, Facebook is for the promotion of things that are happening; Twitter is when we have an opinion or when we want to talk about something that’s more controversial; and Instagram is only things that make us feel.”

The specific challenge with Twitter is that, because it trades in ideas and current events (and a good amount of inside jokes), it’s less compatible with marketing copy. “You can’t relegate Twitter

to people to represent thought leadership,” Ford says. “The thought leader has to be the one that’s [tweeting]. If you’re on Twitter, and you’re just a company posting content, it’s really hard to have a breakthrough.”

There is no one right way to be on social media, just as there is no one right way to run a design office. But 2020 has revealed social media to be an increasingly critical form of communication infrastructure, in and outside of firms, as well as the site of intense debate and design dialogue. Landscape architects, like other design professionals, are having overdue conversations about systemic racism and environmental injustice. They also are fighting to improve and preserve public open space amid a pandemic. For Agency, social media offers a place to hash these things out, to carry out its mission. “To me,” Ford says, “being part of that bigger design conversation is as important as sharing our work.” ●

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