

LANDSCAPE DESIGNER PROFILE

ARTICLE: RUTH CZERMAK, BOTANICAL TRADITIONS



Ruth Czermak

Q: What education or life experiences brought you to Landscape Design?

A: My parents moved to Australia where they set up a farm growing organic berries, goats, and chickens. Then they moved to the Dandenong Ranges – to a property complete with stone walls, mature Rhododendrons and its own fern gully.

I worked at a supermarket from the age of 14 and was put in charge of making sure the plants didn't die. I enjoyed that and decided to get some experience at retail nurseries. I enjoyed it but, as I was quite shy, I was probably not a great salesperson. But people would ask me basic questions and I was able to answer them and I didn't feel at all shy talking about plants!

After Year 12 finished I went for an interview to do Landscape Architecture at RMIT. My memory of it was a

horrible experience with hundreds of other people, where we were divided into groups and had to pitch our design ideas. Of course I focused on plants, while everyone else spoke about paving and built structures. But shortly after I received an offer to study a Bachelor of Science at Burnley (Melbourne University) and accepted it straight away. I must say I still look back at that time as one of the most enjoyable in my life. The lecturers were engaging and knowledgeable and, with about 35 contact hours, the course was pretty full on. But I loved it. It was fantastic been surrounded by all these people with the same interests I had – plants, design

Q: What landscape education pathway/s did you travel, and were there any challenges in the system?

A: None of my secondary schools had any horticultural

subjects. But I did have my experience growing up on a farm and helping my parents garden and renovate, coupled with experiences at retail nurseries, and the supermarket job which all helped me at university and still do even today.

The three year Bachelor of Science (Horticulture), which was a very hands-on course, coupled with a requirement to do a lot of work experience to graduate, gave me a fantastic base level of knowledge and a range of practical skills I was able to utilise straight away. This I did and began, somewhat naively, my own gardening and design business. It was hard work. I don't think I made much money, but enough and overall I loved it. With my dream of running a retail nursery I opened one in Brunswick. But the big drought had just started and got worse, and it was a long way away from where I lived. After 12 months the work became limited and financially things looked bleak. I decided that if I wanted to get some formal training in landscape design then it was now or never. So I went back to university and enrolled in Masters of Landscape Architecture.

It was not the course I thought it would be. Coming from a hands-on science course where you got a good spread of theory and practical skills, I was not prepared for the very 'concept' style of studios and very limited technical subjects. I graduated the course feeling my skillset hadn't really changed that much.

The drought persisted and I felt disillusioned. I was teaching in Landscape Architecture and still had the business. I got a contract going into schools, implementing raingardens and running planting days. It was a lot of fun, but I was seeing these dusty, concrete places that children are meant to learn in and going to parts of Melbourne that I had never been to before. It was a real eye opening experience.

Q: How do you find and/or attract new clients?

A: I am fortunate that a lot of my past clients are also my current clients as we do multiple projects together. The big challenge I think in today's situation is getting new clients. How do you demonstrate your value and worth to a person before they have been your client? A lot of my repeat clients are repeat clients because I solve their problems – they might be after reliability, design outcome, or someone who they know will listen to their ideas, they might have a project that utilises my combined skillset. Like many business owners I probably don't pay enough attention to finding these new clients and thinking about how to engage with the right client for my business. Most of my clients come to me after having a poor experience, I'm glad they persisted and didn't give up.

Q: What differences do you find between private and commercial clients?

A: Most of my commercial clients want someone they feel can do the project with key input at particular times. They have set goals regarding what they want the brief to achieve, timelines and budgets and they want to be kept up to date with timelines. They are happy to discuss problems and work through solutions together should they arrive. They understand limitations. The repeat clients understand the value that a Landscape Architect can bring to a project if engaged early in the design process, but they also understand their responsibilities as a client

in terms of informing you and directing you and approving the design at key stages. Private residential clients are a bit different. I probably decline far more residential clients as I don't think I would be the best match for them. The main reason for this is I am simply too tired at the end of the day to do after hours consultations and I want to work in my own garden on the weekends. I do have repeat residential clients, but these projects run in the same manner as my commercial projects.

Q: What is the hardest client request to deal with?

A: The most difficult clients I think are the ones who don't really have faith in you as a designer, or those who really know what they want but don't have a matching budget available. The biggest warning sign I have learnt to watch out for is a client saying 'my friend, who is a gardener/landscape designer/architect had a look at the drawings and thinks you should...'. It is a big red flag and I quickly clarify with them why they asked for the feedback, did they feel I hadn't paid enough attention to their Brief...?

Q: Is there a trend or pattern in client requests today?

A: Certainly in our commercial work, there is a trend towards wanting well-presented landscapes and some understanding that, to get this, you need good design as well as good maintenance. Our residential clients are after liveable, usable spaces, previously a lot of our residential clients didn't spend a lot of time in their gardens.

Q: Is there a priority, key or starting point in your design solutions?

A: The key starting point actually starts when I am doing the Fee Proposal. I am trying to understand as much about the project and the client as possible. If you don't understand what the client wants to achieve and you really haven't thought of the project's specific opportunities or constraints, I don't understand how you can do a good design. To me the primary consideration to determine if something is a good design is to ask yourself if you have met or exceeded the client's expectations, and done so in a sustainable, aesthetic manner. Have you completed work that you would be proud to show your most admired designer?

Q: Where/how do you get design inspiration?

A: Design is around you all the time. Some of it might be unintentional, some of it might relate to nature. I just keep my eyes open as much as possible; I love visiting gardens and looking at other people's works and projects. Landscape design has been around for many thousands of years – each culture and each time period holds something of interest to me. However, as a business owner and a Landscape Designer only a small portion of my day is spent doing design and overall in a project there is only probably 10% of the time spent on doing 'design'.

Q: What do you think clients consider to be Landscape Design 'value for money' (and is 'value' an issue at all?)

A: If clients feel you have delivered the landscape they want or exceeded their expectations I think they feel they have got their money's worth. I think most of our clients feel that we do this, but also that we give them a valuable insight into ways to achieve things in a cost-effective manner.



Seasonal display Green Square, Sydney. Photo Celina Aspinal



Wicking garden beds, Marian College, Sunshine West (VIC). Photo Ruth Czermak

Q: If you could influence clients generally – what would you change?

A: In both the residential and commercial fields the expectation of what a Landscape Designer can do or should be doing has increased, almost to the point of being expected to do more than an Architect or an Engineer. Clients expect designers to understand plants, soils, the ecosystem, sustainability, construction, stormwater, drainage, electrical, planning overlays, Council regulations, the Building standards, State Government regulations, electrical, gas regulations, maintenance, pest control, pruning techniques etc. Although there are some very good designers who do understand all of these areas, there are also many that do not. The training of Landscape Designers has not kept up with the expectation of the client or the employer. I would advise clients to take time and consider their choice of Landscape Designer not just on cost or hourly rate, but demonstrated experience and how well they communicate with you. An experienced person may, and should have, a higher hourly rate. You are paying for the experience which allows them to generally do something faster, more thoroughly and to a higher standard. If the client doesn't like the projects in the designer's portfolio, they will probably not be happy with the outcome.

The other thing I stress is that without an actual client Brief there is no way that any designer can set a realistic fee or that the client can compare fees. When a client decides to engage a Landscape Designer they need to ensure they have a Brief. The Brief should outline the main aims of the project, the construction budget and the expected/available design timeframe and construction period expectation. As a client you can't go and speak to an Accountant, Doctor, Lawyer, Architect or Engineer and say 'I'm not going to tell you my problem because I want to hear what you think it is and for you to give me your ideas on how to solve it and what it might cost', which seems a very common type of conversation.

Q: How do you see the current state/health of the Landscape Design sector?

A: Opportunities in the Landscape Design sector are there. However, unless the training improves or there is the introduction of traineeships then the industry is going to

run out of skilled people. There also needs to be far greater flexibility provided in the training – I'm not talking about more online options, I am just talking about better timetabling. I think the comment can easily be applied to the entire sector of Landscape Design, Landscaping and Horticulture.

It's a great disappointment that there are very limited opportunities in schools at all levels for people to be involved in gardening, I am forever perplexed that there are Landscape Architects with Masters level Degrees, who have studied one plant ID subject, no soils, no pest control/maintenance, no CAD and no water-related subjects. It's very common to come across a graduate who has never planted a plant!

Q: Anything else or comment you wish to make?

A: People often assume and make all sorts of ridiculous comments about running a Landscape Design business. Most of it is along the lines of 'wow, it must be so great getting to design all day and playing with plants', which I feel really downplays the range and level of skills you need to hold, as well as the amount of persistence required. The reality for myself is that it wasn't easy, I made many mistakes and worked very hard and consistently to gain knowledge and skills and also to ensure I had a business that was viable and sustainable. I still ensure that I grow my knowledge and skills pretty much every week. I do get to design and I think I do that well, but that is certainly not what been a Landscape Architect or a business owner is all about.

The other thing that I think has to be discussed is the perceptions of females within the industry and how hard it is as a female. While over the last 25 years the improvement has been phenomenal, I can still walk onto a site, with my experience and grey hair and with a male student, and people will speak to them instead of myself. The expectation is still that any female walking onto a construction site has to prove their worth and knowledge, while it is still assumed that a male just has the skills and knowledge required for the job. Working part time within the industry is also pretty difficult, it greatly restricts the types of projects that you can participate in especially within the commercial field where design timelines are very tight.