Starting an Environmental Nonprofit: An Untapped Opportunity for Landscape Architects

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WHEN LANDSCAPE architects consider ways to ply their trade, three standard options might come to mind: private practice, public institutions, and academia. Absent from these alternatives, however, is a common but often overlooked organizational type—the nonprofit, sometimes referred to as a non-governmental organization (NGO). The Low Impact Development Center (LIDC) is one such NGO, started by a landscape architect.

“We didn’t want to be consultants selling services,” says Neil Weinstein, executive director of the LIDC, an NGO that develops and shares solutions for protecting the environment through innovative site design techniques. “We wanted to develop a cross-disciplinary approach to solve critical water-quality issues and disseminate our research and design solutions to a broad audience. An NGO allows us to do that.” (For more information about the practical steps involved in starting and managing an NGO, see “Do Well Doing Good,” Landscape Architecture, February 2003.)

Based in Beltsville, Maryland, near Washington, D.C., the LIDC was created in 1998 in response to increasing demand for sustainable urban design strategies. The center’s first project, funded jointly by the EPA’s Office of Water and the Chesapeake Bay Program, studied the feasibility of implementing on-site stormwater management in urban areas. This ultimately led to a series of integrated stormwater management pilot projects at the Washington Navy Yard on the banks of the Anacostia River.

As part of an overall stormwater management plan, Weinstein and his colleagues designed and constructed several working demonstration projects that retrofit some of the most common urban

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In response to federal directives on managing stormwater on state, federal, and District-owned property, the EPA and GSA funded a program to “green” the Washington, D.C., headquarters of the EPA (top). The project, a section of which is shown above, will serve as a model for the federal community and will demonstrate LID stormwater practices that can be incorporated into urban areas.
conditions. For example, parking lots are regraded and fitted with permeable pavers, vegetated swales, and bioretention gardens; rooftop rainwater is harvested in cisterns and in gardens that can withstand both drought and saturation; and standard curbside storm drains are retrofitted with an upstream tree box filter.

These features exemplify the center’s goal of reducing non-point source water pollution by managing rainfall at the source through uniformly distributed and decentralized microscale interventions. This approach originated with the introduction in the mid-1980s of bioretention technology in Prince George’s County, Maryland, to address the growing economic and environmental limitations of conventional stormwater management practices. It subsequently evolved into Low Impact Development (LID), which seeks to mimic a site’s predevelopment hydrology with techniques that infiltrate, filter, store, evaporate, and detain runoff close to its source. These techniques are based on the premise that stormwater management should not be seen as stormwater disposal. Instead of conveying and managing/treating stormwater in large, costly, end-of-pipe facilities located at the bottom of drainage areas, or conveying stormwater directly into local streams and rivers, LID addresses stormwater through small, cost-effective landscape features located at the lot level.

Since its inception five years ago, the LIDC has grown significantly and expanded its operations beyond design. The nonprofit now offers one- and two-day workshops in urban stormwater management, land use planning, water-resource protection, site planning design, best management practices, building requirements, and construction and maintenance of stormwater infrastructure. Workshop attendees include local, state, and federal government officials; developers, builders, and contractors; land use planners; civil and environmental engineers; landscape ar-

LESSONS LEARNED FROM STARTING AN NGO

A question-and-answer session with Neil Weinstein, executive director of the Low Impact Development Center in Beltsville, Maryland.

Q What were your greatest challenges when you first started the NGO?
A The grant and assistance agreement process is significantly longer than contract negotiations and procurement. Also, when we started, it was a difficult time due to the economy, so there wasn’t a ready availability of foundation or grant money. It also takes time to get the word out. Remember, LID is a new approach, really less than 10 years old, that many funding organizations had no prior knowledge of. Asking funding organizations to take a risk on a new idea is a big challenge.

Q How is the daily and annual management of an NGO different from private practice?
A We report to a board of directors, which helps set our annual agenda, and our work has to fall within our mission statement. There are a lot more administrative and reporting requirements, and our books and records are open for inspection. Most of our money comes from public sources or foundations.

Q What are some of the pitfalls that a young NGO should avoid?
A Try to diversify your funding sources. When we started, most of our income came from EPA sources, and our level of income from them has fluctuated with the budget and the administration’s agenda.

Q What advice would you give to a landscape architect who is considering starting an NGO?
A Go slowly. This is a difficult time for NGOs. Funding is not what it used to be. Do a lot of networking and try to partner and share resources with other NGOs.

Q Why might an NGO be an attractive alternative for landscape architects?
A A nonprofit is set up to do work in the public interest. It’s not straight consulting. I know several landscape architecture firms that have set up NGOs for that occasional foundation opportunity that comes along. In the long run, I’m not really sure that’s a good model because doing this is an incredible commitment of time.

chitects; environmental professionals and consultants; and interested citizens.

The LIDC often collaborates with public agencies to develop overarching design guidelines. For example, the center is currently working with the Norfolk District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to lessen and mitigate wetland impacts and with the Department of Defense to develop an LID planning and design manual. Academic and community-based groups also work with the center; currently under way are collaborations with Oregon State University to develop low-impact techniques for state highway programs and with the Friends of the Rappahannock (a river advocacy group) to develop LID strategies for meeting Phase II Clean Water Act regulations in rural communities.

For landscape architects interested in combining design with applied research, training, and outreach, the NGO provides an ideal forum. “The nonprofit structure allows us to select specific projects that challenge us to develop new ideas rather than simply take whatever comes along,” says Weinstein. “One thing landscape architects and planners don’t fully understand is the potential power they have to protect and restore water quality. Landscape architects, in particular, have a lot of potential on the technical end because they generally understand natural systems, whereas most engineers have little training in these areas.”

Weinstein himself has degrees in environmental engineering, and the nonprofit’s staff consists of landscape architects, biologists, and civil and environmental engineers. This cross-disciplinary skill base allows the organization to pursue a range of work, and the center is currently engaged in several high-profile projects, including a courtyard design for the new EPA headquarters in Washington, D.C. This courtyard will serve the typical programmatic needs of an urban, professional user group, but it will also serve as an LID demonstration project: Rainwater is harvested from permeable concrete walkways and patio sheet flow and is directed to rainwater gardens,
and the plant palette consists of native, low-maintenance, and endangered plant species. The center is also consulting on the new Pentagon Memorial to victims of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

While these types of projects provide opportunities to feature low-impact design techniques in a high-profile setting, the bread and butter of the center’s work is a little less sexy, but all the more important for its potentially broad urban application. For example, the center retrofitted a block on Rhode Island Avenue in northeast Washington, D.C., with treebox and gutter filters that strain pollutants and infiltrate stormwater directly into the ground, essentially precluding the need for roadside storm sewers altogether.

Because of the organization’s core commitment to sharing and disseminating information on sustainable design techniques, the LIDC maintains a web site (www.lowimpactdevelopment.org) with many useful resources: standards, specifications, and construction drawings for such design elements as bioretention cells and permeable paving systems; guidance to local governments, planners, and engineers for developing, administering, and incorporating LID into water-resource protection programs; and an excellent set of related web links and references.

“We put much of our work in the public domain, which helps to spread the word,” says Weinstein. “But to support this kind of effort, we have to take a lot of our budget and overhead and reinvest it in research and development, rather than profits.” Weinstein expresses a mixture of satisfaction and frustration when he goes to a conference or meeting and sees the center’s work being used to promote other firms’ capabilities. Yet, dissemination of sustainable design tools is at the heart of the organization’s mission, and it is one of the key elements that distinguishes the nonprofit from a private design firm. In this sense, the LIDC is a kindred spirit to
other prominent environmental-design NGOs such as the Rocky Mountain Institute in Snowmass, Colorado, and the Center for Watershed Protection in Ellicott City, Maryland.

Weinstein acknowledges that the center’s nonprofit status and focus on research and information dissemination force the organization to continually develop new ideas and approaches. “When we first started we were focused on water quality,” says Weinstein. “But now we are really developing a more-holistic and economically and environmentally sustainable approach to site design. Getting to landscape architects is a real key because the profession integrates so many of the issues that we are exploring.”

A rain garden at the Washington Navy Yard is irrigated with rainwater that has been collected and stored in a rain barrel. Native plants with wildlife value have improved urban habitat.

Resources
- BoardSource, www.ncnb.org, is a leading resource for practical information, tools, best practices, training, and leadership development for board members of nonprofit organizations worldwide.
- The Internet Nonprofit Center, www.nonprofits.org, publishes the “Nonprofit FAQ,” a resource of information.
- The Nonprofit Kit for Dummies, by Stan Hutton and Frances Phillips, 2001, is a comprehensive guide for anyone hoping to start a nonprofit, with nuts-and-bolts advice on practical issues such as staffing, budgeting, fundraising, tax reports, and facilities.
- The Nonprofit Resource Center, www.not-for-profit.org, is an online information source for nonprofit organizations.