

PRACTICE



WHAT'S IT LIKE to strike out on your own as a sole practitioner?

After a bad, or even just humdrum, day at the office, many have dreamed of taking the entrepreneurial plunge and establishing their own one-person practice. You can focus on projects that mean the most to you, keep a flexible schedule, take more time off, do things your way.

Or can you?

To see what it's really like working in what John Anderson, ASLA, calls "the ultimate small firm," *Landscape Architecture* talked to a group of sole practitioners. Here's what they told us.

"LEAN AND MEAN" IS MY CALLING CARD

John C. Anderson, ASLA
ANDERSON DESIGN INC. • Lawrenceville, Georgia
www.andersondesignatlanta.com

◆ Six years in solo practice; formerly worked in established landscape architecture firms in Atlanta

WORKED FOR A NUMBER of established landscape architecture firms in Atlanta, but I always knew that eventually I would want to do my own thing.

My work breaks down as follows: 50 percent higher educa-

tion/campus planning, 10 percent parks and recreation, 20 percent streetscapes, 10 percent office/commercial development, and 10 percent planned communities.

MY WAY
Six landscape architects tell us about the ins, outs, ups, and downs of life as a sole practitioner.

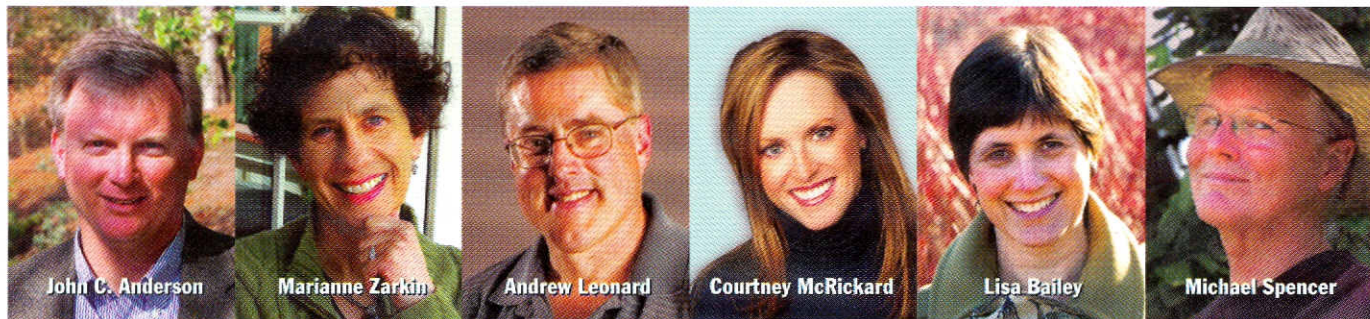
Edited by Linda McIntyre

Most projects I was involved with while working for bigger firms had a project manager and one or two production people with a principal looking over their shoulders. With my firm, you get all of those rolled into one, with some outside help brought in if there is a time pinch. Sometimes I do try to project myself as a larger firm, but you have to be honest with people when asked about the size of your firm. You sell the idea that your firm is lean and mean and provides quality design and service.

I use contract help on occasion. It is difficult unless they are there working in your space with you so you can collaborate. But I collaborate with other disciplines constantly. You don't have to be the lead consultant to play a major role in a project. I'm doing more public sector work now and more work as a subconsultant than I initially anticipated.

Having a solid contact base helps in terms of getting work early on. Besides that, a computer, professional liability insurance, a good bookkeeper, an understanding spouse, and a lot of intestinal fortitude are all helpful.

My biggest challenge was launching a business two months



John C. Anderson

Marianne Zarkin

Andrew Leonard

Courtney McRickard

Lisa Bailey

Michael Spencer



Campus planning and design projects such as this student center at Georgia Perimeter College have become a substantial component of John Anderson's practice.

be able to send invoices and generate cash flow.

Time spent in the office varies from week to week. An average week might be 60 percent in the office and 40 percent at meetings, doing business development and visiting job sites. I usually end up taking two weeks' vacation per year, with more long weekend activities. Outside my practice, I do guest lectures and teach one of the

sections of the Landscape Architect Registration Examination review at the University of Georgia.

Before going solo, you have to ask yourself some important questions. Do you have a strong network of contacts—people you have worked with who

before 9/11. I was fortunate to land a few good jobs fairly quickly. Running a solo practice boils down to finding a good client, doing good work, and getting paid promptly. Then repeat.

I have a 500-square-foot studio in my home. I have a pretty basic desktop and laptop setup with an excellent color laser printer. I couldn't live without AutoCAD and high-speed Internet. I use Adobe products, Microsoft Office, and Quickbooks. I don't have a plotter in the house; I outsource all of the printing of plans 24 by 36 inches and bigger.

Initially my marketing strategy was calling on colleagues and cold calling with a simple but effective brochure I put together. More recently it has been more word of mouth and repeat business. I also now have a web site.

Managing projects such as this urban redevelopment in Lake Oswego, Oregon, provided Marianne Zarkin, ASLA, with the contacts and leverage to get early business in her own practice.

For me, solo practice has become more of a lifestyle than a job. I find I am able to schedule work/family time/downtime and sleep somewhat effectively within the 24-hour window. It is never nine to five and it does get chaotic at times. However you split it up, at the end of the month you still have to have the product produced to

know your capabilities and can bring you work or can recommend you to others? Do you have the experience to make competent decisions, involving other people's money, about design and construction? Do you enjoy all aspects of landscape architecture from business development to design documentation to construction administration to billing and accounting? Can you keep all of those balls in the air, every day? You can hire out any of those services, but ultimately you are responsible for all of it.

SOLO PRACTICE CAN MEAN PUBLIC PROJECTS

Marianne Zarkin, ASLA

MARIANNE ZARKIN, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT • Portland, Oregon

Two years in solo practice; previously managed the Portland office of a Seattle landscape architecture firm, worked for other landscape architecture firms, and worked as a public sector park planner

THE FIRM I WORKED FOR decided to consolidate its Portland projects into the Seattle office, leaving me free to pursue other opportunities. Over the years I had made many contacts in the public sector, and I was offered several projects within a few months of the office closing.

With only two years in business, my practice is still evolving. To date, the type of work has been consistent. I do primarily public work—including parks, trails, and streetscape projects. The approximate breakdown for my practice by type of work is parks, 40 percent; streetscapes, 40 percent; trails, 8 percent; open space/regional planning, 10 percent; and residential, 2 percent.

Once clients get to know you and that they can count on you to provide the services they need, they don't worry about the size of your firm. On a recent proposal I tried to work like a larger firm by bringing in many subconsultants to provide extra staffing. I did not get the project and was later told that reviewers were confused as to why I had such a large team.



PRACTICE

I enjoy collaborating much more than going lone wolf. Since I work by myself, I don't have colleagues in the office to discuss design ideas and get feedback, so I appreciate working as a team with engineers and architects to create solutions for my clients.

The essential items for establishing a business are a computer, software, phone, printer/plotter, scanner, and furniture. Since I had the work first, it made buying these items easier, as I knew I could pay for them.

My biggest challenge has been not getting ahead of myself. Don't worry too early about how you are going to accomplish some task, be it a drawing, presentation, or construction detail. Problems generally get resolved over time, despite the lack of staff to help out. I have had no difficulties finding people to help when I need it.

I have not contemplated hiring an employee. To date, I have hired other professionals on a contract basis to complete needed work such as drafting and presentation materials.

My office is in my house and is approximately 175 square feet, but I am working on remodeling a new space in my garden. I use a Mac Mini for my work. I send all of my computer drafting out to other contractors to complete.

To date, my marketing efforts have been limited to submitting

proposals in response to RFPs and networking with past clients and contacts. I hope to get my web site up and running in the next few months. I have been able to keep myself busy but would like to explore other marketing options, especially as the economy softens.

I continue to volunteer with Portland Public Schools, working on a variety of projects including obtaining funding and supervising volunteers to construct a 5,000-square-foot outdoor classroom for my children's elementary school and acting as chair of a districtwide parent committee. I also am active on several other committees for various nonprofit organizations, providing professional expertise and review of projects.

There are benefits and limitations to working as a sole practitioner. I work 30 to 40 hours per week, with my billable hours ranging between 15 and 30. On the plus side is the flexibility of creating a schedule that works for your clients but leaves room for children, spouses, aging parents, and volunteer opportunities. The downside of working for and by yourself is that when you are not working, no one is paying you for sick leave, vacations, or holidays.

That said, I have taken a few vacations since starting my own practice. My clients are very understanding, as I give them a long lead time and mold project schedules to work with time away from the office. The real test will be when I leave town and have a project under construction, which will happen this summer for the first time.

The amount of time I spend in the office depends on the week

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and where I am on a project. Some days I don't leave the office; other days I am gone most of the day at meetings with clients, other consultants, or on a construction site acting as owner's representative. As the only person in the office, I use my cell phone as my office phone to ensure that I can be reached even if I am out all day. I am considering getting a Blackberry or other PDA so I can check my e-mail on days that I am not near a computer.

A sole practitioner has the same needs as any practice—insurance, accounting, bookkeeping, and so on. The only catch is you have to take care of all of the details yourself, from shopping for office supplies to standing in line at the post office.

There are several factors that go into the decision to begin a sole practice, and primary among them is having a project or client to start with. Just as necessary are the professional skills to complete project tasks, a network of contacts who can provide new project opportunities, and connections with other design professionals to provide skills that you might lack. The time is right when you have a project opportunity and have the necessary experience to complete it yourself.

For someone considering going solo—do you like working by yourself or do you need the social interaction found in a larger office? Can you live without a steady paycheck? Do you have a network of people who can help you find work? How do you feel about marketing yourself?

I WANTED TO RUN THE SHOW

Andrew Leonard, ASLA

LEONARD DESIGN ASSOCIATES • Arlington, Massachusetts

◆ 17 years in solo practice; formerly worked in a medium-sized office as a project manager and senior associate

I STRUCK OUT ON MY OWN when my office was downsizing due to a recession and I realized that partnership was not going to be on the table for many years. I was at the point where I wanted to run at least part of the show.

The biggest initial challenge was developing a client base. I contacted all of the architects, developers, residential contractors, and other professionals with whom I had worked and started from there. I was fortunate to have an income stream from my spouse during the first few years.

Over the years I've noticed that the project mix changes with the economy. Multifamily residential and office/commercial come and go. My work currently comprises 25 to 30 percent residential—primarily medium range, \$25,000 to \$200,000 projects; 20 to 25 percent senior housing—assisted living, life care, and nursing homes; and 15 to 20 percent parks and recreation. The remainder is a miscellany—site development, commercial, apartments, and so on.

With the residential projects, I usually do all of the exterior

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