

Telling Stories Without Words

by Danielle Machotka

They are used in brochures and proposals, presentation boards and lectures, published in articles, framed, and hung on office walls. Images of projects are the primary means for landscape architectural firms to communicate what they do or who they are. And yet the actual photography is often relegated to an employee who is passing by the project and happens to have a camera at the bottom of her bag.

Not so for EDAW, which has employed landscape architectural photographer Dixi Carrillo for the past six years. Carrillo, whose full-time photographer position is unusual in landscape architectural firms, is keeping EDAW well stocked with a database of professional images of its projects around the world.

Her career path didn't initially point in this direction, but through a gentle series of forks in the road, she has made choices and pursued opportunities that have led her to her current office in the heart of EDAW's San Francisco headquarters.

Starting out as an audio-visual technician in 1968, Carrillo was inspired to build a darkroom and begin experimenting with black-and-white photography. She taught herself the technical aspects of her art with books and magazines. A stint as a projectionist for the Oakes Observatory at the Oakland Museum led to the production of shows—soundtracks, scripts, photography—and a meeting with Gerry Campbell of the SWA Group, who asked her to work with him on other shows and photography for his office.

Landscape architecture presented Carrillo with a new subject and a new way of looking at her work. With no training in the profession, she sometimes didn't understand why designers would choose a particular photo, especially when she herself thought it wasn't a very interesting shot. So she began to observe their choices and ask questions.

“People think that I am a landscape architect because I do this work. But I learned about the profession when I photographed a project and brought the slides back. I would see which ones the designers used. They would show the slides to everyone else in the office, and I'd notice which ones they paused on,

which ones seemed to have a lot of information. And I'd ask, 'Why didn't you use this one?' if I thought it was strong photographically. But it didn't tell a story. In the process, I learned a great deal about how to tell the story of landscape architecture," she says.

Possessing a resume that includes traveling internationally for EDAW, twelve years with The SWA Group and three with The Office of Peter Walker and William Johnson, it appears that Carrillo has had a fairly glamorous career. On hearing that, she demurs. Twelve-hour days, rain, wind, and helicopter rides are regular nemeses, and none are elements she can control.

Helicopter rides? Not as fun as they sound. Imagine leaning out of an open door in a hovering copter, trying to keep the horizon level and the rotor blades out of the shot, finding the site from the air, and keeping the camera steady in the wind and cold, hoping you have the right exposure, focus, elevation, distance, and lens.

"That is probably one of the most stressful things I have to do," she says.

On the other hand, she loves her work. Although she may only talk to security guards and hotel personnel for an entire week, and though a stray piece of litter sitting unnoticed in the corner of a shot can ruin a couple of hours' worth of work, and even without control over the external elements that can make or break a shot, Carrillo wouldn't trade her vocation for any other.

What inspires her? Change—seasons, different hours of the day, people moving in and out of a scene, and, particularly with landscape architecture, change over time. She has returned to the same hotel room in Atlanta for several years, photographing EDAW's Centennial Park out the window at all times of day, in all seasons, through construction phases, and during a variety of festivals and events. She appreciates that landscape architecture alters the appearance and feeling of a space over time, as the plants mature and people's use of the space evolves.

"There's this tiny little plant in a shot I took of the roof garden at Harrison Hospital in Bremerton, Washington. I came back two years later—that plant totally dominates the scene now," she marvels. "And the biggest thing, probably, is how people alter a project. As people move through a space, they totally change it. Most of the time, from my point of view, people really add to a photo."

In fact, she feels that some of her best shots are attributable to the presence of people—children climbing over sculptures or playing in a water feature, crowds enjoying a festival in a major urban plaza, people truly *using* a space. It’s a critical aspect of story-telling.

Looking at Carrillo’s many images and the narratives they contain brings up a natural question: how can I do this?

“I should write a book on that,” she laughs. But getting serious, she says, “I want people to understand how important good photography is. You have a wonderful project—it needs to be well photographed.”

Carrillo recommends that landscape architects who don’t want to hire a professional photographer learn the technical aspects of photography like she did, from books and magazines. In thinking about how to compose a shot, she offers the following advice.

- Let the landscape mature a bit before photographing it.
- Experience the space before clicking the shutter. Move through it, feel it, see all the elements before you decide what to photograph and how to represent it—understand the depth of a space, don’t just see it as a canvas.
- Think about what it is you want to say in the photograph, and the different ways of telling the story you want to tell.
- Use a tripod.
- Have patience—think about the time of day, the weather, and the lighting; wait for people to enter the space.
- Early-morning or late-afternoon light adds texture, long shadows, more definition. Flat, stark mid-day light works well for courtyard spaces, which are half in shadow and half in sun—too contrasty—the rest of the day.
- Edit your shots—don’t get attached to photos that are out of focus or badly exposed.

Carrillo cautions against sharing the costs of a professional photographer with architects, because architectural photographers generally photograph a site too early in the landscape's growth, and the relationship between the landscape and the building hasn't yet developed. With their focus generally being the building, they are also bound to tell very different stories than a landscape architectural photographer would.

Ultimately, the photograph has to be the medium that communicates what a space represents. Carrillo's goal, she emphasizes, "is to engage the viewer so completely in a scene that he or she really wants to visit the site."