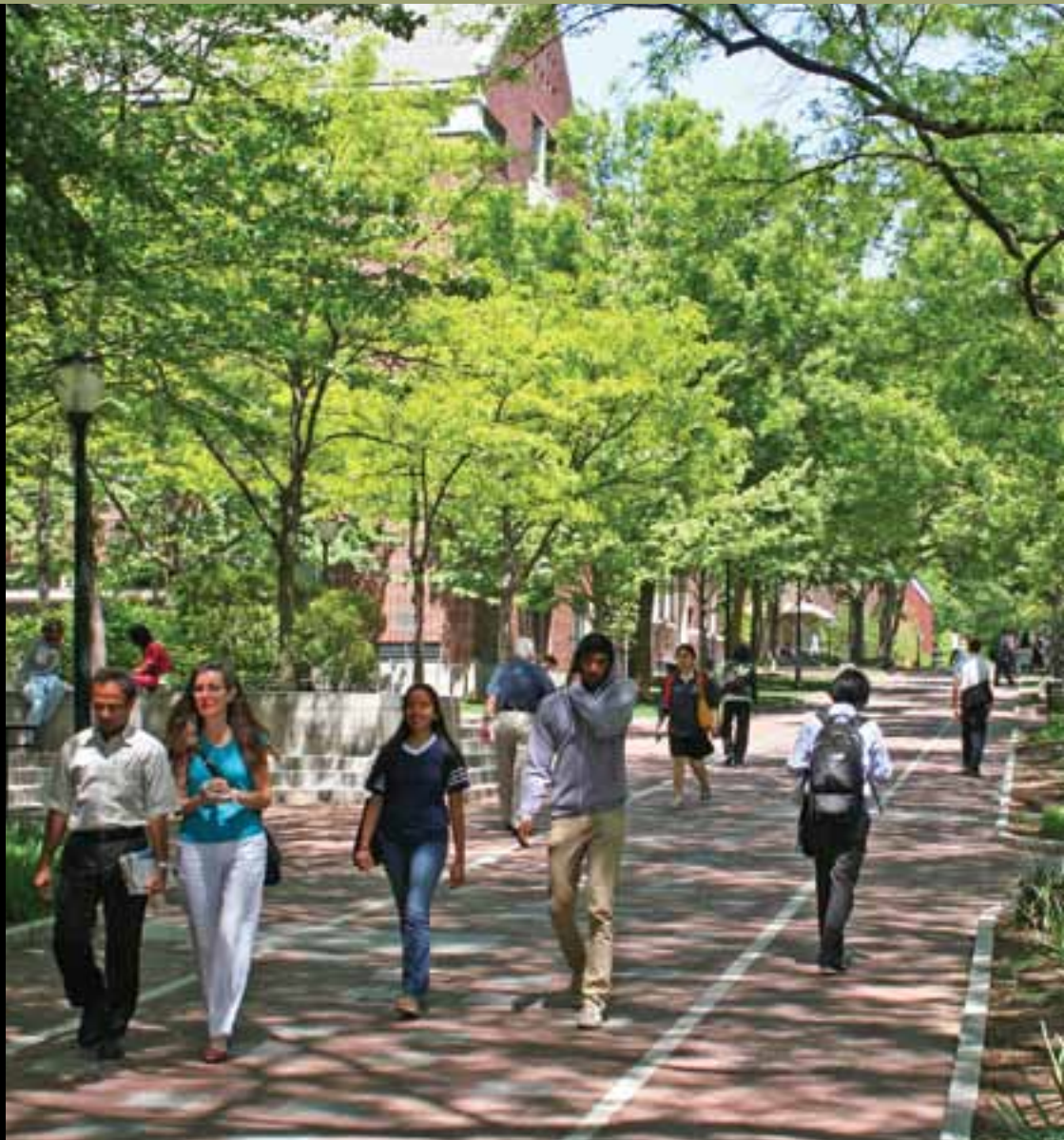


Case Study:
LRSLAstudio



LRSLAstudio: **Forging** New Paths IN UNIVERSITY SETTINGS

*LRSLAstudio uses
Vectorworks software to
design beautiful, livable,
and sustainable sites in
and around Philadelphia.*



The University of Pennsylvania's Class of '62 Walk.



Woodland Walk, view looking east.

The award-winning team at LRSLAstudio (formerly Lager Raabe Skafte Landscape Architects) was founded by Anita Lager and the late Peta Raabe in 1991. Together with principals Karen Skafte and Julie Bush, the firm is now made up of eight design professionals. Using computer-

aided design software to create beautiful, sustainable spaces, LRSLAstudio has transformed dozens of playgrounds, campus sites, and many other public and private spaces of various sizes in and around their storied city of Philadelphia.

Designs for the Local Community

For a decidedly Philadelphia-focused practice, it's interesting to note that most of the employees at LRSLAstudio are not originally from the area. Emma Johnson, a landscape architect with the firm who hails from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, sees this as a great asset. "I think that fact really influences the diversity of our projects and design work," she notes. Regardless of where they're from, these landscape architects are deeply devoted to their current home city and its vicinity, designing and building landscapes that make their communities as viable and enjoyable as possible.

Melding input from a diverse group of landscape architects and designers, as well as many Philadelphia area citizens, the firm approaches their work from a rich knowledge base and perspective. "We're very active in our community, so we learn from community members," Johnson explains. "When you meet a neighbor or talk to community groups, you realize that they sometimes see things differently. I think that this can only improve how you design for the public."

The majority of LRSLAstudio projects are typically within a three-hour radius of the city. From designing small pocket parks to master planning major streetscapes like the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, the firm's work has touched many sites in the Philadelphia area. "It was a lifestyle decision to focus our energy where we live in Philadelphia...it's made

our work a lot stronger because we have a much more vested interest in it. A lot of us use the projects that we've completed, both to and from work every day, so they're really ours," says Frank Garnier, Graphics and Media Coordinator at LRSLAstudio. Johnson agrees, noting that interacting with their designs on a daily basis helps them evaluate and evolve their thinking.

Of course, the client's involvement is always a very important part of the design strategy. "It's a great feeling to change the space so dramatically—a great project always means that we have a great client," Johnson says. "Without them you wouldn't have been able to do any of it." The firm is focused on forging true partnership with its clients, no matter what challenges arise.

In recent years, LRSLAstudio has helped a number of college campuses redesign, revitalize, and rethink their spaces to improve the overall environment and to attract new students. "I think a lot of it has to do with the economy," explains Emma Johnson. "I've been told by several of the universities that a modest building can cost as much as \$20 million, whereas if you put that equivalent amount of money into a site, you can improve four, five—maybe even six or seven spaces. Universities get more bang for their buck when they improve the outside rather than build new buildings." Often new students decide to attend one university over another because of the visual appeal of the school.



The site plan of the 3700 Block of Woodland Walk at the University of Pennsylvania.

Missing Piece of History at The University of Pennsylvania's Woodland Walk

Woodland Walk cuts a main path through the University of Pennsylvania—one of the oldest universities in the United States. With crumbling pavement, this path was becoming both an eyesore and a safety hazard. So in 2006, the university enlisted LRSLAstudio to propose a solution for the 3700 block of Woodland Walk that would replace the pavement and also reduce storm water runoff from the site. The design included granite curbing, permeable brick paving, an ornamental fence, and shrub and perennial planting. This task seemed simple enough. However, while excavating the walk, the contractor made an important discovery—under many layers of asphalt, some fill, and even a sidewalk, lay the old city roadbed that had been covered in the 1960s. This discovery led to the need to make detailing changes in a short period of time in order to maintain the construction schedule.

Johnson used design software to carefully document the project. “We prepare both construction and design sketches, which can include details, sections, elevations, plans, or perspectives, using the Vectorworks® application,” she explains. “Vectorworks software was a good tool for us on this project. The fact that we could easily and quickly issue construction sketches—revisions to the original drawings—to the contractor was important.”

All in all, the design and construction took three years. When they finished the Woodland Walk in 2009, the site was 90% permeable, and featured a beautiful, safe, and functional walk.

LRSLAstudio has been using Vectorworks Landmark software on all of its projects since 1995; in fact, it's their primary drawing tool. They

draw designs in both 2D and 3D. They use 2D drawings to present to clients and 3D to visualize a project and to support architectural work undertaken in Building Information Modeling (BIM) programs.

The firm also relies on the Vectorworks program to save time throughout the design process. Since they develop sections and elevations early in the process to create several recommendations for each particular space, Johnson believes the software makes it easier to gain early approval on their designs. “It is a great tool in just visualizing for our client,” she says. She streamlined interactions with the engineer on the Woodland Walk project by collaborating through design software. “It was great that we could send them a DWG file and export it so that the line weights would come in correctly. It saved them a lot of time and there was less going back and forth and making sure everything read correctly.” She also uses the Place Plant tool and the Landscape Area tool to specify and tabulate plant materials. “With larger-scaled projects, say for over 39 city blocks, it's a lot easier than re-counting all of the plants. You can save half a day doing that.”

“When you go to a finished site, the biggest compliment you can get from the users is that they feel like it's always been there; the design is successful if it is something that people can use and it feels right; then we can tell that we designed it well.”

— Emma Johnson, Landscape Architect,
LRSLAstudio, Philadelphia, PA



Woodland Walk before implementation of the new pedestrian walk.



Woodland Walk looking west. The new pedestrian walk paved with unit pavers and edged with new granite curbs. A new lower fence is set back to allow for planting beds that edge the walk. New light standards also edge the walk on both sides.



Lehigh University's Library Drive Walkway: Left image shows the site before implementation of the new pedestrian walkway; right image illustrates the new pedestrian walkway with patterned concrete. The lawn area is increased and existing light fixtures were reused along the edge to emphasize the walk's curves.

Parking Lot to Scenic Route: Vesics Library Drive at Lehigh University (Bethlehem, PA)

Lehigh University students were pleasantly surprised by the walk that awaited them when they went back to school in late summer 2009. "Whoa, what was here before?" was the reaction," recalls Johnson. "They didn't remember because the walk seemed like the right thing there. When you go to a finished site, the biggest compliment you can get from the users is that they feel like it's always been there; the design is successful if it is something that people can use and it feels right; then we can tell that we designed it well."

"In Vectorworks, you can draw so precisely, and that's exactly what I did. I was able to show exactly what these arcs needed to be, so that you'd be looking at the library front doors just as you should be at the summit."

*– Emma Johnson, Landscape Architect,
LRSLAstudio, Philadelphia, PA*

Transformed from an unexciting parking lot, this space fulfilled Lehigh's vision to connect their beautiful buildings with something equally striking and representative of their campus: a sinuous curve that would lead pedestrians to the library and grant them dramatic views of the



Aerial view of Library Drive Walkway under construction.



nearby buildings. Using Vectorworks Landmark software, she was able to produce accurately dimensioned consecutive curves. Then the skilled contractor was able to saw cut the asphalt pavement following the documented curves in the design drawings, resulting in a curved base for the new unit pavers to be placed upon. Johnson explains, “In Vectorworks, you can draw so precisely, and that’s exactly what I did. I was able to show exactly what these arcs needed to be, so that you’d be looking at the library front doors just as you should be at the summit.”

Road to Knowledge: The University of Pennsylvania’s Class of ‘62 Walk

The University of Pennsylvania’s Class of 1962 wanted to do something special for their alma mater—something extraordinary. They held a student contest for ideas, and out of this was born the idea of a walk illuminated by knowledge. With quotes from the founder of the University of Pennsylvania, Benjamin Franklin, this vision took shape. As Franklin

once said, “Genius without education is like silver in the mine.” So what better way to honor him than to construct a walk that represents the gaining of knowledge? Using this winning contest idea as a springboard, LRSLAstudio developed the walk to incorporate large granite slabs that are inscribed with Franklin quotes, which were selected by the class.

“Anytime you have a drafting program in which you’re able to make changes quickly and send out your ideas quickly you save time, and we definitely were able to do that.

*– Emma Johnson, Landscape Architect,
LRSLAstudio, Philadelphia, PA*



The north portion of the Class of ‘62 Walk in late fall where permeable pavers were installed under the seating area.



The site plan of The Class of '62 Walk at the University of Pennsylvania.

As with many city campuses, this space had to accommodate a variety of functions. First, it was intended to be a connecting pedestrian walkway from Walnut Street to Spruce Street. However, it also serves as a loading dock for the Annenberg Center of Performing Arts, which abuts the walk and a fire lane to the interior of campus. As such, it needed to accommodate fire trucks, as well as tractor-trailers for events. Using Vectorworks Landmark software, the team generated many concepts for the University and the Class of '62 donors to review. "We collaborated pretty seamlessly with the graphic designer to get the quotes right," says Johnson. "Anytime you have a drafting program in which you're able to make changes quickly and send out your ideas quickly you save time, and we definitely were able to do that." Nineteen granite slabs, approximately one by three meters each, were installed flush with the paving to showcase the quotes. It took four years to complete—the amount of time that an average college student in the U.S. attends school—but, it fulfilled the donors' vision.

What was there before? It no longer matters, because the landscape architects at LRSLAstudio have a special knack for transforming older spaces into new spaces that feel right. They've been designing beautiful, livable, and sustainable sites in and around Philadelphia for twenty years. Whether they're upgrading a current walkway, transforming a parking lot, or contributing to a special gift given to a legendary university, they are not only planting seeds for tomorrow's growth, but also providing sanctuaries that remind us how important it is to reflect on today.

Acknowledgements

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Now in its second decade, LRSLAstudio has made a name for itself in Philadelphia and beyond for its well-planned and beautiful sustainable landscape designs. Whether working on a small city park or a large master plan, the firm believes that its people and the clients they collaborate with are their strongest assets.

Images:

Courtesy of LRSLAstudio

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