

reVISION AND DESIGN DAY DISCOVERIES

Designers and suppliers dug into the virtual ASLA conference in November, unearthing new insights and marketing methods that might be worth keeping.

BY RUSS KLETTKE

Executive Summary

- ▶ **The virtual conference drew 3,048 registrants, including 600 students, and 49 exhibitors.**
- ▶ **Exhibitor takeaways: insights from live conversations, very clean databases.**
- ▶ **Adverse conditions sometimes breed new ways to connect.**

For landscape architecture and the world at large, 2020 wasn't the best of times. But it wasn't the worst, either.

Signs from the broader economy are daunting. The massive number of retail bankruptcies – Chapters 11 and 13 filings for stalwarts as varied as Neiman Marcus, GNC, Stein Mart, J.C. Penny, and Paper Store – as well as their supply chains, is enough to send chills up and down the spines of owners and employees in any industry, any month of the year. But online retail (Amazon, et al.), as well as

residential-focused landscape products and services, had a banner year. The pandemic and its effects have been uneven, to say the least.

Landscape architecture and industry suppliers exist somewhere between the good and the bad. The end products, outdoors environments, are now critically important in both public and private settings.

Importantly, how business was and is still conducted under COVID-19 conditions is altogether different and, at times, constrained. When we couldn't gather in-person for the 2020 Annual Conference on Landscape Architecture and EXPO, much was lost. How do learning, relationship development, and collaboration take place while coronavirus infections continue to climb and responsible professionals hunker down at home?

reVISION ASLA (Nov 16-18, 2020) offered a new approach. It could never replace the traditional event, as almost all COVID-19 adaptations fall short of “the real thing.” Still, few threw in the towel. Participation in the virtual conference was strong, with 3,048 registrants, including 600 students, as well as 49 exhibitors.

This is an industry that persists. So what happened at, and as a result of, reVISION?

The mood is anything but defeatist

reVISION ASLA included three days of educational sessions and discussions around a breadth of topics, all at a caliber that is consistent with past annual gatherings. One-third of the event, Design Day, was primarily focused on the supply side of the industry.

The big question: how did the EXPO translate in the virtual format?

“Nothing is better than in-person discussion,” says **Sarah Lisiecki**, marketing communications and education specialist with **BCI Burke**. “However, shifting to digital is the next best thing until we can return to in-person conferences. [Digital conversations do] give us the opportunity to really focus on the conversation at hand and exchange information efficiently. The ability to screen share allows us to have all information at our fingertips and be ready to answer questions or show products.”

BCI Burke participated in a panel discussion titled “Working Together: The Designer-Supplier Partnership” along with representatives from **Landscape Forms** and **Landscape Structures**. The firm's chief marketing officer, **Brian Johnson**, was on that panel. He says that engaging directly with landscape professionals in that forum helped him to



Together: The Designer-Supplier Partnership



“understand the types of information, designs, and products they seek, and to see play and community spaces from their point of view.”

Cheri Ruane, FASLA, vice president of landscape architecture practice at **Weston & Sampson** (Reading, Massachusetts) moderated the panel. The comments from participants included several ideas worth pursuing later: “Sounds like play companies need to combine forces with the site furnishings companies”...“young hires ask us about our sustainability plan; we like to be a preferred employer”...“the pandemic shined a light on play equity and the lack thereof”...“[we should] ‘gamify’ that walk from home to school, at bus stops, urban areas...” **Scott Roschi** of Landscape Structures answered a question on how to streamline the dialog between designers and manufacturer: “[Ask for] early engagement in ideation,” he suggested, adding it’s on the suppliers to quickly model ideas and share them digitally, particularly with customized projects.

What will 2021 look like?

Industry vendors who participated in Design Day received a very clean (up-to-date) database of attendees, as well as records of who downloaded information and their associated profile data.

George Blevins, a sales manager at **Victor Stanley**, says that data is useful now and “for when things return to normal. It’s always about building new and maintaining existing relationships.”

That hoped-for future normalcy might include picking up on some of the tactics that worked in 2020. “I think ASLA should keep some aspects from this year’s virtual conference,” says Blevins. “Having a hybrid platform should allow for more exhibitors and attendees to participate.” He shares that they’ve created videos and other content that is used in and outside conferences (one 25-minute Victor Stanley video had more than 1,000 ASLA viewers).

“There was a sense of optimism, even with everything going on in the world right now,” Blevins says. ■

No endorsement of products or suppliers mentioned is intended or implied.

Registered attendees can still get access to reVISION educational sessions and the Exhibit Hall through January 31, 2021. Go to <https://reVISION.eventscribe.com/2020/ASLAConference>

Thank you to industry exhibitors

...with special thanks to Presenting, Premium, General, and Supporting Sponsors. You adapted to the 2020 virtual-format EXPO. With luck, we will all return to an in-person event in 2021 (Nashville, November 19-22).

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