

# SOME LEARNING BUT NO LUNCH

Pandemic conditions forced continuing education into a virtual format. While this is not ideal, providers keep teaching because the need for knowledge is greater than ever.

BY RUSS KLETTKE

## Executive Summary

- ▶ **Lunch-and-learns aren't possible for the time being**
- ▶ **There is a need to learn – and for CEUs**
- ▶ **Video conferencing fatigue is one of several challenges**

**B**y mid-March 2020 a staple in the professional development of landscape architects came to a screeching halt. Lunch-and-learns disappeared, along with so many other things, cutting off a flow of information – and pizzas – between designers and providers that have not been sufficiently replaced.

Of course many manufacturers and landscape architects kept plugging, primarily with the use of video call interfacing. Suffice it to say this is a creative industry that out of necessity adapted as best it could.

Until there is a sufficient distribution of the coronavirus vaccine it will be necessary to stay on this path. Some, not all, providers and landscape architects have embraced and even mastered techniques and technologies for distance education – because they have to.

### Landscape architects need ongoing education

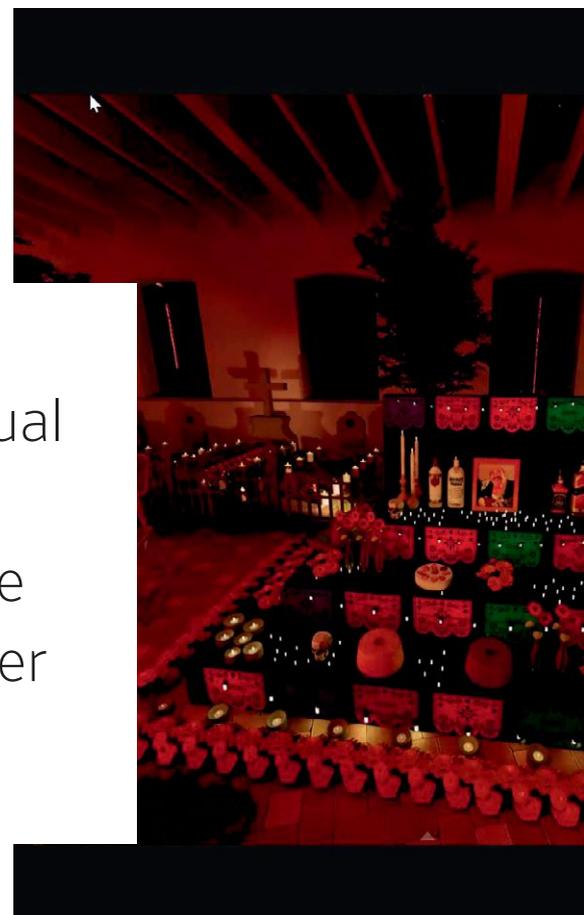
In most jurisdictions landscape architects need continuing education units/credits (CEUs) for licensure. This drives designers and specifiers to attend online classes, as was evident with the more than 3,000 participants in the November 2020 reVISION conference, which stood in for the ASLA Annual Conference on Landscape Architecture.

But lunch-and-learns also serve an important if intangible purpose, according to **Tao Zhang**, ASLA, chair of design culture for **Sasaki**, the Watertown, Massachusetts-based interdisciplinary design firm with roots in landscape architecture and planning. “It’s a time for dialog, a social time, a mental break from projects, and a way to stay engaged in the practice,” says Zhang. His responsibilities as of last summer include nurturing a healthy company culture in spite of the challenges of isolation inherent to working remotely. He adds the food component of those presentations was part of their

**PHOTOS:** Keeping 300 professionals connected and engaged through the pandemic required the creative use of digital communications technologies at Sasaki. Tapping into in-house expertise in panoramic rendering, the firm virtually observed Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) together in November (above and right), and in May took part in a virtual gallery tour and discussion around a curated exhibit featuring portraits of Boston-area millennial artists. This underscores possibilities for new, sophisticated, and compelling presentations to landscape architects in this virtual era.

success. “Now, we face the question of ‘another Zoom meeting?’”

Indeed, there is a phenomenon being referred to as “Zoom fatigue,” although to be fair it applies just as much to alternative apps that include Google Hangouts, Skype, FaceTime, and Microsoft Teams. Multimedia journalist Julia Sklar reported in National Geographic magazine last year that, “virtual interactions can be extremely hard on the brain ... humans evolved as social animals, perceiving [non-verbal] cues comes naturally to most of us ... however, a typical video call impairs these ingrained abilities and requires sustained intense attention to words instead...”





traditional lunch-and-learns –“relationships are at the core of teaching and learning,” she says – another disadvantage is not being in the physical environment being discussed.

“The topic of landscape architecture is enriched by local wisdom,” she says. “Teaching and learning about human interactions in built outdoor environments varies. The teacher/facilitator must have a feel for the supports and constraints in that environment. The best way to get a feel for it is to be there.”

Someday soon, we hope. ■

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### Emerging professionals missing out

**Doug Rose**, paver sales manager at **Pine Hall Brick**, says he’s been “working in dirt” for three decades, time to see landscape architects grow from being interns to accomplished professionals – and customers – years later. Also a member of the Landscape & Paving Council of the Brick Industry Association, he teaches both the proper installation and history of clay pavers, effectively enlightening many on how some American brick streets have survived since the 19th century. He is concerned that virtual learning leaves gaps in knowledge, causing misinformation to go unchecked, which will need to be corrected in a post-pandemic environment.

### Note on the 2021 ASLA Annual Conference on Landscape Architecture:

Planning for an in-person Nashville conference (November 19-22), as well as a mid-year virtual conference in June, is very much underway.



### Time is precious, context matters

**Chuck Butkiewicz**, a manufacturer sales rep for **Holophane**, and his colleague **Jerry Whitten**, a sales manager at **Cyclone Lighting** – both companies a part of **Acuity Brands** – considered pre-pandemic lunch-and-learns to be important contributors to building relationships and effective means to communicate product features and characteristics.

Both decided early on to become skilled at using Microsoft Teams, which they believe works best for teaching. That said, Butkiewicz notices lately a big difference in what landscape architects want before committing time to a video interface: It has to fit within project-based billable hours, or it has to earn them CEUs. When granted that time he injects a degree of theatricality: “A lot of personality can get flattened in the virtual format,” he says. Something else he misses from in-office presentations are the post-class one-on-one conversations, many of which lead to specific project discussions.

**Suzanne Flannery Quinn, PhD, FHEA, CPSI** is a manager at the **KOMPAN Play Institute, Americas**, which shares its research on play and playgrounds with designers through LA CES courses. Aside from the loss of interpersonal interactions in



Which is unfortunate, considering how pandemic conditions drive landscape architects and other industry professionals to find new ways to mitigate the crisis. **Mary Golden**, an advocacy incubator and executive administrator for **Green Plants for Green Buildings**, guides the association in providing LA CES classes, much of it focused on the biophilic benefits of indoor vegetation. Their courses are only certified for in-person delivery, reducing class attendees by 55 percent in 2020 and stymying the program for the time being. “But we’ve seen a jump in our website traffic, with 5,000 additional visitors in December and many more document downloads,” she says. “There’s never been more interest in the aesthetic, health, and economic benefits of plants.”