

# The fine art of state parks

DNR LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS LEAVE THEIR MARK.

A wooded campsite in Perrot State Park. Landscape architects design features that are practical and aesthetically pleasing, and that will blend into the surrounding landscape.

*Joseph Warren and Therese Gripenotrog*

Why do we visit state parks? They are some of the most beautiful places in the state for sure. But what would our parks be without their winding, scenic entry drives, the meandering trails to panoramic vistas, campsites within pine and hardwood groves or shaded picnic areas on picturesque lakeshores? Without those features, would we appreciate these places as much as we do?

Roads, trails, campsites, picnic areas, boardwalks, beaches, boat launches, visitor centers — all are carefully planned and designed to give us an experience that we've come to expect at our parks — and for that experience, a landscape architect may be responsible.

In fact, it was a landscape architect who was responsible for the development of our first state parks. In his report to the State Park Board in 1909, renowned landscape architect John Nolen wrote eloquently about the justification of parks and drafted a plan that would create the Wisconsin State Park System.

## A brief history

Nolen's report was instrumental in getting the state park system off the ground. In the late 1950s, another jolt to the system came when the state authorized \$35 million for park funding over a 10-year period.

Bob Espeseth, one of the department's pioneering landscape architects, was

authorized to create and lead the first park planning section in the Wisconsin Conservation Department. The section started small — with four offices and a large drafting room rented in the front of a beer distribution building — before moving on to larger state office space.

"The money really got us going. There had not been a formal master plan design process. We established a focus and long-range goals," says Espeseth.

In 1958 Governor Gaylord Nelson asked for a study of acquisition and development projects for the state park system. That same year, the National Park System was conducting a study of the Great Lakes shoreline. Espeseth accompanied the NPS on their work in Wisconsin.

"We flew the shoreline by helicopter to spot areas for recreation, which resulted in a lot of those places becoming parks. We pinpointed Big Bay and Apostle Islands on Lake Superior and Rock Island, Newport, Whitefish Dunes, Har-

ington Beach on Lake Michigan," says Espeseth.

"Next we flew the interstate system [I-90/94] to pick areas that would relatively fit with interstate highway travel, so people would be able to easily pull off the interstate and stop at parks," says Espeseth. "Some of the parks that resulted from those surveys were Willow River, Buckhorn, additions to the Black River State Forest, and expansions of Rocky Arbor and Lake Kegonsa."

State park planners and landscape architects also worked to preserve the rich heritage of the facilities designed and constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps.

"Some CCC plans never got developed and we worked off some of those to modify and update them," says Espeseth. "They had beautiful plans. Some we even had framed."

Nineteen new properties were added over 10 years. The rails to trails program, the Ice Age Trail and the Ice Age Scientific Reserve were also just getting started. At one point there were 13 landscape architects on staff.

Espeseth left in 1967 but hired many landscape architects and planners who would go on to long careers with the Department of Natural Resources.

Jim Treichel, one of those hired by Espeseth explains, "There was positive interest in making the park system bigger and better and we had quality people to do it."

## What do DNR landscape architects do?

When asked what landscape architecture is, most people may think of garden or golf course design, but the field of landscape architecture is much broader and diversified. It's not landscaping — it's "architecture of the outdoors."

Landscape architects need to understand horticulture, but must also have a strong understanding of physical topography, geology, climate, wildlife, ecology, soils and construction methods, and human psychology. Site suitability and how to incorporate functional designs into the site are also factors that landscape architects consider when planning designs.

DNR landscape architects work not just on state parks, but on projects for all state properties — forests, flowages, wildlife areas, riverways, fisheries and natural areas — and work as part of a team with engineers, planners, property managers and other staff to develop goals for the property and ensure de-



velopment of the property is following aesthetic, practical and culturally viable design principles.

"Engineers will look at the building quality to make sure it stands up. Landscape architects look at the building quality, but also its use and appearance to make sure it looks good," says Treichel.

"We joke with each other, but LAs are the chain link between the engineers' work and what people see at the parks, the aesthetics," explains Glen Clickner, DNR engineering and construction management section chief.

In talking with Espeseth, Treichel, many of the former DNR landscape architects (David Aslakson, Lyle Hannahs, Leif Hubbard, Dennis Kulhanek, Steve Lewis, Bill Moorman, Susan Oshman, Mike Ries, Dan Rogers and Pam Schuler) and current department LAs (Ken Brokaw, Ann Freiwald and Ken Keeley), it becomes apparent that design principles haven't changed in the last 60-some years.

Explains Rogers, "Has the decision making process changed? No. There

may be an easier way to do a design, but we still treat a wetland the same way."

"We're still trying to create outdoor space while maintaining the natural setting," says Oshman.

"What landscape architects try to do is to design a site that fits into the landscape and allows for the least amount of destruction," says Kulhanek.

One way landscape architects reach that goal is to walk the property and become intimately familiar with it.

"Al Ehly (former state parks director) would always tell us 'If you have your work caught up, go out and walk your property and get to know it well,'" says Rogers.

"I learned when I first started working here that the DNR guys would park miles away so they could walk into the property and get a feel for it," says Freiwald. "We'd go to a site. Leave and come back. It's during the second visit when you really start to see your ideas taking shape."

"Understanding a specific area was our job. When you went out, you'd always come back thinking about it, think-



An example of a conceptual site plan. Proposed park development is shown in relation to the property's topography and natural features.

ing how to refine plans," says Aslakson. "You also wanted to know what you were looking at and talking about with people. If you didn't, it was embarrassing."

"It's hard to articulate, but we look at a landscape with a special lens," says Brokaw. "Our training in architectural design, art history, biology, allows us to see the property differently."

### Designing the parks

Nolen summed up the purpose of parks well in his report to the State Park Board: "In the case of parks ... the main purposes are the preservation and enhancement of natural beauty and the provision for recreation."

To provide recreation there needs to be facilities for people to use, such as buildings, trails, roads, parking lots, walkways, campgrounds, basically anything that's developed.

For landscape architects and planners, providing uniformity to the amenities in the state parks and forests was important. Many of the landscape architects worked in the field across Wisconsin, and having some standards provided an outline for the general function of property facilities while still allowing the unique flavor of each property to shine. Not all parks were developed in the same way.

"Many of us participated in authoring the department 'Design Standards Handbook' which influenced all of the designs we did and is a large legacy of the group," explains Hannahs.

"Being decentralized allowed us to



A paved, accessible trail in Mirror Lake State Park. DNR landscape architects, planners and engineers work to design accessible features such as trails, fishing piers, cabins, buildings and more.

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become more familiar with the property and the users," says Ries. "Being part of the committees to develop the design standards was a great opportunity to be collaborative and exchange ideas."

"We looked at developing different types of parks — a natural park, day use park, overnight park or historic park — and we'd put properties under those categories," says Treichel.

One example of the difference is in Door County.

"Newport State Park was a great landscape to keep more rustic for a different experience. It wasn't exactly a mirror image of Peninsula State Park, but with the lakeshore curving around it we could still include trails, campsites and a beach," says Moorman.

Getting local support and the public involved for park properties proved to be another important aspect of planning and design, and continues to be today.

"The rest of the department was not doing public meetings. It was really something the planning section of parks started for master planning projects," says Treichel.

Says Rogers, "People will tell you amazing things about your project. I learned more my first year on the job than in four years in college."

Planners and designers must take all these factors into consideration, carefully examining a property's natural communities to find a balance between the public's recreation requests with what's best for the land.

Explains Moorman, "When we're planning it's important to take local interests into consideration, but we must also think long-term, hundreds of years down the road. Parks could be here forever."

### The changing (recreation) landscape

While the principles of landscape architecture have been the same since the term was coined by Frederick Law Olmstead over 100 years ago, the way people recreate has evolved.

"Camping has changed. The size of RVs and length of the camping seasons has changed. Campers want more flush toilets and electrical sites," says Aslakson.

"Machines have changed and you have to adapt to users," says Hannahs. "Snowmobiles used to travel 25 mph, now it's a lot more than that."

The Americans with Disabilities Act was another turning point for recreation facility design.

"ADA changed designs tremendously," says Ries.



Several former and current DNR landscape architects met at Devil's Lake State Park to offer insight on their profession and the work they do. Many received their degrees through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Pictured left to right: Mike Ries, David Aslakson, Leif Hubbard, Bill Moorman, Dan Rogers, Pam Schuler, Lyle Hannahs, Ken Brokaw, co-author Therese Gripentrog, Ann Freiwald.

Ries conducted a statewide meeting for landscape architects and planners so they could get a feel for what it's like to be in a wheelchair. For half of the day the landscape architects would have to get around the park in a wheelchair.

Says Rogers, "Nothing has ever given me the feel for designing something, more than when I had to use a wheelchair for a length of time."

Today, connecting people with nature is also more important than ever as Americans are spending less and less time recreating outdoors.

"A call to action for the National Park Service centennial in 2016 is to try to get people out into the parks. When we plan the Ice Age Trail we try to bring it through communities so it connects with people. If people don't know about it, and use it, they don't love it and they won't vote for it," says Schuler, who started with the Department of Natural Resources and now works for the National Park Service.

### Blending science and art

One thing that's always been the same for landscape architects is making a park visit a quality experience. It's not just about getting from point A to B.

"We're trying to create an experience. It's kind of a magical thing to do," says Schuler. "We hope the landscape fades into the background and the experience becomes part of them, for visitors to think 'I love to come to this place because this is the feeling I have,' rather than simply seeing the place."

It's an art to accomplish that. If some-

thing is not designed well, it won't be sustainable, it won't be able to be maintained and it won't be used. And if something's not aesthetically pleasing, people won't come back.

Says Hubbard, "How do you blend roadsides into the surrounding landscape? The challenge is to make it look like it has always been there. It's about bringing art and science together."

Landscape architects will say that challenge and the work itself is its own reward.

"Getting people into the parks, using them. Land ethics. These are things we all share and are really unique to landscape architects," says Brokaw. "We care about the properties we work on and have a deep commitment to them. It's a lot more to us than just a job."

"Sometimes when I'd be working on the Lower Wisconsin Riverway I'd have to pinch myself. I'd think, 'I can't believe I get paid to do this,'" says Aslakson. "There's a state natural area that's going to be there forever. It makes you feel good."

What's also most rewarding is seeing a project from conception through to completion, and seeing people using the facilities and enjoying themselves.

And for many park visitors, they may not realize why that is.

As Freiwald puts it, "If we've done our job right, no one will know we were here."

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