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LaGuardia Design: Apprentice Turned Master

JULY 25, 2018 BY | [NICOLE TEITLER](#)

LaGuardia Design is one of the most celebrated landscape architecture organizations in the country — and it is based in the Hamptons. Real Realty caught up with founder, Chris LaGuardia, on his firm and how winning the most prestigious national award for landscape architecture is affecting its future.

You founded the firm in 1992. Tell us about its beginnings.

I worked for Norman Jaffe for about 10 years, up until his death, and then decided to open my own business, which was a mix of architectural and landscape projects. Eventually I came to focus more on landscape as I found it to be a better fit for me.

When did you partner with Ian Hanbach and Dan Thorp and why?

LaGuardia Design started out in my house, and after a few years, we eventually moved to a Water Mill office location. My wife, Jane began working full time and we had one drafting assistant. We eventually hired two bright

young college graduates who, after about 10 years, would become partners in the firm.

The partnership allowed Jane and I to expand the company with more employees and create a more efficient division of labor within the office. We still hire directly out of college. Cornell, Syracuse and Rutgers are good feeds for us.

What makes your firm so successful?

The success of LaGuardia Design is deeply rooted in a very strong design philosophy based on the tenants of Modernism and ecological conservation. We also hold a firm belief that the quality of our service and its professionalism is very appreciated by our clients and professionals that we collaborate with.

Our hiring model for apprentices right out of college into a vigorous training program is also paying huge dividends, which are now giving us greater bandwidth to take on much larger projects using the team approach.

LaGuardia won the American Society of Landscape Architects' highest award for residential landscape architecture in 2013. What did that mean to the company and to the partners personally?

Winning the award brought national and international attention to our firm's work. We started getting calls from all over the place. I also was asked to lecture widely on our work at universities and symposiums. I came to realize that we had a real message to get out about design and the environment.

Recognition is one of the few perks in the design field, so when you win an award, it validates the quality of your work — not just for yourself but for everyone who works on it in the office as well as the clients, contractors and, of course, my family.

You worked for architect Norman Jaffe. What did you learn about your craft during that relationship?

Every young designer should do whatever they can to get a job with a master. Don't worry about the pay or location. Find the person that is at the top of his or her game and try and learn everything you can.

I got lucky to land a job with Norman Jaffe. It was a very small office, so I spent a lot of time with Norman, and in my 20s, was quite impressionable.

Norman taught me to look at the basics of space, light, materials, and details as essential to doing great work. He also had a really good feel for luxury and how to express that in his work.

Is your approach to projects systematic or is it a free-form process, depending on the client?

All our projects start with conversations with the client. Also included might be the architect, decorator builder, and permit expeditor. Together we formulate the goals for the project. We generate several schemes to have more of a discussion about the possibilities for the project with the client rather than a fait accompli approach. We use a lot of sample photo imagery to help convey our ideas as well.

So many of the projects we work on are located in beautiful places that are also ecologically very sensitive. We like to steer the thinking into a less ornamental approach to the landscape. We like an approach that integrates systems — architectural and environmental.

You've installed large-scale ponds and full naturalistic landscapes. Can you explain how you would look at a new project and see its natural potential?

Adding a freshwater element to a project brings a lot of life into it. The visual aspect of the water is great but the ecological benefits of the pond are exponential. The landscape that joins the pond works in harmony, creating a habitat for wildlife including songbirds, pollinators, many mammals, and amphibians.

How closely do you work with a home's architect? Is it a joint venture?

We work closely with the home's architect in the very early rounds of design. We have great working relationships with many architects and enjoy a great collaborative atmosphere.

In the end, we bring a lot of value to the project because our skillset takes the building and custom fits it to the land. Sometimes this requires major alterations to the initial architectural concepts.

It's all done as a team approach and it's why we get so many repeat projects from architects. Architects love that we integrate buildings rather than decorate them.

Do you ever build accessory structures, such as fountains and pools? Or do you design around them?

We design everything that is outside the house, i.e. terraces, pools, tennis courts, shade structures, and pool houses. My background in architecture helps justify our taking on this scope.

What is some key maintenance needed to upkeep landscaping?

We often provide maintenance guidelines for our work so that the design intent is understood for years to come. We insist that clients hire the best available maintenance teams for the first few years of a new installation. It's an important time to make sure the garden properly acclimates. We have regular meetings with the maintenance team to make sure they are doing the project correctly.

We encourage our client to use an organic approach to lawn care and fertilization. New products are coming out every year that offer a safer, more organic approach to landscape maintenance.

How have you seen the landscape design change over the years? What's ahead on the trend curve?

Landscape design has really evolved in the last 20 years. The big change was the perennial revolution, where perennials were replaced with woody ornamental shrubs as a new aesthetic. I credit this mainly to landscape architecture firm Oehme, van Sweden in D.C. This aesthetic eventually evolved towards a more complex relationship with plants in the work of Piet Oudolf from Holland. His work really expresses itself best at the High Line in Manhattan. The idea that landscape is more than just a pretty thing and that it enhances the bio diversity of the earth is a very noble cause.

What do you love most about the East End's landscape?

There are many things to love about the Hamptons landscape. I really like the sustained horizontal lines I see everywhere. The natural landscape is also very sublime in many ways. The tidal estuaries, the farm fields, the ocean, all hold unique qualities, highlighted by a heroic sky overhead.

The build landscape also holds a beauty of its own. Part of that success is the extremely fertile and well-drained glacial soils we have here. The soil really is a pleasure to work with. Plants and trees love it too.

What are some of your favorite planting combinations, particularly for the East End?

I like to use native planting combinations because they blend so well with each other in color and form. You can also be sure the plants will do well because they are native.

To learn more about LaGuardia Design, go to www.laguariadesigngroup.com or call 631-726-1403.