

Making your mark

The turn of the year seems an apt moment to reflect on what it takes to become a landscape architect. Most students don't follow a single route, as the following profiles show. Instead they reveal the variety, the passion and the commitment of a group of people with their sights set on adding their own unique take to a career in landscape. Here, we ask seven past and present members of the Student Landscape Institute Council (SLIC) to share their experiences and to speculate, just a little, on what the future holds

01

THE POLITICIAN

WILL DUTCH



"THE PAST TWO YEARS AS SLIC CHAIRMAN HAVE BEEN AMAZING. I'VE MET PEOPLE AND ACHIEVED THINGS I NEVER THOUGHT I'D BE ABLE TO DO"

An MA student at Writtle School of Design and former SLIC chair, Will Dutch spent his placement year attending every landscape-related event in Europe and even organising one himself.

What surprised me most about university is how insular it can be if you don't take the trouble to get involved in outside activities and alternative studies. So, when I spoke to the SLIC representative at Writtle, it sounded like a great way to collaborate with people studying around the country and to learn more about the profession.

I decided to go along to the SLIC meeting at the start of my final undergraduate year in October 2009. We met at Kew Gardens and then went to a bar for the meeting. This 'meeting' turned out to be the AGM, and I volunteered to be chairman a role that I passed on to Rob (Baffour) in October 2011. The past two years have been amazing. I've met people and achieved things I never thought I would be able to do.

Thanks to the SLIC, I have been out promoting landscape architecture to students at UCAS fairs across the country. It also got me involved with

the European Landscape Architecture Student Association (ELASA). I went to Edinburgh as an LI representative and have since then made my own way to meetings in Slovenia, Switzerland and Germany. I am now in charge of organising the ELASA UK Annual Meeting in 2013, where we will study the British coast for two weeks with students from all over Europe.

I have been given the chance to be on the judging panel for the Landscape Institute Awards and, as a result, got to meet loads of interesting people from across the profession. As a young professional hungry for advice and support, this is great.

From September 2010 to July 2011, I organised the SLIC Conference with many of the other SLIC members. We got to work with Living Streets, which became our charity partner, Harrow Road Neighbourhood Partnership and Gillespies. The event was a massive success. It was really busy and vibrant, with superb speakers on the first two days, and then we had a landscape intervention day, with lots of local residents involved. I would recommend any student to get involved in SLIC. The more you do, the more you will get from being a landscape architect. ●

02

THE ARTIST

SCHEHEREZADE SOODEEN



"OPEN SPACE IN LONDON SHOULD REFLECT THE CITY'S DIFFERENT LOCAL IDENTITIES"

Fine art graduate Scheherezade Soodeen is in the second year of her graduate programme in Landscape Architecture at Greenwich University.

I graduated with a BA in Fine Art and Sculpture from Camberwell College of Arts in 2008, which gave me experience of working closely with different community groups in an artistic and therapeutic context. Being able to work directly with communities, alongside developing my creative aspirations, meant that landscape architecture was an easy choice for me.

I love the design process itself: thinking deeply about a site, reacting to its fundamental elements and generating designs that function both artistically, and practically. Being able to communicate your ideas in a clear and compelling way is important. Any project that involves the public realm should involve a broad audience, and any a vision for public space should be a shared vision that can be easily understood.

Joining SLIC helped me to gain a deeper understanding of people's different personal values towards landscape architecture. This extended dialogue has been

important and also enriched my student experience.

I think there is an opportunity to experiment with the potential of the public realm. There are so many spaces that only offer a one-dimensional experience.

As landscape architects, I think we should extend our responsibilities. Yes, we should choose appropriate hard and soft materials for any given site and be able to compose a satisfying aesthetic, but we must also understand local behaviours if we are to design public space that truly matches the needs and character of its users. The profession should be making more spaces that are unique rather than generic.

Open space in London should reflect the city's different local identities. I would like to explore these themes and translate them into new aesthetics and physical spaces. Choosing planting that evokes a sense of other countries and climates in the public realm, for example.

I am sensitive to differences in culture, ethnicity, gender and age, and understand how this is relevant to identity. Celebrating their differences in the public realm would help to maintain London's reputation as a leading global city. ●

03

THE NEW GRADUATE

ANDREW PRINGLE



"SLIC OFFERS AN INVALUABLE BRIDGE BETWEEN ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE"

Andrew graduated last summer with an MA from Edinburgh College of Art. He recently completed a short-term contract with LandLab Ltd, in Dumfries, Scotland.

I enjoyed studying at Edinburgh, it's such a creative place – open to forward thinking and with inspiration leaking from every corridor and classroom. Being an art school, it had a strong focus on hand sketching and experimenting with different mediums and techniques, and this has informed my design process.

As landscape architects, I believe that we should have a strong commitment to sustainability. At university, it was often easy to achieve a fashionably high-level of sustainability in our projects when you had no budget or real client. We would often criticise 'real' projects that might use imported stone or species not suited to site, but now, as a graduate, I empathise much more with how difficult sustainability can be to achieve in reality.

If there's one thing I could change about landscape architecture education, it would

be to introduce more hands-on, professional experience earlier. I feel that SLIC offers an invaluable bridge between academic and professional landscape architecture. Over my time in the Council, we set up landscape competitions, conferences and physical community projects, all of which were well received and complemented my university studies.

Last year, I spent a week at the Amsterdam Academy of Architecture. It has a very intense course structure, with students on obligatory professional placement three days a week throughout term time. This professional experience intertwined with coursework is tough on the students at the time but, I believe certainly to their benefit in the end.

It's a more rounded structure that many of the UK schools of landscape architecture may want to consider in the future. With rising tuition fees, courses that offer the chance to study while working in the same field may become an attractive, practical solution to keeping personal debt down. Inevitably, it will prepare students better for the transition between university and professional practice. ●

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04 THE EUROPHILE LAURA PARSONS

“IN SWEDEN, THERE IS A STRONG FOCUS ON THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AND ITS ROLE IN HEALTH AND SOCIETY”



While doing her BA at Manchester Metropolitan University, Laura spent five months at the Swedish University of Agricultural Science in Alnarp on an ERASMUS exchange. This fuelled her passion for the European landscape architecture and she is now studying a two-year MA programme at Copenhagen University.

I became interested in landscape architecture, initially, because it combines my passion for design and the environment. Since studying abroad, I have become increasingly aware of the social perspective. The experience has enabled me to compare my home environment with international models and, at times, question British concepts.

In Sweden, there is a strong focus on the natural environment and its role in health and society. Legislation stipulates that everyone has access to nature in accordance with ‘allemansrätten’.

With this ‘right to roam’ comes a sense of ownership and respect for the landscape, and this environmental responsibility spreads across the Nordic countries. In Copenhagen it is apparent as landscape

practices push for innovative and sustainable design.

As well as giving me a different perspective, studying abroad has highlighted the pertinence of being able to communicate effectively in classes of mixed nationalities and specialities. On a broader spectrum, being able to articulate your ideas convincingly and clearly to those outside the profession is even more key, and could be what sets us apart from other built-environment disciplines.

One of the biggest challenges that our profession faces at the moment is justifying its own value, however, I also see this as an opportunity for our generation to seize and define.

I was inspired to join SLIC last year after talking to other students who had been involved and, during the summer, I helped with the organisation of the student landscape conference in London. This was really interesting as it allowed me to meet a mix of professionals and students, and work on a short community project. The preparation before was also valuable as, in a similar way that I find studying abroad so fascinating, it meant students with different backgrounds and experiences from across the UK were able to share ideas. ●

05 THE YEAR ABROAD STUDENT TIN-TIN AZURE

“THE PROCESS IN CHINA IS A LOT FASTER THAN OURS, SO DESIGNS CAN FEEL RUSHED”



When Tin-Tin Azure was unable to find a placement in the UK, he looked to China instead. Now working for a planning and design company in Beijing, Tin-Tin has been struck by the contrasts between British and Chinese landscape design, and dreams of building skate parks with a green edge.

My first landscape design ideas were based around youth activities – how to incorporate skate parks and other sports into urban environments. I had a dream when I was a teenager about designing a huge skate park built into a forest, a development that was completely sustainable and usable in all weathers.

These types of development have an enormous effect on social issues. As designers, we should never create stagnant spaces, but that still happens too often in urban environments. I believe that young designers

who have grown up in these spaces are perfectly placed to affect this change.

My first job in the industry has been in China and what has struck me is just how much respect there is for British education here and Landscape Institute-approved courses in particular. The practice in China is very similar to the way we do things in the UK, largely because many Chinese processes have been taken directly from those in the West. But there are differences. The process in China is a lot faster than ours, so designs can feel rushed. Chinese development is progressing at a ridiculously fast pace. Entire communities are demolished, redesigned and rebuilt in weeks.

With the benefit of a bit of geographical distance, it strikes me that the British landscape profession could be quicker to jump on green solutions. But, to be fair, I think it's less about the profession than it is about getting developers to follow through with original plans.

All too often clients shout about wanting green credentials, but at the last hurdle, visions are failed and promises broken, with the excuse of a lack of money or time. It's an argument that just isn't acceptable in this day and age. ●

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06 THE CAREER CHANGER
ROBERT BAFFOUR

“MY FIRST EXPERIENCE AT UNIVERSITY WAS PRETTY ONE DIMENSIONAL, BUT RETURNING TO STUDY THIS TIME AROUND HAS BEEN COMPLETELY DIFFERENT”



After several years in digital media marketing, Rob Baffour (SLIC chair) is now in his second year of a degree in Landscape Architecture at Kingston University.

As well as studying at Kingston University, I am working part time at Group M, a global advertising company, where I previously worked full-time. I can't pinpoint exactly when I decided to study landscape architecture, but it was definitely its broad constitution compared with other built environment fields, that attracted me.

Before I began the course I wasn't sure how my background would be of benefit, however, I've found that my various work and personal experiences can be used to inform projects. I'm keen to explore landscape's contribution to urbanism, and I'm constantly inspired by some of the bold work that is produced by practices such as West 8, SWA and Groundlab. These are practices that embrace a transdisciplinary approach, which I think is key for designing for urban conditions.

My first experience at university was pretty one dimensional, but returning to study this time around has

been completely different. There are many opportunities to build knowledge and gain skills outside of the academic structure. Being within the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture at Kingston also means being in a very creative environment and I am constantly surrounded by inspiring work.

I got involved with the SLIC by helping to organise the student conference last summer. Being part of meetings involving current practitioners, local council members, community groups, and the charity Living Streets, was definitely a valuable experience. It opened my eyes to the wide range of stakeholders who are invested in landscape, which has made me keen to make it work for them.

If I had to say what my ideal project is, it would be something like the Northumberland Development project in Tottenham, north London. It's a long-term project involving the construction of homes, a stadium and new public spaces on a high street. I'm drawn to the obvious challenges there are in delivering this type of project, yet handled correctly projects such as have the potential to be a catalyst for improvements in the wider community. ●

07 THE CONVERSION STUDENT
ESTHER GERRARD

“IT SUITS MY SCIENTIFIC AND PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE, BUT ALLOWS ME TO DEVELOP MY ARTISTIC AND DESIGN INCLINATIONS”



Currently in the final year of an MA conversion course at Writtle School of Design, Esther came to landscape architecture via a biology degree at Imperial College, London and much more in between.

After university, I yearned to work in an environmental setting, so I did a diploma in environmental impact assessments. At the same time, I was also undertaking a diploma in applied project management and ended up starting work on a private residential scheme as project coordinator for a feasibility study. This led to a job with multidisciplinary firm MCO Projects as a project manager on a big public hospital project in Dublin.

It was this role that brought me alongside architects and landscape architects and, after doing a short course in garden design, I realised it was the landscape profession that really inspired me. It suits my scientific and practical experience, but allows me to develop my artistic and design inclinations.

That's what sets landscape architects apart from other built environment disciplines.

Landscape has to include an understanding of the environment, but also the aesthetic, which has to be considered when designing with nature. Other disciplines understand the environment purely in terms of science or planning, they don't grasp the full picture as landscape architects must.

I think employers are looking for flexibility and potential in a landscape graduate. Last summer, I helped to set up the student summer conference and my involvement with SLIC also led to some research work with the LI during the summer.

Every generation has a different focus in terms of the political and social pressures they face. Our generation will be remembered, hopefully, for making a change in terms of sustainability and laying better foundations to provide for future generations. ●

For more information about the Student Landscape Institute Council, visit www.landscapeinstitute.org/education/SLIC.php

To pre-book your place at this summer's student conference or to find out more, contact stevec@landscapeinstitute.org