

Ten Months, One Quantum Leap

by Jane Roy Brown

After more than three decades, one of the country's smallest graduate schools is still standing—and standing up for sustainable landscape design and planning.



Students at the Conway School of Landscape Design burn lots of midnight oil as they learn design and planning by doing three real projects in 10 months.

David Brooks Andrews

"A cemetery is the perfect place to study geology, because three kinds of rock are used in monuments," says Richard Little, striding among old marble and slate gravestones to a spot where upright granite monuments mark the newest section of this graveyard in South Deerfield, Massachusetts. Sixteen men and women pause to scratch in notebooks as Little, a geologist and guest lecturer, stops to point out examples of igneous, metamorphic, and sedimentary stones.

For the members of the Conway School of Landscape Design class of 2007, this is the second day of school and the first of a nine-day road trip through the Connecticut River Watershed. Many of the students—10 women and 6 men, aged mid-20s to mid-50s—haven't drawn since elementary school. Until a week ago they were pursuing careers in disparate fields—software engineering, kayaking instruction, and jewelry design, to name a few. Today they are tagging along with Little to decipher the processes, from volcanoes to glaciers, that shaped the local landscape.

The outing began in the classroom. Director Paul Cawood Hellmund, ASLA, told the students that throughout the road-trip outings they would be using sketchbooks to record the natural patterns and processes they observed along the way. "As designers, you'll be intervening in these patterns," he said.

After humorous exchanges earlier in the morning, the students grow serious. Intervening in the patterns and processes of nature is not something they take lightly.

Like the medical school injunction, "First, do no harm," the Conway School reminds students that what they do as designers affects a landscape that supports a complex living system.

THE SEPTEMBER ROAD TRIP, a learn-and-bond ritual that sets the pace for the 10 months to follow, dates from the 1970s, when the fledgling program was housed in a century-old barn and a tiny adjoining sugarhouse on a riverbank in rural Conway, Massachusetts. The town, which then had a population of about 1,000 (it has since doubled), perches on low hills on the northwestern edge of the Connecticut River Valley, about 15 miles



Geologist Richard Little gives students a field lesson as part of the Great River Road Trip, a 7-day natural history expedition that kicks off the school year.

Bill Regan

northwest of the University of Massachusetts in Amherst.

Walter Cudnohufsky, ASLA, taught in the university's landscape architecture program for six years before leaving to establish the Conway School in 1972. In a July 1975 article in *Landscape Architecture*, he said he left the university out of "disillusionment with the frictions inherent in large institutions." He also voiced frustration: "Students and teachers carry too many varied responsibilities. You never have enough time with individual students

to make sure they get the message."

Inspired by the budding environmental movement and the ecological assessment methods pioneered by Ian McHarg, among others, Cudnohufsky taught applied design based in rigorous analysis of both site and program, rather than in forms imposed upon the land. Or, as he and generations of Conway students put it, "Design is the process of form finding rather than form giving."

Although the curriculum focused primarily on design and planning,

it devoted 60 percent of the year's credits to speaking and writing so that students could communicate their concepts effectively. The program also incorporated varied teaching methods, from conventional studio classes to field trips, to accommodate the gamut of learning styles. "There are all kinds of ways different people learn, like walking through a bog or a forest," says Cudnohufsky.

But the most radical methodology was to plunge students immediately into real projects for real clients—not after a semester or two of learning how to use a transit and a T-square, but while picking up these tools, possibly for the first time. On site, students learned to analyze shade and sun, soils, hydrological and geological features, legal constraints, circulation, vegetation patterns, the site's relationship to its larger cultural and ecological context, and how to use survey tools and identify plants. In the classroom and studio, they were taught to make maps, draw by hand, write competently, and give professional presentations to teachers and classmates.

Thirty-four years and 500 graduates later, the Conway School program



For Conway students, learning to draw comes with the added challenge of working on plans for real clients, right from the start.

Bill Regan

AT A GLANCE

Graduate Program in Sustainable Landscape Planning & Design

Conway School of Landscape Design

Location:

Conway, Massachusetts

Students:

18-19 in a 10-month program of study

Faculty positions:

2 full-time, 2 half-time, 2 adjuncts, 6 master teachers, more than 50 visiting lecturers each year

Faculty holding PhDs:

1 (EdD), (1 PhD in progress)

Degree offered:

Master of Arts in Landscape Design (MALD)

Accredited:

Yes, by the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (Not by LAAB)

Profile:

The school's one-of-a-kind, 10-month program focuses on design of the land that is ecologically and socially sustainable. Collaboration, not competition, is stressed as students explore sustainable design at scales ranging from residential sites to towns and regions, while working on real projects for real clients. They graduate with practical project experience and client references and go on to diverse design practices or further education.

retains most of its original format: A 10-month course of study takes students sequentially through three real projects at different scales, emphasizing presentation skills and hands-on learning. Students don't get grades. Instead, they receive comments from faculty and peers at repeated presentations, continually refining their work, as in professional practice. Throughout



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A few years ago, the school moved from a small barn and sugarhouse to a former residence on 25 wooded acres, above. Those responsible for Conway's success, *bottom*, include, *from left*, founding director Walter Cudnohufsky, ASLA, his successor, Donald Walker, and current Director Paul Cawood Hellmund, ASLA.

the year, weekly humanities seminars use readings, writing, and discussion to explore “the relationship between ecology, knowledge, and aesthetics,” and “to practice the language of persuasion and constructing a case,” says Ken Byrne, core faculty member in humanities, who teaches the course.

After returning from the road trip, each student is assigned a residential client in one of the nearby towns, for whom they must create a landscape design based on the client's needs and a thorough analysis of the site. (Prospective clients in local communities

contact the school to be considered for student projects, and the faculty tries to match students with clients according to student interests.) Students bill clients a nominal design fee (now \$350), and both parties sign a contract.

Because the school is known for its experiential approach, people unfamiliar with it sometimes assume that it's a design/build program, but students have no time to build or execute their projects, as they learn applied design on three different scales in 10 months. “They study construction and site engineering in the studio, and those



Bill Regan



About 10 weeks after starting the program, Karen Chaffee, class of 2007, *here*, presents her residential project design to fellow students, instructors, guest critics, and the clients who own the property. *Below*, Sarah Bray '08 uses one of the school's new digital theodolites.

who pursue design/build practices after graduating often intern or otherwise work with others to gain construction experience,” says Hellmund.

While clients—residential, community, or institutional—aren’t obligated to execute students’ designs or plans, some students receive the gratification of seeing their projects completed. “My [student] community project was to compare alternative designs for conventional zoning versus flexible conservation zoning in the town of Grafton, Massachusetts,” says Nat Goodhue, ASLA, class of 1991. “We showed how the latter would preserve land values and conservation and historical features, and voters passed the ordinance. To see and make a real difference from one town meeting to the next was incredibly powerful,” Goodhue says. A registered landscape architect, he is now a sole practitioner at Goodhue Land Design in Stowe, Vermont.

Environmental Passions, Diverse Professions

The school’s motto, “Make a difference by design,” and its mission, “to explore, develop, practice, and teach design of the land that is ecologically and socially sustainable,” express a deeply felt environmental concern and an activist sense of responsibility. Applicants must demonstrate that they share these, but this isn’t a stretch for most. Jennifer Campbell, a member of the class of 2007 who lives in southern

New Hampshire, applied because she is distressed by rampant development —“large lots filled to the max”—where she lives. “I’m interested in guiding growth and in how to develop land so that common open space is available to people,” she says.

Should she weather the grueling year, Campbell will graduate with a Master of Arts in Landscape Design (MALD), the degree awarded by the program, which is accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (although not by the Landscape Architectural Accreditation Board). After that, she could go on, through practice or more formal education, to become a registered landscape architect. Or she might go into conservation planning, regional planning, land-use management, wetlands restoration, residential design, or revitalizing downtowns—some of the varied careers pursued by other “ex-Cons,” as some graduates call themselves. (The school is improving its tracking methods, but currently it has no firm statistics about the careers of graduates.)

Cudnohufsky says he originally envisioned the program as a stepping-stone to conventional (two- or three-year) MLA programs for career changers. The Conway program, he says, aimed “to get students directly into graduate design degree

work” at other institutions, preferably for only two years, by arming them with “advanced knowledge, skills, and prowess.”

Five years ago Conway sealed a formal agreement with the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, to credit Conway’s MALD toward the university’s three-year MLA program. (To date this is the only such agreement in place.) So far, no Conway students have applied. “Our graduates go on to pursue many aspects of planning and design of the landscape,” Hellmund says, echoing similar observations by Cudnohufsky and the immediate past director, Donald Walker. “Some have become [registered] landscape architects through further education, others through practice, but it is probably safe to say that most haven’t become registered landscape architects.”

Hellmund views the Conway School as complementary to professional landscape architecture programs. “Ours is a good applied generalist education for would-be landscape architects who are especially interested in sustainability issues,” he says, explaining, “We’re training generalists, or to paraphrase [Oberlin College ecologist] David Orr, ‘specialists of the whole.’”



In a hemlock forest in coastal Connecticut, ecologist Judy Preston discusses ecosystem succession with the class of 2007 during the fall Great River Road Trip.

Integrated, holistic thinking characterizes both the program's pedagogy and the mindset of many students drawn to the school, and their subsequent careers may encompass more than one discipline. Hellmund cites the example of Wendi Goldsmith, class of 1990, who went on to found the Bioengineering Group Inc. in Salem, Massachusetts. Among other related projects, her firm works on coastal protection, including wetland engineering, and river management and flood control, including stormwater management. In January Goldsmith's firm landed a joint contract with another company to improve flood-control systems in New Orleans.

School officials, alumni, and trustees vigorously counter the occasional but persistent perception that the program is trying to pass itself off as a substitute for (or shortcut to) a traditional MLA program. "The 10-month program is a portal and doesn't attempt to cover all landscape design topics but instead to give a broad grounding with targeted technical expertise, so that graduates are prepared to start on careers that address pressing environmental issues," says Hellmund, who has an MLA and most recently taught at Colorado State University while also practicing. "Our particular strengths are in design process, landscape ecology, and cross-scale thinking."

Walker, who retired in 2005 after 33 years as an instructor and then director, harbors an antipathy for mainstream (i.e., design-focused) professionals, though he holds both an MLA and an MFA. "Landscape architects have a death wish," he has stated, because of "their continuing role in the demolition of the natural world."

"The school doesn't aspire to be a professionally accredited program. They're clear about that," says Jack Ahern, FASLA, who chairs the



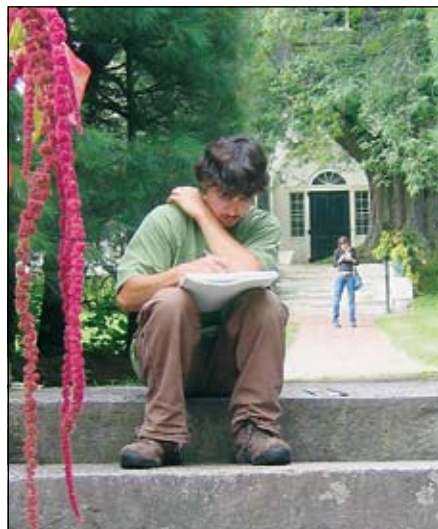
Priscilla Miner Novitt

Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and serves as a Conway School trustee. The fact that no Conway grads have yet taken advantage of the deal to enter his university program "proves that people coming to Conway aren't looking for a shortcut to a three-year MLA," Ahern says.

Sean Roulan, a member of the class of 2007, displays the diverse interests typical of Conway students, having worked in landscaping firms and nurseries and as an arborist and an apprentice organic farmer. He came to Conway from the University of Massachusetts, where he had been pursuing plant and soil science and natural-resource studies. He had

become frustrated by the specialization of his training and hoped to explore the interconnections between these disciplines—how particular soils affect the greater landscape, for example. At the same time, "I came to realize that I was studying design of the land," he says. Knowing even then that he was not likely to pursue landscape architecture, he looked briefly into the university's MLA program but felt "it seemed too focused on the design aspect."

Larissa Brown, class of 1994, was a career changer with a PhD in history from the University of Virginia. She was an assistant professor of history at Michigan State University before entering the Conway School. After graduating from Conway, she worked as a municipal planner while also expanding her portfolio through networking and pro bono projects. She started her own planning firm and now works as chief planner at Goody Clancy, a Boston-based architecture, planning, and preservation firm with a national practice. "I had plenty of intellectual knowledge [when I arrived at Conway], but practice was very, very important," she says. "It's the essence of the school and the reason why it works."



Priscilla Miner Novitt

Sean Roulan, class of 2007, ponders handouts during a visit to Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site in Cornish, New Hampshire.

Permaculture guru Eric Toensmeier, in Holyoke, Massachusetts, goes over the basics with the class of 2007 during a fall road trip up the Connecticut River Valley.

Brown sees a difference between her experiential training and the conventional schooling of job applicants she has hired since becoming established. “The people who come from traditional master’s programs in planning have taken some studios, but they don’t know how to budget, write a proposal, build consensus, produce a product,” she says. “They don’t have the clarity and the confidence that come from practical experience.”

Most outsiders grasp the value of the program’s pragmatic and ecological focus. Some guest critics, who are generally sympathetic to the mission and methods of the school but were trained in other programs, expose Conway students to other points of view. For instance, Mary V. Rickel Pelletier, who has a bachelor of architecture degree from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), now works with nonprofit groups to initiate green infrastructure projects in metro Hartford, Connecticut. She served as a guest critic at Conway student project presentations last fall and noticed that some students didn’t display an understanding of the design principles instilled during her training. (In fairness, students had been in school for less than three months and would get more design training in subsequent projects.) “Unfortunately, in a design-focused school like RISD they leave out the life sciences,” she observes. “But there’s something very real about the formal geometries taught in design-focused programs that allow for spatial order.”

Another guest critic, Joan S. Rockwell, ASLA, a registered landscape architect who has served as an adjunct faculty member at the school, observes that the University of Massachusetts’s MLA program from which she graduated emphasized construction and exposed students to landscape



Priscilla Miner Novitt

architectural history, which are not taught to the same degree at the Conway School. But, Rockwell says, “The students’ ecological awareness reinforces my desire to drive that home to my clients and bring it into my work, and the students benefit from my technical knowledge.”

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One by one, the students stand in front of faculty members and peers, plan views of residential properties pinned up behind them. In what are, at this early point in the year, often primitively rendered drawings, students have noted grade changes and drawn the features to scale. Classmates and all four members of the Conway faculty, including Hellmund, watch quietly. This is the second presentation of about 10 in the weeks to follow, and trembling hands and voices belie the confident front adopted by some novice presenters.

When each student finishes, a patter of applause follows before audience members offer comments. “I thought your site analysis was excellent, but I still don’t have a clear idea of how relocating the driveway affects drainage,” one student volunteers.

Comments tend to be voiced in this vein—positive remarks first, followed by more critical ones. Even without the ritual humiliations that have become

legend in some design schools, Conway students undergo immense pressure as they launch into real projects, learning as they work.

After the residential projects conclude, they form teams to start winter term’s large-scale community-planning projects. Again working in teams, they tackle real issues in communities in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Vermont, New Hampshire, or eastern New York, producing a written report. The third and final semester also features team-based community projects, but this time student teams tackle intermediate-scale designs for areas such as parks or neighborhoods, producing a set of plans and implementation documents.

Every student learns to draw manually, and prospective students sometimes balk when they learn that CAD isn’t a strong suit. Until fairly recently, the school did not own up-to-date computers or offer CAD instruction. Hellmund is now investing in equipment and software to expose students to professional applications. Says Conway faculty member, alumna, and registered landscape architect Susan Reed, “Now we’re getting students who have been exposed so long to technology that they’re saying, ‘I want to learn to draw with my hands.’”

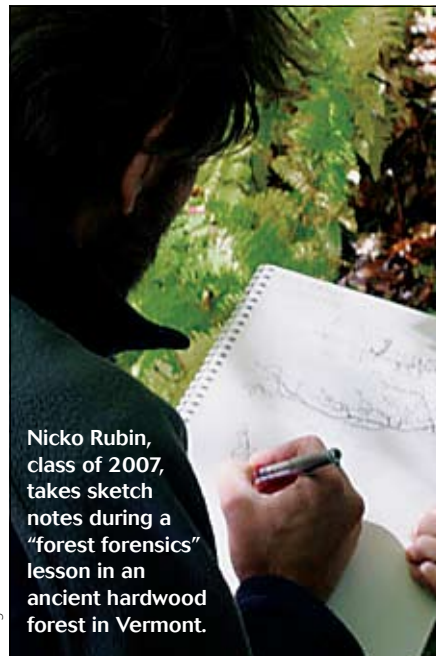
Cost is another stumbling block for some would-be applicants. Conway School's tuition and participation fees total \$26,000, and students must pay their own living expenses (the school has no dorms). Currently the school provides two scholarships of \$500 each. Reid Bertone-Johnson, Associated ASLA, interviewed at the Conway School in 2003 but chose the MLA program at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, instead. The lack of computer facilities then and the fact that the university had an accredited MLA program were the major factors, he says. The Conway program's expense, which, unlike university tuition, could not be offset by teaching assistantships, reinforced his decision. "Also, I had already earned degrees in geology, environmental studies, and education, and I felt that the Conway program emphasized the environmental stewardship aspects of landscape design more than I needed," he says.

As university programs around the country strain to meet the growing demand for landscape architects, "If the demand gets met it's likely to be done by alternative models such as the Conway School," says Dean Bork, ASLA, who heads the Department of Landscape Architecture at Virginia Tech. "I think you'll see more private landscape architecture programs emerging if the demand for graduates remains what it is right now. Conway is ahead of the curve."

Julius Fabos, FASLA, professor emeritus of landscape planning at the University of Massachusetts, agrees. "I think it's a vital niche that they started there and it should continue," he says. "It's a good service to offer – we are too big a profession and we need as many ideas and options as possible."

A Three-Day Charrette

It is mid-November, the week the students make formal presentations to their residential clients and guest critics. Some have dark smudges under their eyes from long hours in the studio. But here they are, spread out



Nicko Rubin, class of 2007, takes sketch notes during a "forest forensics" lesson in an ancient hardwood forest in Vermont.

Bill Regan

over the lawn of a Frank Lloyd Wright-designed house in Amherst as part of three-day charrette with landscape architect Darrel Morrison, FASLA, who has been a visiting lecturer at Conway for the past 14 years. Accompanying him is a team of three "ex-Cons," who will critique students' work and contribute knowledge on historic preservation, native plants, and landscapes at other Wright properties.

"On the site we took a lot of pictures, seeing what was there, pacing the landscape and driveway, and experiencing the landscape unfold," says Kate Dana, class of 2007. "Darrel Morrison was encouraging us to use native plants, planted en masse, articulating the landscape in a way that when you look at it from different perspectives you see different things each time. He spoke so much about light in a landscape, how it affects the way plants appear at different times of day, different times of the year. That was something I hadn't thought of before. When light hits sumac in the fall, this plant becomes an incredible focus, and at other times other plants come into focus."

In the classroom, Morrison and his colleagues presented slides on the designs of Jens Jensen and Wright. Morrison assigned students to create

a series of Jensen-inspired mass-space diagrams for the Wright landscape and develop one of the compositions into a real plan. Students laid sheets of tracing paper over their copy of the site's base map and used pastel crayons to fill in locations for different plant communities according to sun, shade, moisture, dryness, and the plants' height. "He encouraged the use of organic forms and thinking about how plants fit together in the natural landscape," says Dana, who has an undergraduate degree in industrial design.

Adding another sheet of tracing paper, students then filled in specific plants. "People who were good with plants got that very quickly, but people like myself who don't know a lot about plants had to look them up," she says.

The second day's lecture on historic landscape preservation added complexity to the design problem, and the students kept taping more layers of tracing paper onto the original one to form their emerging designs. "On day three we did presentations," Dana says. "The critical focus included faithfulness to Jensen's ideas as well as evaluating the plans on their own terms."

Walker started inviting Morrison to do such charrettes as part of an emphasis on geomorphology and native plants that became his hallmarks as director. He was also responsible for moving the school from its first location to the present 25-acre forested property about a half mile from the town center so that students could immerse themselves in the local woodland ecology. Though he also taught the intermediate- and large-scale planning projects that were part of the original curriculum, Walker stayed close to the ground, urging students to restore natural conditions whenever possible. To do that, he says, "you start with native plants."

After his retirement, the trustees sought to build out from this foundation, concentrating more on the broad-scale end of the curriculum. "In the past there was more emphasis on

Visitors to the Panamanian village of Achiole, *left to right*, Gioia Kuss '99, Matthew Arnsberger '98, and friend of the school, Laura D'Angelantonio collaborate with local host, Daniel Holness, *right*, on land protection for the Toucan Community Center.



Paul Cawood/Hellmund

environmental design at a small scale, and now we're trying to focus more on planning across scales," says board chair Arthur Collins, Conway class of 1979, who is a registered landscape architect and real estate developer. This shift is expressed in the new tagline after the school's name, "graduate program in sustainable landscape planning and design." Collins adds that the board would like the school "to become a major voice in environmental design," which is largely a matter of getting the word out, he explains.

The board was also seeking "someone who was both a teacher and had run a successful design practice, since we're an applied program, and who would do outreach on local, regional, and national levels," says Administrative Director Nancy Braxton. "Paul [Hellmund] has extended that outreach to the international level." She

adds that the school also wanted a director "who would enjoy doing some public speaking and develop strategic partners locally and regionally," attracting more applicants.

Hellmund, who was born and raised in Panama, has already begun to fulfill these ambitions. In addition to developing some prospective long-term partners for winter and spring student community projects through outreach, he organized a spring 2007 alumni trip to a Panamanian village, where travelers will work on volunteer projects and help assess the area's ecotourism potential.

As coauthor, with Daniel Somers Smith, of *Designing Greenways; Sustainable Landscapes for Nature and People* (Island Press, 2006), Hellmund demonstrates his approach to tackling environmental issues in holistic terms and at multiple scales. "I tell students that you are a better regional planner if you understand how things work at the site scale and a better site designer if you understand sites and their issues at broader scales," he says. "This, to me, is a fundamental requirement of sustainable landscape design."

Jane Roy Brown is a writer in western Massachusetts.

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Conway School of Landscape Design is to explore, develop, practice and teach design of the land that is ecologically and socially sustainable. We:

- » provide graduates with the basic knowledge and skills necessary to practice planning, design, and management of the land that respects nature as well as humanity
- » develop ecological awareness, understanding, respect, and accommodation in its students and project clients
- » produce projects that fit human use to natural conditions.

Conway School of Landscape Design
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