



PUBLICATION

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AN INTERVIEW WITH VIRGINIA BURT, FCSLA, FASLA

Virginia Burt, FCSLA, FASLA, creates landscapes and gardens of meaning for residential clients, healthcare facilities, and academic and governmental organizations. For more than 30 years, Virginia's design philosophy has reflected these roots, enabling her to create gardens and landscapes that reveal their natural context and sensitively reflect and support those who use them.

Virginia's international work has been widely recognized. These awards include CSLA National Awards in 2015, 2016, 2017 (two), 2018, and 2019; awards from the Ohio Chapter of ASLA in 2006, 2012, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019; a National ASLA Award of Merit in 1999; and a Palladio Award in 2014. Virginia is one of seven women in the world honored to be designated a Fellow of both the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects and the American Society of Landscape Architects.

The following interview with Virginia Burt was conducted and edited by Lisa Bailey, ASLA, and Siyi He, Associate ASLA.

ASLA's Healthcare & Therapeutic Design Professional Practice Network (PPN) also invites you to continue this conversation with Virginia on Thursday, July 16, 2:00-3:00 p.m. (Eastern). Registration for this webinar is now open.

What inspires you to do this work?

I grew up on an apple farm, and being this close to nature literally wove and wrote it into my DNA. It is such a blessing.

I learned something from having watched plants blossom, literally blossom to fruit, and then being able to eat that fruit. You realize that something out there is greater than we are. So for me there is a richness, and I would say a spirituality, that infuses my world.

My brother brought home a girlfriend for Thanksgiving when I was in eleventh grade, and she told me about this course called landscape architecture. As someone who grew up drawing and doing art, I was inspired! I thought I had died and gone to heaven and knew then I was going to be a landscape architect.

Jump ten years forward: after I graduated, I joined Design Workshop in Aspen, CO. After two years, I returned to Toronto to work for JSW+ Associates. After 10 years, they asked me to become a partner. I looked around the table and said “No, and it is not that I don’t love you.” My heart was not as engaged in the work. So I packed my files in my car, and I started my own landscape architecture firm on June 13, 1996. I wanted to do things differently and I had done a lot of personal work. I had volunteered for an organization called World Council, about accessing greatness in yourself and paying it forward. There was a woman who asked me, “What is it you do in your real work?” Without thinking I said, “I am a landscape architect, and I design spirit and healing gardens.” She looked at me and said, “That is so cool! Tell me more!” I had to tell her I’d get back to her on that (so I could figure it out).

I had to find out what a healing garden is. I love research and love using research, but rather than study healing gardens, I wanted to learn by making. I had to do the design of a space and have it made. I love landscape architecture—for me, it is a calling and my craft. Landscape architects design for the people we serve; they know the answers so we have to tap them and take them through a creative process. We are also the caretaker. What inspires me is people, being able to serve so we can enrich, we can inspire, we can transform. These places we design transform people’s lives.

Many folks said you could not prove that these gardens are healing. For me, the point is, how can we create places that are rich with opportunities? How can we create places that call someone into the

present, even for a brief moment, like the beauty of the hummingbird stopping at a flower. That is the transformative moment—when the rest of the world briefly falls away. For me, that is healing. It is described in a 2014 article I wrote called “It’s Somewhere Else Instead,” inspired by A.A. Milne’s poem “Halfway Down” (“It’s Somewhere Else Instead”: Healing Gardens As Transformative Spaces (V. Burt), for Landscapes | Paysages (Vol.16, No. 2)).

Can you tell us about your office and describe the structure of your practice? How did you set it up, and what do you love about it?

For a long time, the office was a small space in my house. Then we had ideas about expansiveness and realized we needed a new office. We have five employees, and we also have consultants, depending on the size of the project. We have a standard, routine office, but we have fabulous projects. We are a boutique firm that attends to detailed, meaningful design.

We take risks, and we are happy to try new materials and design spaces that stimulate people’s minds. I’m a skier, too, and sometimes it feels like we’re designing a plane while we’re flying it! My office works well together; we have several people that we often collaborate with for drawings and graphics. Day-to-day production of drawings helps us to tackle what’s next. It is fun and rewarding. If it is not fun, why are we doing? We can get more serious about this stuff, yet we breathe and still smile, too.

Can you tell us a bit more about your design process?

The first piece is we strive to do our work with heart, and design with intention. That is how we attract our clients.

Inspiration comes from all different places. I read poetry, draw, paint, sketch, travel, and read voraciously. To me, there is an ongoing study in beauty, as well as work and research that we do—finding inspiration, whether by finding patterns, walking in the woods, or reading poetry. My personal favorite poet is Mary Oliver, and my all-time favorite is her “what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life” from “The Summer Day.” Poems and articles spark ideas that then germinate and inform my work.

I like to start the design process by talking about people first. I have been trained in small group processes as well as large group intervention and organization development. To me, this is about how we translate ideas within groups of people, small or large, and gather their input into the garden.

Looking at one healing garden as an example, for the Seidman Cancer Center's Schneider Healing Garden, people were talking about the garden as a place to get away. It was a place to step out of the cancer journey, away from treatment. That's how the line "It's somewhere else instead!" from A.A. Milne's poem came to inspire this garden. It's a special place, with different characteristics from the spaces just outside it, but woven into the tapestry of its surroundings. We picked up all those threads and began to weave them into a beautiful tapestry. That is how the design came to be.

The design process was guided by the idea of going "somewhere else instead." The germination of that seed of the idea guided decisions all the way through the process. A wall surrounds two sides of the garden. The garden is pushed downwards, with a separate way to enter the garden, adjacent to the front entrance of the hospital for cancer care. One can get out of their car, and then have one choice to go into the building; the other choice to go directly into the garden. That entrance was specially made for the healing garden to become an invitation. To this day, I receive emails from people who have visited the garden and been affected by it. One such email reads, "My family has recently experienced a loss...and one of the few joys we all got during that difficult time was getting everyone outside to admire the garden out front."

For that project, did you have to fight for that location, or was that the location given to you?

I got invited to the master planning team, so I was granted the opportunity. The client also had a donor for the project. The story and the resources opened up the opportunity for a wonderful healing garden. I think the key is the challenge gets more manageable when many critical items are addressed right at the beginning.

Have a strong reason for doing things. If they choose not to do it, let it go. Sometimes one puts in their best effort and it does not work out. Here, two things must happen at the same time. The first one is to be content you did your best, and the second is to learn from what happened. Did you learn about something you would do differently or better next time? Have a stronger argument for doing that.

The next piece to keep in mind is that the project may not be a good fit. The work I attract and the work I have done is a win-win situation. It is a win for me and a win for the client and everyone who goes there. It is a moment in time that we can open that garden and get things done, but there must

be follow-through afterwards. Too often, people are disappointed because the maintenance budget never got through, and the care was never taken. We need the money to be able to make the spaces, and we need to have the energy and dollars to be able to maintain these spaces. When we do these things, it sometimes helps to make it much smaller and do it really well. You only have so much butter for the toast, and if you want two or three perfect bites, you can't do everything. From challenges, we have the opportunity to learn and find how to move forward.

Could you say more about maintenance, and how you work in planning for maintenance, because it is sometimes tough to secure that money?

Make it a precondition. You can be courageous five seconds at a time. My goal is to ensure my clients know at the outset: if you are not creating a fund or using dollars to take care of this garden, please do not hire me. I am not your person. These gardens are dynamic. If someone was away from the office for two months, and no one washed the floor, what would happen? Not too much. If you do the same thing in a garden, in two months it can go from looking so great to looking below average and possibly even worse.

Moreover, people are unaware of how much it takes, and how much of an impact maintenance makes. If you get out of your car, enter the garden, and you see ten dead trees and flowers are wilting, that moment stops the journey and manifestation of healing. The condition of the garden is a direct reflection of the mission. If you are not going to dedicate money to maintenance, please do not do the garden. Make it simpler for all involved.

Do you have trouble in your area finding people that care for gardens? There are not many people who really know how to evaluate what gardens need and how to take care of those needs.

I am blessed to find many people I can trust to do this. There is a garden we are aware of, where they are choosing not to hire somebody knowledgeable. I spoke to them, and they need to find a champion of the garden within the organization. I go into the garden and maintain some of it myself. That is a piece that they elected not to do in the end.

We depend on finding those skills. Moreover, in my opinion, we need to get better at looking into finding those folks and bringing them along. If you are not finding the right people, go to the school that teaches horticulture. Because over there, you could find people that know their plant material.

What kind of design elements do you usually use in your healing gardens?

I think every garden has all the elements in it. There is no recipe to follow to create a healing garden. You have to work with what you have. You might have a water feature, landform, etc.—those elements are in the toolbox when you arrive at the project. Those may change. For example, at one of the healing garden projects, the Schneider Healing Garden, the client had an excellent affinity for art. So, we used the four elements: air, earth, water, fire. We manifested those elements in an artful manner. We incorporated work from five different artists.

Labyrinths are not appropriate in every single project. When appropriate, and if that group is willing to program and use it, I ask myself if different physical elements, like sculpture or landforms, are appropriate for the user I am serving. And if they said art is essential to us, and trees are very important to us, then those things are going to come out of the toolkit. There need to be good reasons to use particular elements.

For instance, with a project in Cleveland, heated paving would have been ideal. How could we do snow removal on that beautiful labyrinth? Looking at the plan, the client determined the whole heated paving idea was too expensive. Upon closer examination, I noticed a steam tunnel going by 20 feet away. We captured and recycled the steam, and with that energy melted the snow on the labyrinth. There was a good reason to do this, and steam recycling was a great reason. Do something for the environment at the same time as doing something for the people using the garden—another opportunity to serve the users, and the earth, at that moment.

Can you talk a little bit about your marketing? How do you market your firm?

It depends on where your markets are and who you are marketing to. Over 95% of our work is by referral. Referral means you are asking for referrals. You get the courage for five seconds at a time.

One can ask for referrals in a particular way. Take some sales training. You think that you are a designer, with a higher calling, and yet we also need to learn about the sales process, understand where we are in it, and be good at doing it. You need to decide: are you a request for proposal firm, or are you a referral firm, or are you both?

Dedicate the time and resources for professional photography. There are quite a number of

landscape colleagues with poor pictures, yet they have great stories. Nevertheless, they do not have great images to go with it. One of our responsibilities as a professional is to capture the depth and beauty of what we design.

Over time, what do I spend the most money on? Great photography. Then, at a dedicated time each month, I write about it, I capture it and take these photographs to add to articles. My office creates newsletters and publishes on social media. I have somebody who helps me with getting out the newsletter. So we do all kinds of things for marketing, though we rarely buy magazine advertisements.

I also create a vision board every single year. I am clear about what I am going after, and how many projects we need (or want?). What would make my heart sing? It's a rich document that I keep on my wall. I have photographs, words and sketches that say "I can do it!" To me, that is a piece of marketing as well: having clarity on your own mission and vision for your firm. If we're unclear, how do we know if we delivered?

My mentor is Cornelia Hahn Oberlander, FASLA. I am so blessed! She is simply an inspiration and very sharp. It's the simple things, and climate change is part of it. Come to know that every move you make makes a difference. It's a heart filled journey, stay focused on the important things. You never know where your next job is going to come from. Keep your eyes open and show up fully. Stay clear and open. If it's got heart and meaning, watch for the feeling of upliftment when an opportunity opens up. Push yourself to expand, you just never know.

Do you go back and evaluate past projects, or do any kind of post-occupancy evaluation (POE)?

I am not doing it formally, like Clare Cooper Marcus has done. I do go back. We have a current project for adults with autism that is unique in North America. We are interested in POE as a firm, to expand that particular area of knowledge. The caregivers are excited because we are addressing the concept of measuring the number of holds (a technique for calming individuals in this healthcare stream) as a measure of stress, and keeping the construction process as non-disruptive as possible. They predicted it would be very disruptive, and instead it has been the opposite. We also want to measure the effects of the design. We have gotten a research grant from the Landscape Architecture Canada Foundation (LACF), and we are applying for another research grant as well. So, we have already done some evaluating, and will be doing more POEs going forward.

Have you reached out to people in education who are doing research and bring them in?

Two things. For some projects, they have researchers on-site within their facilities. That is how I know these numbers, and they are feeding us information. Moreover, I have a graduate student who is working with me as an intern. She is doing a literature review, getting the research figures and attending to the personal stories.

If you look back over your career so far, how have you evolved and changed?

We begin to do what we do by looking to our models, our mentors, and the people whom we work with. I have been mentored by Cornelia Oberlander, and I have been blessed for the past twenty years. As you mature, you realize you have to show up fully. It is important to pay attention and mark that spot just for a moment, where you realize, oh, that was an important thing that just happened. Sometimes, one does not see that right away, and does not realize just how critical that window was, just that spark. So, I keep my eyes open more these days, because I truly believe we are so well taken care of, by someone or something greater than we are.

When we talk about healing gardens, we could say it helps physically, mentally, and spiritually. The physical part is about the sun, shade, water, etc., and we could talk at length about just this aspect. The mental part is when we tap into memories, storytelling, and connecting with each other. When I think about that, my vision board begins to filter out the negativity. So, pay attention to your internal monologue and how it works and manifests, focus on your vision and mission. Memory is important, too. How do we tap into memory? The emotional part, how we respond to space, and how we respond to emotions inside—our emotional response to the space and to what is happening in our work. How does your response aligns with your current work?

The next piece is about spirit. I look at this as a holistic wheel. There is something out there that is greater than we are. I do not care how you recognize or worship it; that is unimportant. I look at spirit as that spark, that essence, that carries us forward in so many ways. As landscape architects, we have the opportunity to design something that helps people and helps us serve more people. That we have the opportunity to take the bare dirt, a piece of ground that may be flat and empty, and turn it into a place that is an island of healing. We are blessed! So, my attitude is gratitude. I am so grateful to be able to practice what we talk about.

This sense of spirit and gratitude has gotten stronger as I matured. It is important to talk to younger people, bring them forward, and stimulate their lives to understand that they have this, too.

Is there an important, pivotal moment in your life?

Yes, the time someone asked me what I do, and I responded out of the blue that I create healing gardens. And the risk taking.

What do you have on your vision board that you'd like to share?

I'm writing a book. It's a journey of the heart that I'm just embarking on. Stay tuned!

Anything else you would like to share about yourself and your work?

I am blessed to be able to do this work. I love what I do, so that makes it easy.

This interview with Virginia Burt, FCSLA, FASLA, was conducted by Siyi He, Associate ASLA, Chair of the ASLA Healthcare and Therapeutic Design Professional Practice Network (PPN), and Lisa Bailey, ASLA, sole proprietor of BayLeaf Studio in Berkeley, CA, and a consultant with Schwartz and Associates, a landscape design firm in Mill Valley, CA.

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