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Ethics in Landscape Design

by Garth Woodruff, Professional Member, APLD

December 2, 2001: Enron declared bankruptcy, tumbling from its peak net worth of about 70 billion dollars. The ensuing scandal ushered in what would be a decade of big business, financial and ethical blunderings in the news. The housing market peak somewhere in 2006 was a symptom of that same kind of corporate and personal greed. California boasted that over half of its new loans were interest only. These same loans that were getting AAA ratings were then gobbled up by "safe investors" like overseas interests and retirement investment funds. The fallout was marked by much more than just the worst housing crash in U.S. history. September 26, 2008 marked the biggest bank failure in U.S. history. By the end of that same year, over three million foreclosures had taken place.

When housing credit froze in the summer of 2007, we watched as things deteriorated rapidly. My firm functioned primarily as a residential design build organization, and with little to no diversification in longer-term commercial projects or maintenance, we immediately began to feel the effects. In the fall of '07, and after over a decade of business, I had a customer say, "Yes, I owe you \$30,000, but I can't get a loan and I don't have the money." No matter if you ran a good business or not, the impact of the financial crisis had an effect on you. My company, and many like mine, started to make massive cutbacks. Employees were let go, systems were changed and a new paradigm was afoot. I watched as many well-respected companies slipped under. Landscape design is a luxury for most people, and our little company closed almost 20% down in both '07 and '08. We had a strong loyal customer base and found ourselves lucky in a region much less affected than many. We pressed on learning from the experience. However, much of our industry, so connected to housing, continued to reel in the economic struggle.

While our industry asked these questions (of what, why, or how), big business was doing the same. The result was a great deal of talk about business ethics. Many of these businesses that failed did so because they were betting on risky investments and making their portfolios look good at the surface while hiding millions of mistakes and financial delinquencies behind corporate curtains. CEOs were walking away with ungodly amounts of money while a struggling work force watched their meager retirement disappear.

I personally have struggled with this topic of ethics and business as it relates to landscape design. Our industry is mostly made up of small businesses, and more often than not, we find ourselves far outside the reaches of big business ethics. We are lovers of the land and environment and not only have the love of nature in our blood but are realistic about the fact that nature is our livelihood. After the fallout of one of the biggest business blunders in history, how do we as an industry react? In a trade where ethics can be usurped by quality relationships, does ethics apply? What is business ethics? How do I share it with my students or you with your employees? I teach landscape design at Andrews University, and I came to some personal conclusions about these relationships after a purposeful journey in thought and reading.

John Maxwell wrote a book entitled *There's No Such Thing As "Business" Ethics*. His philosophy is that there are only personal ethics and that people run businesses accordingly. He concludes that the market crash wasn't because corporations were corrupt, but rather because of a failure of personal ethics among corporate leaders. That philosophy puts all of us individually on the line. Designers, in big companies or small, must examine their own ethics. Maxwell and many others offer a simple way to define ethical behavior. It's called The Golden Rule, and it easily applies to us as designers. How?

Our interaction through the design process is littered with ethical dilemmas. Surely we still need to treat our employees well and to treat nature with respect. Many of us also interact with clients who are spending tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars



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We are also business owners who need to make a living and at times to provide employment to others. As designers or installers, we may have our own favorite plants or garden accessories. We may want to create our own "brand" of design. Many of us want to be creative artists, but we are also sales people touting our wares. And that creates a deep ethical dilemma. How are we as an industry dealing with such critical interactions?

I've been working on some research with the design process and teaching the client interview in my classes, and I've come to notice a trend. Some believe that architects and designers are often creating monuments to self. Landscape designers straddle between plantaholics, contractors and artists. Although the customer provides us with the means to create – through their checkbooks – sometimes little attention is given to their needs. All of our current college texts that cover the design process give, at best, limited training in client interaction. In my firm, seldom did staff meetings incorporate true client needs. What do our clients really feel about the landscape and their home? We need to consider not just color choices and patio samples, but delve into more personal questioning: Where do they come from? What makes them comfortable in a space and why? How does that impact my design, and, as designers, what are the main priorities and how do we create a good balance between designer, psychologist and income producer?

From the smoke of that collision rises ethics in our industry. We have an ethical responsibility to put our clients' wants and needs above our own. If the golden rule, or something like it, were our guide, we, as the client, would expect that kind of respect in return. I would even take it one step further. Ethics should be a part of our design

communication. It's more than just listening to a client, but being able to decipher the unspoken and find the "meaning behind the meaning." Design ethics is taking the extra time and asking the extra questions with only the client in mind. If a design goes in poorly or the client springs "new needs" on us halfway through the process, it's our fault. We are hired as the experts and we are expected to be the professionals in the relationship.

The banking industry is now living with an ugly stigma, something we want to avoid. If landscape designers are seen as advocates for customers and trusted professionals, our creative tasks would be much easier and our profession would garner much more respect. If we were our customers, how much better would we feel knowing that the number one goal of the relationship was beauty for us in spite of money?



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