

JOBS WANTED

Yu-Chung Li, Student ASLA, a graduate student in landscape architecture at the University of California at Berkeley, started applying for summer internships last year and had good reason to be apprehensive. After all, the economy was still in a rut and many landscape architecture firms were reeling from the slowdown, laying off staff, and reining in spending. Li applied for three internships and was overjoyed to receive one offer for a paid position at SWA Group's office in Sausalito, California. "I was lucky, because I knew many people with good portfolios who were not accepted for internships," Li, who is 33, recalls.

That internship, which rotates among SWA's various offices, was an intensive and rewarding experience, Li says, and the perks weren't bad either: In addition to a stipend, the interns were provided accommodation on houseboats and given bikes to commute to the office.

Compare that situation to the experience of another student whose quest for an internship was rough going. A graduate student in landscape architecture at a

prominent university, she applied to more than a dozen firms and received a variety of responses, ranging from "we're taking interns but can't or might not pay" to "we're not taking interns

directly with principals, associates, and clients on actual projects, and to hone their design skills under the mentorship of experienced staff. Interns also learn about how a firm operates, from building relationships to the design process and marketing. Yet the recession has forced many firms to reevaluate their programs, leaving many students scrambling to find positions.

Exact statistics on the changing situation with internships are not available. But interviews with students, landscape architecture firms, and university officials all suggest that the economic downturn has tightened chances for placement. "It has become more difficult to find jobs for interns, even if they are less expensive for the firms," complains Bernie Dahl, FASLA, an associate professor of landscape architecture at Purdue University and coordinator

"WE ARE CONCERNED ABOUT A LOST GENERATION OF DESIGNERS," SAYS BECKY ZIMMERMAN, THE PRESIDENT OF DENVER-BASED DESIGN WORKSHOP.

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because we can't pay." One firm offered an unpaid position but then rescinded it. Another unpaid position popped up at a small firm in a major city, and she accepted and found herself among a group of other unpaid interns. It was a mixed experience: She was assigned to challenging projects, but the experience was overshadowed by a nagging sense of exploitation and despair. "I had the feeling we were being taken advantage of, and that was disheartening," says this person, who asked to remain anonymous to avoid damaging her employment opportunities after she graduates. "Even to work for free it was hard to find a job," she adds.

Internships are, of course, an integral part of landscape architecture education. They give students the chance to work

of its internship program, which places about 30 students annually in internships for a full academic year. In one case, he says, a firm that had taken a Purdue intern was forced to cut six staff members—including the intern.

Reduced opportunities for student interns also jeopardize the entire educational process from interns to

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THE NUMBER OF STUDENT INTERNSHIPS IS GROWING IN MANY FIELDS, ALONG WITH THEIR PERCEIVED VALUE. A NATIONAL SURVEY IN 2008 FOUND THAT 50 PERCENT OF GRADUATING STUDENTS HAD PARTICIPATED IN INTERNSHIPS COMPARED TO 17 PERCENT IN 1992.

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entry-level positions and the path to licensing exams. The overall job outlook remains so bleak for new graduates, in fact, that many firms report an uptick in applications for internships from recent graduates who are ready to accept a lower-paid student internship as the only way to move forward in the profession. All told, some landscape architects are worried that this could have long-term negative consequences for the profession. "We are concerned about a lost generation of designers," says Becky Zimmerman, the president of Denver-based Design Workshop. As the economy forces firms to shift ground on internship programs, "we want to make sure we are staying engaged in keeping this next generation in the profession," she adds.

For its part, Design Workshop, which was hit hard by the economic downturn, is trying to maintain its paid internship

program despite having cut its workforce in half, to about 90 staff in six offices. Not surprisingly, Design Workshop canceled its internship program in 2009 and restarted a year later but without a special feature—a two-week charrette, which usually kicks off the summer, that had interns working on "real projects with real participants," Zimmerman explains. The reason was simple: cost. "We usually get contributions and sponsorship for lodging and work space and meals, but we didn't feel comfortable knocking on doors to get donations because everyone is in a tough situation," she says. And instead of the usual 10 or 11 interns Design Workshop usually takes, the number was pared down to around six in 2010 and 2011. Meanwhile, the number of applications has steadily climbed to "a couple of hundred" for the positions.

The benefits of internships run both ways. While interns gain invaluable skill in problem solving, firms reap rewards too. Fresh faces around the office, many landscape architects say, bring a jolt of ideas and excitement. "I have always enjoyed the energy they bring, so youthful and wide-eyed

and fun; it helps liven up the studio," says Marq Truscott, ASLA, president of Quadriga, a 12-person California firm with offices in Sacramento and Santa Rosa that stopped its internships about four years ago because no staff member had time to champion the program.

Another advantage of having interns is more practical: They save money. "Their billable rate is lower," notes Paul Seck, a senior associate in charge of staffing in the Brooklyn, New York, office of Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates. Interns are hardly cheap labor, however. "There is education,"

Seck points out, noting that interns work on projects including model building, graphic design, and construction documents for early-stage projects. The interns, about half of whom come from Harvard University Graduate School of Design—where three MVVA principals teach—as well as from Iowa State University and Colorado State University, also sit in on design and client meetings. And they're paid, of course: "It's New York for heaven's sake," Seck exclaims.

Internships give firms a first look at potential candidates for full-time jobs. For large operations like SWA Group,

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• Good Accommodation

What is the statistics?
at EPISA

The bar has been set much higher for intern candidates now than in the boom years. OLIN requires candidates to be proficient in programs such as CAD, PhotoShop, Illustrator, InDesign, and SketchUp.

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and Employers found that 50 percent of graduating students had participated in internships compared to 17 percent in 1992, according to a study done by Northwestern University.

Yet the question of whether to pay student interns in any profession has always been contentious, and became a heated issue last year in light of the recession. With the number of unpaid internships climbing as the economy deteriorated, federal and state regulators last year began investigating a number of companies to see whether the internship positions they offered violated minimum wage statutes. The *New York Times* quoted Labor Department officials as saying that they will lead a nationwide crackdown on firms that fail to pay interns properly. Officially, there are six federal legal criteria for internships to be unpaid, including that the intern does

which has run an internship program almost continuously since 1972, internships often lead to staff positions and long careers: The firm has hired 47 interns out of more than 200 interns who passed through its offices, and four have become partners in the firm. "It's an investment," Elizabeth Shreeve, a principal in the Sausalito office, says about the firm's extensive eight- to 10-week internship program, which includes studio problems, field trips, juried projects presented to a panel of experts—to polish their presentation skills—and weekly talks by senior staff. It's not a vacation, despite the biking and kayaking trips. "We run them a little ragged," Shreeve says about the highly structured program, which last summer focused on a project to develop a downtown revitalization plan and university campus for the city of Vallejo,

California. That was an important aspect of interning for Li, the UC Berkeley student who was at SWA last summer, because "the task, the people, the client—they were all real," he explains.

While some firms scaled back, the OLIN firm in Philadelphia adjusted to the shifting economic situation—in this case a surge in business after a decline, a wage freeze, and belt tightening—by doubling the number of summer interns last year to six. "We were busy, we needed the help, and there was a significant number of qualified students," says Sydney Koerner, human resources director at OLIN, which has a staff of 74. Moreover, the firm wasn't sure if the workload would be sustained



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MONEY?WORK?EXPERIENCE?MONEY?WORK?

Experience?

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to enable the hiring of full-time staff, so interns were needed to pick up the slack. "We didn't want to project out too far and thought interns could help us," she adds, noting that the firm is now hiring staff. OLIN has had an internship program for more than 30 years, with students for the 10-week paid positions recruited nationally to ensure diversity. "We have an obligation to train the future of the profession and the future of OLIN, as we tend to hire a significant number of graduates," Koerner says.

The number of student internships is growing in many fields, along with their perceived value. A 2008 survey by the National Association of Colleges

not displace regular paid workers and that the internship should be similar to training in an academic institution or educational setting.

Landscape architecture firms vary on pay policies. "Intern is a fuzzy term," says Marcel Wilson, ASLA, founder of Bionic, a three-person landscape and

REDUCED OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENT INTERNS ALSO JEOPARDIZE THE ENTIRE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS FROM INTERNS TO ENTRY-LEVEL POSITIONS AND THE PATH TO LICENSING EXAMS.

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urban design firm in San Francisco. "In the true sense of the word they are looking to learn, and you need to make a space for mentorship to make that equitable," he explains. In that sense, his firm, which takes on one or two interns annually, strives for "fair" compensation. But, Wilson adds, "We don't have a hard and fast rule about compensation, because everyone's skill level is different." Wilson, who often recruits interns from UC Berkeley where he teaches, believes that in the design industries, "the 'knowledge for time' transaction is the prevailing ethic."

For interns, snagging a hard-to-get position today depends on a number of factors, from the all-important good attitude, ability to think visually and creatively, a winning portfolio, and of course, technology chops. In one example of how the bar has been set much higher than in the boom years, OLIN requires candidates to be proficient in programs such as CAD, PhotoShop, Illustrator, InDesign, and SketchUp. SWA "appreciates" 3-D skills such as Rhino as well as Adobe Creative Suite. "We usually put an intern to work building a model with a laser cutter," Shreeve says.

One significant change on the usual path from student internship to entry-level job and then licensing exam is that a growing number of desperate graduates are going after student internship-level positions, instead of entry-level ones, to keep their careers on track in a slumping economy.

Laura Rennekamp, Associate ASLA, a recent graduate of Philadelphia University, had applied to five firms in the Philadelphia area for full-time jobs but was told that nothing was available. But when an offer came from OLIN for an eight-week paid internship, Rennekamp grabbed it although the salary was 15 to 20 percent lower than for a full-time entry-level staff. "Times are tough," she says, "but I thought that if I could get a foot in the door I would convince them to keep me. I didn't want a waitress job." During that time, she took on projects as if she were a staff member, which led to a job offer from OLIN for a permanent position after the firm's workload increased. "By taking a small step back," Rennekamp says, "I showed that I was dedicated to the profession and really wanted the job."

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