11-22-2013

Professor John Ellsworth Interview Transcription

John C. Ellsworth
Utah State University

Recommended Citation

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in LAEP 75th Anniversary by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact becky.thoms@usu.edu.
You retired a year before I started in the Department. I really appreciate you participating.

I am happy to do so. Do you want to make a recording of the date and time and who we are?

Yes I will do that now. This interview...I have lost track of my days.

It is November the 22nd. It is the 50th anniversary of the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Conducting the interview is Aaron Smith, and the interviewee is John Ellsworth. Will you please state your name and where you were born.
Professor John Ellsworth Interview Transcription

JE: I am John Carroll Ellsworth. I was born in 1953 in Hot Springs, Arkansas. I served on the faculty in the LAEP department at Utah State University from 1985 through 2009, when I took an early retirement option offered to all eligible faculty and staff because of the great economic recession at that time. I was a graduate student in the same department from fall of 1977 through the spring of 1982 with a break for professional employment from summer 1980 through summer 1981.

AS: As you have prepared a lot of these notes, I was curious if you wanted to have these as what they are, and have me ask more directed questions about things that I have pulled out of it, or do you want to go back through?

JE: I don't see any point in going back through either of the two questionnaires you provided previously that I answered in writing, unless you have any questions about any of it. I have made a couple of corrections of things in those questionnaires, and I will communicate those to you in a future email. They are fairly minor, and I have already done the changes on those, and I will just send the documents to you as I have revised to this point. Yes, I don't see any point of going through those details. Just for the record, I submitted a few days ago to Aaron detailed responses to his questions on both the former faculty interview document, as well as the alumni interview document, and those are the documents that we are now talking about. You will have to forgive me, I will tend to take over this interview if you let me.

AS: That's OK. So you want to cover any of those updates, or let them serve as part of the record?

JE: When I provide to you the revisions, they will be there, and they are really simple. Those will be the final documents for the record, and as you and I have agreed please do not share or distribute those initial draft documents with anyone.

AS: We will kind of go through chronologically from when you started at the department as an MLA student. I would like to talk about balance within the graduate program. You mentioned the natural resource component and management, and sort of the scale
issue, but you also mention when you left and went up to the University of Idaho, that you had not really had a lot of exposure to the artistic side of landscape architecture. I am wondering if you can explore that a little bit more, about how the department was structured.

JE: I am glad you asked that, because that is something in my personal and professional development that was a bit of an eye opener. I came to Utah State University LAEP department as a graduate student with an interest and a background in natural resources, and a degree in Natural Sciences, which was botany, geology, anthropology, a mix of those various areas. The LAEP Department suited me quite well in those interests, and that undergraduate degree was good preparation. There was not a strong emphasis, at least in the LAEP program as I experienced it as a graduate student, in the artistic side of landscape architecture. That certainly came into play in design studios, in planting design, and in most of the courses, but there was really only one person on the faculty at that time that I interacted with who was really an artist, as a landscape architect, and that was Jerry Fuhriman. I took several courses from Jerry, but I did not develop a deep understanding and appreciation for how an artist views landscape and landscape architecture. The Department did not have a direct or intimate connection with the Art Department that I was aware of, even though we were in the same College, and in the last couple of years in the same building. It is important to note that my first two or three years the Department was in the Mechanical Arts Building, which no longer exists on campus. It was on the south lawn, adjacent to Old Main at the time. I think it was 1980 when we moved into the newly constructed Fine Arts Visual building, where the Art Department was right there with us. There was very little connection between LAEP and the Art Department, at least in my experience.

When I graduated with my MLA, and ended up going to the University of Idaho for a series of three one-year appointments while faculty were on leave and on sabbatical, that department was and is situated in the College of Art and Architecture. The departments of Architecture and Art, in that order, where primary in that College, and
the third department was the Landscape Architecture department. With only three faculty in the LA department it was not a major force in that College. However, the connections between the LA and Art department, as well as the Architecture department, but more the Art department, was really quite strong. All of the students from all three of those Departments took the same common freshman level basic design course. It was taught by a faculty member in the Art department, so there was a common base of understanding, at least at a fundamental level, of what is art and design that all students in that College shared. As a result of that, the connections that I started to see and understand at a deeper level about landscape architecture as art were becoming more clear to me.

The other important aspect of that particular experience from those three years was the LA Department Head at the time, William H. Snyder, a very accomplished artist. He was quite good in several media including painting and sculpture, most definitely an artist, and he was also an expert in plant materials and the artistic and design use of plant materials in the expression of art in the landscape. This was something that I had minimal exposure to in my experience in LAEP. Again, it came in through planting design and basic design studios, but it was not an emphasis during my MLA program. I came from a background in sciences that was reinforced in my design and planning education in LAEP, and then when I got to the University of Idaho a whole new world of art and the landscape was revealed to me.

The other aspect is that Moscow, Idaho, at the time - I don't know now, I haven't been there in many years - was very much an artistic community. A lot of artistic and very creative people, very avant-garde and “outside of the box” people were in Moscow, Idaho. I gravitated to those folks right away because they were interesting, fun, creative, and enjoyable to be around. I made great friends that I still have to this day.

This is where my eyes were opened to the artistic aspect of landscape architecture. I think that I mentioned in one of the documents I submitted to you that when I came back to USU I brought that understanding and appreciation for the art of landscape
architecture with me, and one of the things I think is most obvious about that is the “Landscape Architect/Artist Speaker Series” I was able to initiate by getting some substantial grant money from the Marie Eccles Caine Foundation. The speaker series went on for several years and we brought several different landscape architects who were known as artists, and we brought artists who were known for working in the landscape, for example Robert Irwin, Peter Walker, George Hargreaves, Martha Schwartz, Kathryn Gustafson, and several other big name landscape architect artists.

I suppose the other aspect of it is with my emphasis in trying to understand landscape scenic beauty, it escapes me now how I did not have a fuller appreciation for the art of landscape architecture while a graduate student, except to say that my approach, and the standard approach, to accessing, analyzing, and managing scenic beauty throughout the years has been a much more empirical data based, defensible, procedural process approach. In other words the Bureau of Land Management, the Forest Service, those agencies have projects that must be approved or not approved or amended, and they need some kind of a data based approach to understanding scenic beauty. That is where I focused, but I also started to understand the perceptual aspects when I started to work with Stephen and Rachel Kaplan at the University of Michigan. They assisted me when I was doing my Master's Thesis. Everything I did following that thesis, throughout my career, my understanding of the art of landscape architecture, became more and more prominent in my appreciation for what this profession is and can be.

AS: You mentioned your Master's Thesis. I was wondering if we could spend some time on that. You bring it up as one of your most important research projects that you did, and also the association with the Kaplans. I am wondering if you can elaborate more on how it came about and was developed?

JE: I consider it to be a very pivotal point in my career. It was definitely, at the time the most important piece of research I had ever done, it was the first piece of research I had ever done, but I look back across what I have done since and it is still if not the most important. It set the foundation and path for me in my understanding of what research
in landscape architecture really could be. I was in the third year of the graduate program, and we were on the quarter system at that time. I honestly don't recall if it was the winter or spring quarter, I think it was the spring quarter of that year, and I was doing a directed study. I think it was with Craig Johnson, it may have been with another faculty as well, I am not sure. I pretty much designed the directed study project myself because I had discovered in the course of the previous year or two this whole area of landscape visual analysis, which had been unknown to me before getting into landscape architecture. Anyway, I designed an independent study that involved a visual resources inventory of the Cutler Reservoir, which is in the bottom of Cache Valley, just a few miles from where we sit now in the Logan Library. It’s important to note it was only an inventory of the existing visual resources, using a bio-physical approach as developed initially by R. Burton Litton at the University of California Berkeley. That inventory was later included as an appendix in my MLA master’s thesis. Chapter One of the resultant report, titled “A Visual Resource Inventory of Cutler Reservoir and Its Tributary Streams, Cache County, Utah, June 1980”, includes reference to a trip I took with Mr. Litton to the Cutler Reservoir on May 17, 1979 (therefore it was the Spring quarter of that year). Mr. Litton was on campus as a guest speaker. He offered many helpful comments and I appreciated his valuable assistance. I recall feeling very fortunate to interact with one of the most prominent landscape architects involved in landscape visual resource analysis of the time.

The genesis of the directed study, and my master’s thesis that grew out of it, started when Craig Johnson had given an assignment in one of my MLA courses that involved a canoe trip down through the Cutler reservoir marsh in Cache Valley, and I was fascinated by that wetland. I worked that first assignment into the independent study I just spoke about, which used one method of landscape visual assessment at the time (Litton’s), which was to designate on a map what were called visual units, which were areas that were visually similar based on bio-physical attributes. For example, there are areas of Cutler Reservoir where the Little Bear River and the Bear River flow into the reservoir, and I included those tributaries of the reservoir for a few miles as they flow
into the reservoir. Those were different visual units, they had different characteristics in terms of attributes such as scale, width of corridor, spatial definition, meander pattern, enclosure, visual focus, etc., a whole range of bio-physical variables that were used. Then you get into the reservoir itself and it is much more open, but in some places it is like a maze, and that is a different visual unit than the open areas. The Little Bear River corridor is a different visual unit, because of its spatial, physical, and other bio-physical characteristics.

During that directed study I mapped those visual units. It was a lot of Spring field work canoeing around in the marsh taking photographs, and I thought, what more could you ask of a career or research project than getting outside on a beautiful Spring day and seeing the birds and mountains and landscape. It was really great, but it was also invigorating intellectually, because this was something that I had not thought about in such a detailed and analytical way before. Everybody appreciates beautiful places, and everyone says that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder“(which I always told my future classes was the biggest lie ever perpetrated on the American public). Beauty is not in the eye of the beholder, in the sense that people think the way you, Aaron, see beauty in the landscape is different from the way I see it, when in fact we see and understand and interpret landscape scenic beauty almost always exactly the same, and all the research has shown this time after time. People still use that ridiculous phrase, but however, I am getting off track here.

I completed this inventory of the visual units of Cutler reservoir during that Spring quarter. At that point I was out of money (personally) and I needed to get a paying job. So, I went to work for a local engineering firm for a year. I did not have my degree completed, had not started on a thesis per se, and I thought maybe I would take what I had done so far and expand it into my master’s thesis. I had continued to research other aspects of visual analysis, including perceptual approaches which ask how do we perceive the landscape and what does it mean to us, the way that Stephen and Rachel Kaplan, environmental psychologists at the University of Michigan, had been going
about it. I thought, "I don't think anyone has ever compared this kind of biophysical approach to understanding visual aspects of the landscape to a perceptual approach." So I thought that I would just put those things together in this one place that I had already started to study, and do some respondent surveys and see if I could make sense out of which one of these methods works best for understanding landscape visual resources, or what is the relationship between the two approaches, etc. This level of complexity was above and beyond what was expected of any master's thesis, and if you ask any graduate student that studied under my guidance while I was a faculty member they would say, "The thesis Ellsworth encouraged me to do was much more difficult, much more involved than anything he ever did!" and that was probably true in some cases, because I demanded deep inquiry in the theses I supervised.

That piece of research, my thesis, became very significant. It was very significant in the eyes of Stephen and Rachel Kaplan, who at the time were my heroes. I just worshipped the ground those two walked on, and when they started quoting my thesis in their published work it was the highest compliment. It was well received in other venues by researchers who were doing similar kinds of visual analysis procedures, and indeed confirmed, at the time, no one had ever compared a biophysical versus a perceptual approach to the landscape. It just seemed you could do it one way or another way, but nobody had a clue there was a quantifiable as well as qualitative relationship between the two. Indeed that piece of research, what I learned from it, and what I learned about how to think about doing research continued throughout the rest of career to the point that at the end of my academic career I was still doing those types of approaches. I have always been interested in these kind of relationships, i.e. this is the way group "A" approaches an objective or design problem, and here is how group “B” has traditionally done it. I have always wanted to know what if you put the two together? What is the relationship between those two? What is the result of a deeper understanding of the relationship of diverse approaches to posing a question or approaching a design and planning challenge?
That has been a theme that has echoes throughout much of what I have done since. I have always been interested in mined land rehabilitation. I have become interested in wildfire and its effect on scenery, as shown in my on-going repeat photography research in Yellowstone National Park after and since the 1988 wildfires. I have made many presentations, for example, to surface mining conferences, and to wildfire management conferences, and to other conferences that are generally considered not within the landscape architecture “box”. But for me, that is what makes it interesting. I have always wanted to go outside the box of those areas that interest me, to take what I know and try to apply it to those areas, and then tell those folks about it, either in a professional consulting project, or as an academic research exercise, and communicate that through reports and professional conference presentations, book chapters, and etc., to say, "have you guys (who aren't landscape architects) thought about this, and if not please do and tell me, what do you think?" That approach, that framework of responding to my own intellectual curiosity, all goes back to my master's thesis.

AS: You also taught research methods, and research was sort of coming on line in landscape architecture at that time and it hadn't been as prevalent. What did you see in the LAEP department as far as research was concerned, as far as the acceptance or rejection of this new type of research that wasn't just applied professional practice?

JE: That is a really good question and is something that I did not mention in the documents previously submitted. When I came into the Department, "research" was not well defined in the landscape architecture profession, not even by academic practitioners. You could look at the way a chemist does research or the way a historian does research or the way anyone in the physical or natural sciences and even in the social sciences does it. They have accepted protocols, methodologies, and standards they used to conduct their research. Landscape architecture did not have those, and, quite frankly, still does not have those aspects well-defined. We pick and choose from all of those different areas. We have to be natural scientists, we have to be designers, we have to be artists, we have to be engineers, we have to be sociologists, we have to be (fill in the
Landscape architects tried to be a little bit of everything, even in our approaches to conducting research. When I taught the graduate level research methods course, LAEP 6890, I would use a handout from Landscape Architecture magazine. It was a transcript of a discussion among the jurors for the 1989 ASLA awards, in the research category. I would have the students assume the roles of the various jurors, in a “reader’s theatre” format. It really brought home to them just how difficult it was to define “research” in landscape architecture, and how different the belief systems, based on professional background and education, can be related to that.

In terms of research methods or a research paradigm, landscape architecture really did not (and does not now) have “one”. We constantly borrow from other disciplines and their research paradigms. It makes sense when you realize some landscape architects do visual analysis and others do wildlife habitat enhancement and others do art in the landscape, therefore it is very difficult to come up with a paradigm for landscape architecture research. Perhaps the best criteria for a landscape architecture research paradigm that really makes sense is to say it must be rigorous, it must be explainable, it must be reviewable, and it must be repeatable, etc., those basic foundations of most research paradigms. If you apply that to someone in fisheries management, they are going to use sophisticated sampling and statistical procedures, all of which have been, for the most part, tried and trued and accepted, and they will come up with innovative approaches from time to time. Landscape architecture does not do that so much, and I think those criteria I just mentioned are really fundamental to doing any kind of research. You can have a creative activity, and creative activity does not necessarily have to be repeatable, it does not have to be something that someone else can review in some quantitative sense, and say this works or this doesn't work. For example, Bill Snyder, who I mentioned earlier from the University of Idaho, who was an incredible artist and landscape architect, and who, I would like to mention, just recently passed away. For the record, I was honored to have worked with the man. Snyder was so creative and was such an artist that it would have been inappropriate to try to repeat what he did or try to quantify it, or, even in some ways, qualitatively assess it, because,
as with much of art, one person will see it and say that they can see some value, but others may say that work is so similar to what has been done before, or is not innovative. There are all kind of criteria that can be applied to try to understand and value an artist’s creative expression, but there really is no “creative paradigm” for assessing creative work (that I know of).

This is part of what landscape architecture faces with “research”, and I really don't know if it will ever be resolved or if we should even be concerned about resolving it. A landscape architect who is a creative artist is able to bring their work forward and put it out there for public inspection, experience, and review. If they are successful in that way, and successful by whatever means or criteria the art and design community decides is successful, then that needs to be taken into consideration. It is difficult for this approach to thrive in a University sometimes, because Universities often like to quantify things. They like to say you have done well enough, or you need to do a little more. One shining example of how this barrier to assessing creative work can be overcome is the recent designation of Professor John Neely in the USU Art Department as USU Researcher of the Year, the first faculty artist so honored. Neely is a ceramics artist whose creativity, augmented by his almost empirical approach to understanding clay, glazing, and firing of ceramics has resulted in an international reputation for excellence and innovation. It was gratifying for me to hear of USU honoring his work in this way.

When I arrived in the LAEP department some faculty engaged in professional practice, and that was considered co-equal or on the same level as "research" (again, a term and concept not well defined in our profession). Given that we don't have a strong research paradigm in landscape architecture, given that creative expression and art is integral to the profession of landscape architecture, then you have to ask how does professional practice fit into that? I will just use my own professional practice as an example. I have been in private practice with my own company, Ellsworth and Associates, landscape architects, inc., doing visual analysis and visual simulation and analyzing visual research
with a variety of different methods, for twenty-five years now, since 1988. I can tell you at times what I do is more art than science, and at other times more science than art, but it is always professional practice of landscape architecture. The question becomes, does that professional practice qualify as an academic approach to research, does it qualify as research?

I came to LAEP from a background in natural and some social sciences. I thought I had some idea of what research was in botany, geology, and anthropology. I came here and people talked about research, and we would have guest speakers come in and talk about research. I remember one nationally prominent landscape architect gave a guest presentation once, and people were talking to him about research, and he said every time he does a project he does research. He had to research the soils, vegetation, laws and regulations, people and their behavior, etc. for every site he designed or planned. He considered that to be landscape architectural research.

At that time, that may have been a valid definition of landscape architecture research. When I heard that statement, coming from a science background, and that was in my first year or second year of graduate school, I remember sitting there and thinking, "That is not what anybody in the sciences, even the anthropological and social sciences would call research." I think we may still struggle with that in the academic practice of landscape architecture in some places, but we should not be struggling, because there is a line that can be drawn, however fuzzy, between professional practice and research. In order to do some professional practice, and to do it well, you have to conduct that kind of “research”. You have to do what could be easily considered research to find out what your client’s needs, wishes, and desires are, and to find out what methods might work, and what methods might not work, and what attributes of the site and it’s users are important and why. But for most landscape architecture projects, doing those kinds of investigations should not be considered “research” in the way scientists and scholars use the term.
Some firms definitely do what I would call research as they are undertaking their projects, especially the larger ones. One metric or test I would apply to it is do they present it for peer review and offer the product of the research beyond the confines of the project. If they are discovering something about how people perceive the landscape or about what is important to people in low income or urban areas, about how they interact with their landscape, and that is discovered within the context of the project, in my opinion, they should put that forward at professional conferences or in peer reviewed journals. Those opportunities are there and that might then constitute research.

It takes us back to the previous discussion you and I had, Aaron, coming into the room this morning before we started recording. It was very shortly after I took early retirement in 2009 that, due to new hires, half or more of the LAEP faculty now hold PhDs. This brings a level of research acumen that you don't find in someone with an MLA. I did not have that level of research training and experience. That is why I am so excited about having those PhDs on the faculty now. Research can really be done well now, at a level I always wanted and I did my best to make happen in my academic practice. I readily admit I did not have that PhD level of research skill. Most of what I learned about how to do good research came from experience doing research, or from a course taken here or there. I also read a lot of research and basically learned from what other people were doing. That is a fine way to learn, but it is not the same as formal training and education in research methods. And yet, I taught the LAEP MLA research methods class for several years. I think the reason is the faculty had confidence I possessed sufficient knowledge, understanding, and experience. I had the skills, abilities, fundamental knowledge, and experience to teach that course. On the other hand it was a one or two credit course when I taught it, and it was as much about how to write a thesis proposal as it was about research methods. I don't know what that course, or courses, involve now. I certainly hope it, or they, go into more depth regarding research paradigms and methodologies. I really look forward to when LAEP graduate students, like yourself, have that understanding of research methods and skills, and apply that in
your practice. Whether academic, public, or private practice, they will know how to apply their research methods and understanding to accomplish better landscape architecture work, and to share the results of that research in publications, conferences, and other venues and have it respected by researchers and practitioners in the hard, natural, and social sciences.

AS: I would like to talk more about visual resource analysis and simulation, and how that evolved over your career, and where it is going. This is your area.

JE: I first heard of this thing called visual resource analysis and management in the second year of my MLA program. In researching my records related to landscape visual analysis, I discovered the following from my course notes as an MLA student.

In the fall of 1978, my classmates and I enrolled in LAEP 610, the first of three studio courses that academic year with emphasis in regional planning.

The first few weeks of the course involved an exploration of the design implications and principles of regional planning through case study review. In mid-October we were assigned the class project, a team effort to complete one aspect of regional planning for all of Cache Valley. After much discussion, it was decided we would initiate a visual analysis of Cache Valley. I expressed particular interest in this, and was assigned the role of project leader.

As part of the annual faculty retreat (fishing trip to the Henry’s Fork of the Snake River near Island Park, Idaho), Carl Steinitz (Harvard) came to Logan to lecture (and fish). On October 17, Tuesday Carl Steinitz gave a lecture on “Visual Analysis”. He discussed using a 3 step approach:

First, based on the book Image of the City, identify important parts of Cache Valley using interviews/informants, paying attention to any differences in responses between natives v. transients. He suggested we read his paper in the July 1968 issue of AIP Journal.

Second, he suggested we design the interviews to use a simple scale with endpoints of “like” and “dislike” (not unlike Kaplans’ preference scale). He suggested the sorting of polaroid photographs that typify near views of one “thing”, then map and compare responses.

Third, he suggested we identify and map areas visually exposed from the main roads, with everything else “hatched in”, and overlay the two.

As project leader, I took the initiative to explore additional methods of visual analysis. I researched in depth the US Forest Service Visual Management System (VMS). Shortly after the 17th, I made a detailed presentation on the VMS system to my classmates, including handouts. We decided to use the VMS system for our project, primarily because it had been implemented
for several years on a number of projects (therefore validated to some degree), the steps in the method were clearly defined, and it was designed for large areas of land similar in scale to Cache Valley. With that decision, we were on our own to pursue the project.

On November 8, we were visited by Mr. Rich Hagan, then a landscape architect with the US Forest Service. He discussed in detail the application of the VMS system for timber harvesting, surface mining, and wildlife management, stating each of these topics would be the subject of additional VMS “chapters” in the coming year.

On November 10 we determined the final form of our VMS-based visual resource inventory and decided this would be the focus of our work given the short amount of time remaining in the quarter. We completed the project, however we knew we had only scratched the surface of this thing called visual analysis. My interest in the topic was undiminished, although with the end of the quarter, the holidays, and the impending fresh start on a new quarter only a few days away, there was little time to consider it further. That remained the case, until the next quarter when Mr. Reed Stalder and Mr. Stewart Jacobsen gave their presentation on the BLM Visual Resource Management system and it’s near-revelatory effect on me (see below).

As it turned out, Rich Hagan became a trusted and valued professional colleague twenty years later. By then, he had transferred from the Forest Service to BLM and was actively involved with the BLM National Training Center in Phoenix. I had already spent a good deal of time during those intervening years working with Reed Stalder in the BLM Salt Lake City office, so when Rich asked Reed who might help with the design and delivery of a Visual Resource Simulation course at the NTC, Reed suggested me. Rich and I talked over the phone, and with my upcoming sabbatical in 1999-2000, agreed I would spend a substantial portion of it designing, developing, and delivering the course for BLM. As I looked back over my notes from LAEP 610, there were only a few lines noting Hagan’s presentation to our class, and frankly I don’t remember it at all. Yet, we met again in 1999 and worked together developing the Visual Resource Simulation course. I continued to work with Rich for another decade until his retirement. I am pleased to say we developed a lasting friendship based on mutual interests, respect, and shared personal values. It was a sad day when Rich passed away on November 15, 2011 at the age of 72, at home in Littleton, Colorado surrounded by family.

Regarding Reed Stalder, landscape architect with the Bureau of Land Management, he came into one of our classes in the winter quarter of 1979 and gave a presentation on the BLM Visual Resource Management program. The VRM program was established in
1977. It was a direct result of the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the federal law that mandated the environmental considerations of projects on federal land be assessed and evaluated. The result was environmental assessments (EA) and environmental impact statements (EIS), which we continue to do on projects on federal land today.

These experiences with Reed Stalder, Stew Jacobsen, and Rich Hagan were my first introductions to the concepts and specifics of landscape visual analysis. Indeed, three of the four paradigms identified by Zube, et al were part and parcel of the VMS and VRM systems, i.e. expert, psychophysical, and cognitive. I would later appreciate the fourth paradigm, experiential, as well. (Zube, Sell, and Taylor. “Landscape Perception: Research, Application and Theory”, 1982, Landscape Planning 9:1-33)

Over the course of my career, I got to know Reed really well. He passed away in 2007. It was a great loss to landscape architecture in Utah and the Intermountain region. Reed Stalder was a fine man, a very dedicated landscape architect, and the nicest guy you could ever meet.

On that day in my class, Reed gave his presentation about Visual Resource Management. I was in the audience and I thought, “this is what I got into landscape architecture for!” At that time, as I mentioned, the BLM VRM program had just been instituted, in 1977. There had been a draft of it since 1975, I have all of those early documents now, and that is why I know this so well, and I used to lecture on this. In 1977 I started graduate school, so VRM was a brand new program, and had not been used very much. I started to investigate it. I was consumed with my other standard LAEP courses, and then in the spring of my third year, I started the directed study of Cutler Reservoir’s visual units using a biophysical approach to visual analysis, and the VRM process was influential. After that I discovered the perceptual preference approach, which the Kaplans pioneered. That was the progression of my learning about visual resources analysis from about 1977 through 1982. Visual analysis is really a discipline within landscape architecture for the most part and as I mentioned largely a result of
NEPA. Visual impacts by a project were often necessary to consider, but projects didn't require it until NEPA. Landscape architects would work it into the analysis when it was necessary, but after NEPA and VRM a whole new area of practice was opened up for those landscape architects in federal services and consultants. Suddenly, all of these projects for oil and gas development, mining, timber harvesting, road design and construction, oil and gas development, whatever the project was on any federally administered lands, Forest Service, BLM, etc, had to address aesthetic (visual) resources. NEPA refers to aesthetics, and that became visual impact analysis. This was a whole new area of landscape architecture professional practice. I was right there at the right time, and jumped into it fully. It is what I was interested in. Everything in my life up to that point, growing up adjacent to a National Park, enjoying beautiful landscapes in the Ozark and Ouachita mountains of Arkansas, backpacking and mountaineering, fishing, hunting, photography, traveling; experiencing, appreciating, and understanding landscape scenic beauty became the focus of my career.

In terms of how visual analysis has changed through the years, there was a very dynamic period between the mid 1970s through the mid 1980s, and that is really when I cut my teeth on this. The BLM VRM was more of a cookbook manual on how to do it. The Forest Service had another approach called the Visual Management System (VMS), which later in the 1990’s was changed to the Scenery Management System (SMS). They took a somewhat different approach. There were geologists, sociologists, psychologists, all kinds of people assessing and managing scenic resources. Some people had been involved in it previously in the 1950s and 1960s. R. Burton Litton at the University of California Berkley did some really important work in the 1960s that led up to how the Forest Service and BLM designed their initial systems. The mid 1970s to the mid 1980s were very exciting and dynamic for those of us trying to find methods that worked. There was a landmark conference at Incline Village (near Lake Tahoe), Nevada in 1979 called “Our National Landscape: A Conference on Applied Techniques for Analysis and Management of the Visual Resource”. Don Andberg, another LAEP MLA student and I attended that conference, having little idea what we would learn. It turned out to be
the most important and influential conference on visual resources up to that time or since. The proceedings were over 700 pages, filled with state-of-the-art papers covering an incredible variety of considerations and approaches to understanding and managing landscape scenic resources. Attending that conference was an amazingly valuable experience, as it was focused to a great extent on managing visual resources on public lands and NEPA through both research and application. I was able to see and meet the most influential people in visual resources research, including Litton and many others. So, during those years there was not only a mandate from NEPA to manage visual resources, but also we as landscape architects were inherently predisposed to be interested in this. Landscape architects, if you go back to the English landscape designers of old, have been trying to figure out what is pretty and what is not, what is beautiful and what is not. For example, does it matter if you experience a winding path or a straight path, and why? If you see a bend in the path, are you intrigued you may discover something new (Kaplan’s “mystery”)? It is all very basic in human perception, but now we had a mandate to understand it all in a way that could be explained, and repeated, and managed defensibly. In that decade, it was all incredibly dynamic, exciting, and invigorating. It was absolutely the best time to be a landscape architect (and student) interested in these issues.

During that time, from the third year of my MLA to the time I really started to work on my thesis a year later, I did a lot of literature research. I developed a bibliography of publications related to visual resources assessment and management. That bibliography was 1,200 (one thousand two hundred) published references that I had put together with complete citations, and I had read most of them. That was far beyond what any MLA graduate student should ever think about doing but I was just so fascinated with it all. It is part of my personality to over-achieve just a bit. That bibliography consisted of 1,200 3”x5” index cards (paper) with multiple keywords for each reference and a brief synopsis/abstract for most. The LAEP department assigned a work study student to type all of those 1,200 cards into a digital file on an Apple II+ desktop computer using a software program called “PFS: Personal Filing System”. I still have that bibliography on 5
1/4 inch floppy disks, as well as printed out in multiple copies. My point is that even at that point in time, 1980, I was able to identify 1,200 published references that, if not exclusively, then in some relevant way, shape, or form addressed scenic beauty in the landscape. No one had done anything like that before, and I wanted to publish it but couldn’t figure out how or where (I had no funding and there was no internet yet). Besides, I had a masters thesis to complete so I could get a job and pay back my student loans!

After that, landscape architects and environmental psychologists (the other major group investigating these issues) became more and more involved with trying to understand how to assess visual resources. Who knows how many related publications there are now, tens of thousands probably. After the mid 1980s and into the 1990s, there was a lull in new and innovative approaches to visual resources analysis and management. Through the 1970s into the 1980s many of us were investigating a lot of different approaches, and some really good work was being done by a lot of highly skilled people. That work set the foundation that we skated on through the 1990s and even up until today. There are some standard procedures, approaches that allow some innovation and some creativity, but there is not nearly the dynamic enthusiasm and excitement that there was during those days. I should qualify that statement just a bit. I was a young aspiring professional at the time. When I found 1,200 references they were all new to me. I don't know how many people out there were already familiar with that information and would have laughed at me and said, "Come on Ellsworth, we already know all of this stuff!" I doubt very many, but I think most people who have been involved with visual analysis these past thirty years would agree with me at least in terms of that tidal wave of enthusiasm in the 1970s and 1980s.

**AS:** Visual resource analysis was really the center of your research, how did that translate into the classroom? How was visual resource analysis brought into the program?

**JE:** I think that was one of the reasons the faculty hired me in the first place. They knew my interest in visual resource analysis and management. My level of intense enthusiasm
and interest in that particular area did not exist on the faculty at that time. They also knew I did really well in the construction classes as a student and as a teaching assistant, and Vern Budge needed a break from teaching those courses. He had been teaching construction for many years. I had taught construction at the University of Idaho, and Vern knew I had been a really good student and I had some very good experience working for the US Forest Service and the Colorado Division of Highways. So, I believe there were a number of factors that came into play as to why I was hired. In terms of visual analysis in the classroom, or in the curriculum, obviously I was at the center of it. I think the faculty also understood that visual analysis, because of NEPA and everything that was going on public lands, was going to continue to become more and more important. I integrated my skills and knowledge of visual analysis into the curriculum in the Spring quarter senior year fairly soon after being hired as faculty, I’m not sure of the exact year.

AS: I know that I have a date on that somewhere.

JE: I taught a course in visual analysis and management systems and approaches for a number of years to senior students. At one point, it was an entire quarter of teaching that subject, and when we transitioned to semester, I may have actually taught it for an entire semester, I am not sure about that. In the later years it was in the spring semester of senior year. The first half of that semester Craig Johnson taught the students about wildlife management planning, and the second half I taught them about visual resources analysis. This worked well because my section was late in the Spring and we could do fieldtrips, get outside. The down side of it was they were graduating seniors, more interested in graduating and finding jobs, and they knew if they did well in the first half of that course but did poorly in my second half they were still going to graduate. I always had several students that really enjoyed analyzing and managing visual resources in a systematic way, and yet had never heard about it until they got into my class. I would look in their eyes and see a similar enthusiasm as I had when I was a student and first discovering it. I am still in touch with many of those students. They are out in their
own practice, academic, private, or public and I will hear from them from time to time. That has been one of the greatest joys of being a faculty member, those former students who continue to communicate with me and share their progress, and especially when they pursue careers related to visual resource analysis and management.

I also brought visual analysis into graduate studies. There were several graduate theses that had some aspect of visual analysis, and to my knowledge I was always the chair of those committees. Those students were attracted to visual analysis as a major focus of their thesis study area either because they were inherently interested in it, or they knew I always had another thesis project or idea with a focus on visual analysis. If they couldn't figure out a thesis, they knew if they came to me I would likely have one for them. I kept a file folder in my office drawer labeled “thesis topics”. Every time I thought of another research question about visual analysis, I wrote it on a scrap of paper and put it in that file folder. I had dozens and dozens of thesis topics just waiting for some student to walk in the room and say, "Geez, John, you seem to know a lot about this, and I guess it is kind of interesting. I don't have a thesis, do you have anything I could do?" I would pull out that file folder and say, "You just look these over and tell me what interests you then we will put a thesis together."

That was a great joy for me because it would advance the state of the art and knowledge of my area of professional interest.

AS: The next question is kind of a transitional question. You mentioned quite a bit about technology in your draft answers, and also as it relates to visual resource analysis, what were the tools of the trade and how did those change?

JE: In the document you are referencing, I talk about when I was a graduate student the technology was mainframe computers and card readers. You probably don't even know what those are, Aaron. Card readers scan these little cards that are about 2" by 6", just these little beige punch cards. There is a special machine that punches holes in them that represent one piece of digital data, one bit of information. We would need tall
stacks of these cards just to make one simple map. You would have a stack of cards that could be three, four feet high that would have to be passed through a card reader machine. It would ram them through very quickly, similar to the machines that count dollar bills. Somebody had to sit at a keypunch machine, like a typewriter, and put one card at a time and hit the keys for one piece of data and then put another card in. It had a feeder, I guess, that put the cards through, but someone would have to sit there and do that. It was just incredibly tedious. For my master's thesis, I still have the cards used to run the statistical analysis. That was 1982.

At about that same time the desktop computer was just hitting the market. I think the first IBM machine was sold on the open market in 1981, and the first (and second) Apple computer was pretty similar, marketed in 1976 and 1977. The first Apple machine that was really consumer quality and kind of the “everyman” machine was the Apple II, and then the Apple II+. In 1982, after I had finished my thesis and gone on to the University of Idaho, I had bought an Apple II+ computer, but it was not capable of doing any of the research tasks I wanted. It was a great little word processor, and I had a very compact dot matrix thermal printer that went along with it, they called it a Style Writer. I could word process then print out my syllabi for my courses at the University of Idaho, for example, and then I would hand it to the secretary and she could run copies on the mimeograph machine. I don't know if you know what that is, it's an old style copy machine.

Shortly thereafter, desktop computers became more popular, affordable, and useful, able to do more than basic word processing. When I was at the University of Idaho from 1982 to 1985, I was the only person on the faculty who knew anything about computers. Bill Snyder was an artist, the other two faculty were skilled landscape architects but they did not know anything about computers. I walked onto campus with my own personal desktop computer. They looked at that and said, "You need to teach the students about this. We understand that computers are going to be important for landscape architects soon, you need to show the students how to use these." So I taught ad hoc non-credit
seminars on how to use an Apple II+ computer to do things related to landscape architecture. I think most of them just wanted to see how these incredibly small computers worked. So I would show them the basics.

When I joined the LAEP faculty in 1985, there had been quite a bit of progress in terms of the available technology and its capability. The Macintosh came out in 1984 which was very exciting. It had a graphic user interface, a mouse, and was actually capable of generating graphics by moving the mouse and seeing the image change immediately on the screen. This was revolutionary. I purchased the first Mac when it came out. I immediately sold it to a friend because he really wanted one and there was a long waiting list. I wish I had kept that machine. When I joined the USU faculty in 1985, John Nicholson was also very interested in desktop computers. John and I became, at least in the LAEP world, the two computer guys. John was the planner and I was the landscape architect which worked out pretty well. John and I worked together in getting grants and convincing University administrators and people holding the purse strings to equip what were called the “micro-computer labs”. There were just one or two such labs on campus, where a student or faculty member could access and use desktop computers. Most were IBM machines, but a few were Apple Macs, and those were there primarily because John and I, and Alan Hashimoto in the Art Department, had enough influence to get funding; they were the good graphics machines. I should mention here that Alan Hashimoto, who passed away at a young age in February of 2013, was an outstanding colleague, as was John Nicholson who passed away at a young age in July of 2010. We all worked together on computer issues, helping to acquire literally hundreds of thousands of dollars of graphic computer equipment, desktop computers, that were graphically capable and excellent. The three of us were very pleased to help secure reliable access to desktop computers for USU LAEP and Art departments’ faculty, staff, and students.

In the following years, access to desktop computers changed the way things were done in our courses. Many of our faculty struggled with computer technology. John and I
embraced it whole-heartedly. Then (and this is very significant) as a result of one LAAB accreditation review, probably around 1988 but I’m not sure of the date, we suddenly had a break-through. The lead person on that accreditation team was Jot Carpenter, landscape architecture faculty member from the Ohio State University. Jot was a very energetic and dynamic person who could get his way by sheer force of intense personality. He could get just about anything done, he was just fantastic. He came in as a member of that accreditation review team, walked through our studios, walked through our faculty offices, talked with John Nicholson and myself, and the rest of the faculty. Then he looked at John and me and said, “You guys need computers on your desks, every faculty member needs a computer on their desk!” We said, "That would be great, we have been trying to get that done for years!"

As the story goes, Jot walked (or stormed) into the USU President's office during the accreditation team exit interview (I so wish I had been there!), slammed his fist on the President's desk and said, "If you don't put a computer on every LAEP faculty members’ desk, you won’t have a landscape architecture department! These guys are going to get rolled over by every other school, and no students will come here!"

Within just a few weeks every one of our faculty had a box with a new Macintosh in it sitting on his or her office doorstep. It was just amazing! John and I were just ecstatic. We had already been using the Macs in the micro-computer lab (over in the University Reserve building and the Merrill Library) but our access was extremely limited by demand. Some of the faculty were unsure, saying things like, "I got a new doorstop, what do I do with this thing?" It became incumbent on John and me to assist the faculty in figuring out their new desktop computer, how they could make it work for them in teaching and research. John and I were happy to do it, and pretty much all of the faculty were able to integrate the new computer into what they did eventually, although there were many challenges. For example, one was applying computer aided design, AutoCAD, and some of the other CAD programs. These programs were very difficult, hard and time consuming to learn, not user friendly, and constantly changing. I had little
interest in learning how to do construction drawings with a computer that basically showed different colors of lines on the screen, and really didn't look like any drawing I was interested in working on. AutoCAD, from my point of view was not a good tool for design, and I think a lot of the faculty would have agreed. It was very different to design on a CAD system than it was on paper. CAD is getting better, but in my experience it is not there yet in terms of user-friendliness and intuitive interface, and it’s been a half century since the first CAD systems were created.

You asked about visualization. The imaging, the graphic applications on desktop computers were fantastic, wonderful. Those were the applications people like myself and Nicholson, and some of the other faculty were really excited about. It took a long time for computers to become well integrated within the faculty. I have not been on campus for almost five years, but when I was there in 2009, computers were still a challenge for some of the faculty. If a faculty member needed a digital base map, most faculty would think that should be assigned to someone else, not to a professor with ten to thirty years of experience, essentially asking them to become a CAD draftsman. That is not efficient, that is not smart, and faculty understood that. It took a while for us to realize that. I advised faculty, "Look, the students are all pretty into this, they love this stuff. Get yourself a teaching assistant with CAD skills, and tell them what you want them to do. They’ll draw it up, it won’t take much time at all, and it will be just fine." It took a while for that to happen. Does that answer your question?

AS: That really starts to transition towards other stuff.

JE: I had one other thing I wanted to mention, in terms of visual simulation technology. I got very interested in this from that first lecture Reed Stalder gave on the BLM’s Visual Resource Management System. The BLM had a machine, I think it was called the Technovate Simulator. I think Technovate was the name of the company. It was a series of four overhead projectors (for 8.5”x11” transparent sheets) in one machine. The projectors were lined up side by side in a row. Each of the four flat panel overhead projectors had a series of mirrors that would project the image from each onto one
central mirror assembly that would then project the composite image onto a projection screen or onto the room wall. On the first overhead projector there might be a base map, the second overhead projector could have a mylar transparency that had soil conditions. On the third one you could have vegetative conditions, and on the fourth one slope categories. You could put one map onto each one of the four projectors and this thing would capture all four light displays and then focus them on the wall, and you would have a composite image. You could switch mylar transparencies of various land status maps, if you wanted to. You could make any composite map you wanted.

The BLM landscape architects discovered this machine and said, "Wow, visual simulation!" They would take a picture of a landscape and make a colored transparency of it, and put it on one of the overhead displays. Then they would take a photograph of the proposed change for that landscape as it had been constructed on another site - maybe it was a mine or a series of power lines or a new road, or whatever - and then they would cut and crop to reproduce, for example, just the road itself. They would make a Mylar of it and put it on the second display. If they had to add power lines, they would do the same thing, and put that on the third display. Sometimes they would just sketch the proposed change with a Sharpie pen on one of the mylar sheets. They could do this and create on the wall this amazing composite visual simulation showing existing site with new proposed road and powerlines, all of which could be switched with other conditions just by removing one (or more) transparency and replacing with another one. This was really incredible in 1977, 1978! No more hand drawing and sketching, but actual on-the-fly compositing of imagery without having to use darkroom photographic techniques.

BLM used this technology to understand how the visual landscape was going to change, and how to measure that change. If we made the road five feet wider, we could do an overlay showing that and we could compare a road twenty feet wide versus fifteen feet wide. Or if it is a different type of power pole we could show that ... is it wood, or metal, or anodized steel, or what other options are available? You could just switch out mylars.
and build this composite visual simulation as you go. BLM landscape architects thought this was fantastic, and it was. However, at the time I was on the faculty, desktop computers were starting to become capable of doing similar things digitally on the computer monitor, much faster and with a much higher degree of realism.

Reed Stalder called me one day, probably in the late 1980s or early 1990s, after I had started to do visual simulation with pre-Photoshop graphics programs (TrueVision Image Processing Software, see discussion following) - and I would like to talk about that briefly in just a minute – anyway, Reed called me one day and said, "John, you are really doing a lot of this visual simulation stuff."

And I said, "I am really enjoying it Reed, and it is your fault, because you are the one that introduced me to all of this!"

He said, "You know, John, we have this Technovate simulator here at the State BLM office in Salt Lake City. We really don't use it anymore, do you think if we gave it to the University you guys could use it?"

I knew our desktop computers had already advanced far beyond the capabilities of the Technovate machine, but I was not about to say “no” to Reed. so I said, "That would be great, Reed! Thank you!"

So I drove to Salt Lake City, picked it up, and brought it back to LAEP. I think I used it once or twice, but mostly it sat in a spare storage room off the graduate studio for probably twenty years. Every time I would see it, I would think, "That is where it all started, my interest in visual simulation, with that composite overhead projector display system."

I got involved in the computer technology before there was Photoshop. There was a piece of software made by AT&T, called Truevision Image Processing Software (T.I.P.S.). Brian Orland at the University of Illinois had discovered this stuff. Brian was one of the first academics to apply computer technology to visual simulation. He was the real leader in this, and I was just a couple of steps behind Brian, and got to know him pretty
well as a result. Truevision Image Processing Software ran on an IBM machine and did what the first version of Photoshop, introduced later, started to do, but Truevision did it better until Photoshop about version 3 or 4. AT&T Truevision Image Processing Software was way ahead of its time. It was fantastic for what we wanted to do with digital visual simulation.

I contacted someone who was selling these systems in Denver, Colorado. I asked how much one of these systems cost. The system involved an IBM 286 machine. The 286 was a very slow processor, one of the earliest in a desktop computer. It involved a large graphics tablet with a corded pen, SummaGraphics was the brand, a really good graphics tablet. It also involved an RGB video camera with an attachment on the front of the lens for 35mm slide capture through the RGB digital camera. That image would be sent digitally into the IBM machine and result in a color digital file that the Truevision Image Processing Software could actually manipulate. This was amazing to be able to do this. We didn't have scanners, we had RGB cameras that were really quite good, but low resolution, basically screen resolution, 72 dpi.

I was a young faculty member, I think this was 1987 or 88, and I called up the vendor in Denver and asked, "What would it take to get into this?".

I was told they could probably get me a complete system for $30,000.

$30,000 was more than my annual salary (way more)! There was no way I could afford it. I met the vendor at a conference, and was told, "OK John, we think when you start doing this as a landscape architect it is going to open up a new market. We will sell you a used demo system for $12,000."

That was only about half of my salary. Where was I going to get $12,000? From my Dad. I called him up and I said this is what I want to do, this is going to make a huge impact (I may have said something like “this is going to make me rich and famous”, I’m not sure). He sent me $12,000, and said, "Go for it!"
That got me started. I used that system for several years, and if you go on my website, ellsworthandassociates.com, you will see some of the simulations that I did with that original system. Because they were screen resolution, I can still use them as basic examples. I actually still have that system. It is sitting in a corner in the basement in my home.

A few years after that, Photoshop came out, in 1993 or 1994 as I recall. All of a sudden here was this piece of software that, even though it was expensive, would run on any Mac or IBM machine. Color scanners were coming into the market at that time, so you didn't have to spend money on a dedicated RGB camera. You could get a really sophisticated system capable of doing the kinds of digital visual simulations we needed. I continued to use the Truevision system in my consulting, but at the same time the University bought the computers for the micro-computer labs, and Jot Carpenter got computers on all of our faculty desks. I started doing visual simulation in private practice on my projects, and I started doing it in my classes, and showing students how it could be done, and teaching it to them as well. My private practice and academic practice were complimented by the common factor of visual simulation and visual resource analysis. That is how that particular aspect of our profession, visual analysis and simulation, came into being in the LAEP Department.

AS: The next great story to be told in regard to technology is your involvement in distance education. What was the genesis of the idea? How did that start to formulate?

JE: I was at that time technologically savvy in terms of imaging, and computer applications. In terms of distance education, about the year 2000 I developed my first online course. I think the real motivating force was the advent of the private online university model, for example the University of Phoenix, highly controversial in their approach to University education. In terms of being able to deliver an education virtually, the University of Phoenix was really a force to be reckoned with, because traditional universities looked at them and said, "These private universities are liable to put us out of business. If you can get your education online without having to quit your job and leave your home to
go to Logan and USU, this could be a real problem for USU. A lot of university people at that time were saying, "We have to figure out how to marginalize this online thing." because they really didn't want to get involved in it. They saw it as a threat rather than an opportunity. In reality it was huge opportunity. Some of us in the various departments’ faculty saw it as an opportunity. I saw it as an opportunity, along with the people in Continuing Education at the University, later called Distance Education, which was a politically smart move on their part.

Some time in the late 1990’s some people in Distance Education at USU really started to facilitate the design of online courses. I knew some of those people, in particular Kevin Reeve (still at USU) and Eddie Loo (now at University of Wisconsin Extension). They were associated with Distance Education and also with what used to be called the Faculty Assistance Center for Teaching (FACT). Eddie was fantastic! He really understood online and distance education, and what it could become. I took a couple of courses in the College of Education with Mimi Recker, and I think she is still there. Mimi was really knowledgeable about distance and online education. I audited a couple of classes from her in the design of online courses. I thought online education is fantastic, and the way it is going there will be no reason you couldn't deliver a significant portion, if not all, of a landscape architectural degree education online. At that time, the whole idea of Skype types of interactions were brand new. We did not have the bandwidth on a common basis throughout the country, or the world, to truly make that work well. It was clear it wasn't going to take long, that we were going that way. I took those courses from Mimi, and I was fascinated with the approaches advocated by Kevin and Eddie. They were all for my idea of an online MLA degree, and they said that they would love to see me put it together. They wanted to see as many online courses come on board as possible. Their goal was to have the USU administration accept online education as an opportunity, not a threat.

Ann Williams was an outstanding MLA graduate student at that time. I chaired her thesis committee. The thesis was a survey of landscape architecture departments to
find out what if anything they were doing with online and distance education. The second part of her thesis was assisting me in the design and development of the first online LAEP course, LAEP 1030 Introduction to Landscape Architecture, which I had been teaching face to face for several years. We designed this course, and like everything, just put our heart and soul into it. We did all kinds of videos. I always had an introductory video. In one of them I was talking in front of the fountain in front of the Taggart Student Center. Another was on the bench looking out over the valley. Another I was fly fishing in the Blacksmith Fork River. I was trying to make this an involving course, and these were the introductory videos. It was a very rich course, because Ann and I were trying to use all of the available technologies and all of the available approaches to a blended course delivery. We had discussion forums, and we had canned lectures that the students would go through online. We had email connection so they could email either myself or Ann at anytime they had questions. The course was wildly successful. The students loved it. It never had a lot of students, because online education was just not that well known at the time. It was still new. I always had fifteen to thirty students, and that worked very well for student involvement. I always had a really good core of students. I delivered that course two or three times a year, as I recall. Ann assisted me in the first couple deliveries, then she graduated and pursued her own career in private and academic practice. That course was often praised by the people in Distance Education.

Karen Hannah was the Department Head from 1999 to 2002. Karen was all for distance education. She was very supportive. It was during that time, it must have been 2000, that Ann and I put together the 1030 course and started to deliver it. Then one summer, and it was probably the summer of 2001, Carlos Licon, who is on the faculty now, was a visiting adjunct faculty. Carlos was interested in distance education, and was pretty technological savvy. I wrote a grant and received some funding to employ myself, Carlos, and Ann Williams that summer to put together an entire online curriculum for the delivery of the second professional Masters degree. I don't know if that degree program is still on the books in LAEP. For many years we offered a three-year MLA
program for students from non-landscape architecture or non-design degree backgrounds, and a two-year MLA degree for people who already had a BLA degree. We rarely had many students in the two-year program. We would have one, two, or maybe three at any time. I looked at that and I thought, you know, somebody who already has their BLA degree doesn’t need the basic graphics courses, they don’t need the design courses, none of the traditional studio courses. Really what they need are the graduate level courses that deal with their area of interest, and with research methods, and maybe large scale planning, and of course guidance in a thesis. So, the three of us designed a complete second professional BLA online degree curriculum. It is a document three inches thick that has an entire curriculum with every course described with a syllabus and how it would be delivered online, the justification for the online delivery that primarily Ann and Carlos did, in order to set the foundation for why and how that online degree could actually work. That is all in the document. We were ready, I was ready to kick that into high gear immediately and launch that online degree program. I presented it to Karen Hanna, and she was excited and supportive. Then, unexpectedly Karen left USU to become Dean at Cal Poly Pomona, and from then on the support for LAEP distance education diminished. The two-year Advanced Professional MLA degree online was not implemented.

AS: It caught me off guard when I read [about the online MLA], because it made, personally, so much sense. Like you said, someone who has already had the BLA, already been in the studio experience, anyways, really innovative. My wife did her Masters online through the University of Idaho.

JE: In all fairness, some of the reasons it was hard for people to get behind that online degree, was online education was brand new. I was the only one in the Department involved with it. The idea of never seeing your students face to face, or seeing them rarely was not easy for studio-based faculty to understand. As I said, we had very few students involved in that face to face two year MLA program, it was off everyone’s radar
screen. I believed the power of the concept of an online MLA degree, and the quality of the document we produced, should have triumphed, however it was not to be.

AS: The private, and academic side. You were very involved in ALSA. I was wondering if we can talk about that relationship?

JE: I joined ALSA in 1982. It seemed like the smart thing to do. There was not a big emphasis on ASLA when I was a student, few of the faculty were members. I saw ASLA as an opportunity to become more involved in the profession and with my fellow professionals, as a way to network and meet new people. I had just finished my thesis, and I wanted to tell people about this visual analysis stuff that I was starting to understand more and more about, and ASLA annual meetings, and such, were a way to accomplish that. I have been a continuous member of ASLA since 1982, and in 2004, based on two factors, I was inducted as a Fellow of ASLA. Those two factors were my work in visual analysis and visual simulation, and also online distance education. In 2004 there were few other landscape architecture courses online when Ann and I designed and delivered the 1030 course. It may have been the first fully online landscape architecture course.

I continued my involvement with ASLA at the University of Idaho, where I advised the ASLA student chapter. I am pretty sure I was the only member of ASLA among the three faculty members there. I have always seen real advantages to being a member of ASLA. It is a way to have an impact. You can make change in how the profession operates, and what is important in landscape architecture as a profession, by being involved in ASLA. I have made changes in this profession at the state, regional, and national levels by my participation in ASLA. To interact with colleagues, have an influence on them, and be part of the planning of the annual meetings of the State Chapter, as well as the National meetings, and to give presentations at the National meeting, I was having an impact. People were coming to my presentations, coming to the meetings I helped organize.

This is so appropriate, today is November 22, 2013, fifty years since President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. His most famous line in his only inaugural speech was, "Ask
not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country!" I borrowed that line frequently as an ASLA member. When people, especially students, would ask why they should join ASLA, and what would they would get out of it. I would say, "Ask not what ASLA can do for you, ask what you can do for ASLA!" It was trite, but surprisingly effective.

They would look at me like that was cute, and they would ask, "What do you mean by that?"

I would say, "What I mean is you can change the way landscape architecture is practiced, and you can have an influence on how landscape architects think, and what they think is important, by being involved in ASLA. If your only goal is to send in your dues and sit back and wait for something from ASLA to arrive on your doorstep in the mail, I would say don't join ASLA. But if you want to get involved in your profession, and you want to have an impact, and you want to be networked with some pretty sharp people doing some pretty interesting research and practice, then you should join ASLA, and you should contribute to it and you should help build it, because that is our professional society."

That was always my attitude, and I don't recall when I did the little twist on Kennedy's phrase, but that is how I always thought about it. It is true of anything. Any organization you join, or any profession you engage in, or anything you do, if your objective is to find out what is in it for you, that's important, but if your objective is to give more than you get then you are going to get a lot more out of it in every aspect. If there is one thing I would always try to impress on a student, the more you put into this, the more you are going to get out of it. It is true.

AS: A couple of last points that I wanted to go over. The placement of the Department, College wise, has been an issue. It has been an issue through its whole existence, but it has had some flash points in the last couple of decades. What is your opinion of those decisions, and you mentioned that, while you weren't on the faculty during this recent switch to Ag, where do you think the Department should be within the University.
JE: When I was a graduate student, and the entire time I was on the faculty, LAEP was in the College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences. There were real advantages to that. We were considered a premiere department in that College. We were not considered the ugly stepchild of a College of Architecture or Agriculture or any other College. In Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, LAEP had status and we were well respected. It was also very interesting to be in that College because we were considered one of the humanities, and landscape architecture is one of the humanities. Of course, it is also one of the sciences; we have strength in our diversity.

I think most landscape architecture departments around the country (I saw some research on this at some point in the past so I don't know how current this is now), but most of them are in Colleges of Agriculture. That is a historical artifact, because they started from horticulture or plant science in many cases. Landscape architecture was mostly about plants, and here at USU, when Laval Morris brought landscape architecture from BYU to USU, he was, as Bill Snyder used to say, an excellent plantsman. I had never heard that phrase before Bill Snyder. What is a plantsman? Someone who really knows plants, a horticulturalist that also understands design, and those were the professionals who started many of the landscape architecture academic programs around the country. You probably know this better than I do, Aaron, where was the Department when Laval Morris and Burt Taylor were here?

AS: It was still in Ag until...

JE: It was in Ag, wasn't it?

AS: It has gone full circle. Soon thereafter it went into what was then HASS.

JE: I read Susan Crook's thesis and the Department 50th anniversary book that came out for the 50th anniversary celebration. For some reason or another we went from Agriculture to HASS, and then more recently, 2010 or 2011 I believe it was, right after I retired, we went back into Agriculture. There were always undertones from time to time about maybe we would be better positioned in the College of Agriculture, or maybe it would
be better if we were in the College of Natural Resources. There was a time in the late 1990’s when the idea of going to the College of Natural Resources was seriously considered. It was a huge concern to many of us on the faculty. Most people on the faculty did not like the idea of going to the College of Natural Resources. Many of us were of a similar mind on this. As I said, we had a lot of autonomy and respect in HASS. We were one of the premier departments. In the College of Natural Resources it was not going to be that way. If we were over there with Forestry and Wildlife, those were the established Natural Resources College departments, and we could have integrated with them well, I am sure, but we would definitely not have enjoyed the same premiere status we had in HASS.

There were other things that were going on within the Department when that discussion was going on. There was a lot of tension among the faculty in the Department at that time, and I will leave it at that. We worked through that. In 2010, 2011, whichever it was, after Sean Michael came on as Department Head, the discussion started coming up again if LAEP should move to a different College. I think the central administration thought there could be efficiencies realized, and of course the Caine College of the Arts was being formed from HASS, so that precipitated the discussion about the best location for LAEP, I believe. Sean shared emails with me when this discussion was going on, and I found it interesting, but I was moving on to other things at that time, and wasn’t concerning myself with it because I was confident they would make a good decision. I believe they did. Moving back to the College of Agriculture was smart. If there is one College on the USU campus that is absolutely secure against recession, politics, decommissioning, or just about anything else, it is the College of Agriculture. USU is an agricultural school, agriculture is always going to be important in this state, and is always going to be a major recipient of federal dollars and support and research. It should strengthen the LAEP department to be under the umbrella of the College of Agriculture.
AS: That is the end of my follow up questions from your draft interview response. Is there anything else that you would like to add? It was a lot.

JE: You have another 30 or so pages to transcribe right there!

AS: I would like to thank you for allowing me to interview you, and I have enjoyed talking, and that will be the end of recording.
QUESTIONS: The History of the Department of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning
Alumni Oral History Questions (30-60 minute Short Format)

1. What is your full name? When and where were you born? Where did you live as a child?

   John Carroll Ellsworth
   1953, Hot Springs, Arkansas
   I lived with my biological mother, father, and older brother in a comfortable bungalow family home built by my great-uncle in 1905.

2. How did you become interested in landscape architecture? Were there any particular social trends or events that caused you to become more interested in landscape architecture?

   My home was just a few blocks from the edge of Hot Springs National Park, which most people considered to be one and the same with the city. I was very aware of the National Park Service every day growing up and this influenced my interest in all things related to nature and people. In undergraduate school at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville I studied botany, geology, and anthropology. In my last year I became aware of the profession of landscape architecture during a conversation with a fellow student, saw the natural fit with my undergraduate degree. I applied to graduate schools around the country and was accepted at several including Utah State University. I decided to go to USU because it was in the mountains (nature) and I was an avid rock climber and backpacker and angler. The LAEP department also had a reputation as a natural resources oriented program and that fit my interests.

   In the 1970’s there was a television public service announcement showing surface mining in the western US as one aspect of how we were degrading our environment. This was very powerful to me and for some reason I identified with the surface mining. Participating in surface mine reclamation became a personal goal.

   I’m not sure why mining was so important. I was familiar with several mines in Arkansas but most were hard rock mines, not large surface mines. I knew about the large open pit and surface mines for coal in the great plains. Those TV images were very disturbing but also motivational as something I would enjoy working on (reclamation). The 1970’s were the beginnings of what became known as “the environmental movement” and I was deeply motivated and involved. I was one of the initiators of an outdoor education and participation program at the University of Arkansas through the Arkansas Union (student union) programs office. I chaired the “Outdoor Recreation Committee”, students interested and skilled in activities such as canoeing, backpacking, rock climbing. I taught classes in these topics, led backpacking and rock climbing trips in various areas in the Ozark and Ouachita National Forests, and canoeing trips on the Buffalo National River and other rivers and streams. We also sponsored environmental education programs, the most significant of which was “Environmental Awareness Week” which was several days of speakers and programs in the Arkansas Union. This would have been around 1974-77 (completed degree requirements December 1976, degree awarded class of 1977).

   I also had a friend majoring in horticulture who told me about landscape architecture as a major. There was no such program at the University of Arkansas at that time, although they initiated one a short time later. I
spoke with the one Landscape Architect on the horticulture faculty, Dr. Al Einert, and based on that discussion and what my friend had to say about it, I decided to apply for graduate schools in landscape architecture. It’s important to note I didn’t have a deep understanding of landscape architecture, but USU was in the west, where those surface mines were, and the LAEP department literature indicated an emphasis on natural resources, so I thought it would be a good place to go. Looking back, I’m amazed at how I made that critical decision based on relatively little information and research. I graduated with a degree in “Natural Science”, but my only job offer upon graduation was for $7,000 per year cruising timber with Weyerhauser Corporation that had a significant presence in central Arkansas. So, I thought graduate school in a more marketable field was the way to go, and I thought my BA in Natural Science was good preparation for a landscape architecture graduate degree (and at USU, it was).

3. How did you become interested in the landscape architecture program at USU?

See the discussion above.

4. Do you feel there were specific emphases in the Department during your time as a student?

Yes, emphasis on natural resources and management of the same. There was a strong connection with the College of Natural Resources, and I took several courses there, including mined land rehabilitation, range plants, principles of range management (all related to my interest in mined land rehabilitation, obviously), and also courses in environmental perception from Dr. Richard Schreyer. Rich held a PhD from the University of Michigan where he had studied with Stephen and Rachel Kaplan, both of whom turned out to be critical mentors in my thesis research.

Otherwise, the LAEP department provided a solid foundation in fundamental LA skills, critical analysis, and site design. I was able to apply that knowledge to what became my driving and passionate interest, visual analysis and management of landscape scenic resources especially as applied to drastically disturbed landscapes, such as surface mines, highways, oil and gas development, etc. So, my early interests, from childhood and into undergraduate school, in nature, people, wildness (national parks, backpacking, climbing, etc.) were satisfied with the education I selected and received at USU LAEP.

5. What landscape architecture trends were prominent during your education?

Large-scale planning (as articulated by Ian McHarg in Design with Nature), and natural resources management were important new directions for landscape architecture. Other more traditional areas of the profession were of little interest to me, so I was less familiar with what was going on with, for example, landscape architecture as art. That changed once I became a faculty member in the College of Art and Architecture at the University of Idaho, and I carried those new-found interests back with me when I joined the faculty at USU in 1985.

Landscape architecture was a fast-growing and changing profession in the 1970’s for several reasons, most significantly the “environmental movement” including all of the contemporary environmental laws such as the Wilderness Act, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Forest Land Management and Policy Act (FLPMA), the 1977 Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA) which mandated reclamation of surface coal mines, and many others.

6. How would you describe the makeup of the student body in LAEP?

The student body was mostly non-resident, about 80% as I recall. Non-resident tuition was inexpensive and there were a lot of us throughout USU.
Most of the students were typical baby boom generation: 18-22 years old undergraduates, 22-27 years old graduates; more males than females (60/40?); a smaller percentage of more mature students (30’s – 60’s).

Also, there were many international students in LAEP from a variety of countries: Iran, Philippines, France come to mind, and plenty of others.

The social life of LAEP students was invigorating. We studied together, partied together, skied and hiked the mountains together, bicycled all around Cache Valley together, laughed and sometimes cried together after jury critiques. I liked most of my fellow students very much and made life-long friends with many of them. It was a wonderful time with wonderful people in a stunningly beautiful place.

7. How would you describe the studio and classroom atmosphere?

It was a very dynamic, open academic environment where students often questioned the faculty vigorously and most of the faculty appreciated the interactions. We were all very excited about landscape architecture and the potential to fit our values and goals, and the faculty were of similar minds for the most part.

8. What LAEP projects figure prominently in your education?

The ones I recall were the grading and drainage class (Vern Budge instructor) for the new-at-the-time Logan Regional Hospital. It was a very challenging project and we learned a lot from it. The planting design projects were, for the most part, interesting and integrated a lot of the fundamentals of landscape architectural design with an emphasis on the design qualities and considerations of plantings (Craig Johnson instructor). I pursued several “directed studies” projects, which were for 1 or 2 credits, designed by myself. One was a study of the SMCRA law and its implications for landscape architectural applications to surface mine rehabilitation. This was of great benefit to me, as I became an “expert” on that law. Another directed study was the start of a visual analysis of Cutler Reservoir in Cache County. This project became the basis for my Master’s thesis research, which became my pivotal academic work and laid the foundation for the rest of my entire academic, public, and private practice career.

9. What classes or professors were most influential in your career?

The most influential courses were grading and drainage (1st year) and third year site planning and design. In the latter course, we had a different faculty member every 2 or 3 weeks with very different projects. It was stimulating and fresh, a good course.

The most influential aspect of all of our courses at the time was the fact that the non-LA background graduate students (most of us including me) had to take undergraduate level courses but many of those were taught to us in separate sections, so that only grad students were in our lectures and studios, while the same lectures and studios were delivered to undergrads at completely different times. This was, I later realized when I became a faculty member, incredibly hard on the faculty and they are to be praised for this.

I hesitate to single out specific faculty as particularly influential. There was a core of young faculty who were demographic peers and had gone through school together (undergraduate and graduate) – Vern Budge, Craig Johnson, Jerry Fuhriman all attended University of Illinois MLA program and graduated in succession over three years. This interpersonal dynamic was very effective in presenting a shared message to the students as to what Landscape Architecture was all about. Other faculty became part of this core in the 1970’s (Richard Toth, John Nicholson, Gere Smith, Michael Timmons, and Larry Wegkamp, along with some other part-time and short-term faculty). For many years, for the most part and on most issues, these eight faculty composed a solid cadre of like-minded and dedicated faculty. These core faculty were critical to the success of the LAEP department in those years.
10. Outside of regular classroom and studio work, what were some of the activities that you recall the program being involved in, such as competitions, fieldtrips, BBQs, etc?

“LAEP Week” was the big event, in the Spring, when faculty and students came together for 3 or 4 days of shared picnics, sporting events (track, volleyball, others), movie night (“The Fountainhead” was a favorite), and guest speakers especially successful alumni.

Field trips were an important part of many courses, with real world project sites to be visited, analyzed, and “clients” to be interviewed. This was an amazing educational tool for me, coming from a science background with no experience with this kind of project-based design education.

11. How was design taught? What role did design juries play in your education and professional development?

Most of the “design” courses were really about various aspects of site planning, such as recreation, residential, planting design, or large-scale planning and design. There was a “design theory” course but graduate students did not have to take it, a concession to our otherwise packed quarter-system schedules. In retrospect, it would have been good to take that course, but the standard set of courses in the first year of graduate school was overwhelming and there simply wasn’t time for another course.

Juries were very important. They were dynamic, sometimes aggressive and abrasive, no-holds-barred affairs, again a very different method of learning for me. We often had guest critics who were not shy about expressing their opinions. Plus, other students from all levels of undergraduate and graduate study would attend and participate in the critique.

12. How were technological advances used in your education? What role did computers play in your education?

I started my MLA program in the fall of 1977. Computers were mainframe machines, not desktop and certainly not lap-tops or tablets or handheld devices. The only time we used computers was for the regional planning courses, using two software programs called “GRID” and “IMGRID” which few of us really understood very well. These produced incredibly crude maps of site analysis variables (such as slope, soils, vegetation cover) by printing various text characters onto a sheet of paper. In other words, the areas of steep slopes might be shown by the letter “R” repeated line by line, and buildable soils by the letter “O”. Very crude, but the concept of overlay maps to facilitate design and planning was powerful (a la McHarg). It was in 1969 that Ian McHarg, landscape architect, published Design With Nature (the beginnings of overlay mapping for design and planning) and Jack Dangermond, landscape architect, founded Environmental Systems Research Institute (the beginnings of computer-based GIS for design and planning). Some of the MLA and MS (Planning) students I studied with went on to work for ESRI and some were quite successful.

I finished my coursework in 1980, took a year off, and finished my thesis in 1982. That same year I bought my first desktop computer, an Apple II+, for around $2,000. I used it for several years, including in my first faculty position at the University of Idaho from 1982-85. I was the only member of the U of I landscape architecture faculty who knew anything at all about computers (mainframe or desktop), so I became the “computer expert” for the department and was well regarded by the students for being technologically savvy.

So, bottom line, the year I graduated with my MLA was, coincidentally, the year the desktop computer became user friendly, and started to make an impact on design and planning education and practice. It was a very significant time that few of us understood well, myself included (some of those who did went on to be very successful).

13. How would you describe the Department of LAEP's reputation while you attended?
It was highly regarded regionally and nationally. The core faculty worked hard to establish and maintain a great reputation. By the 1970’s and 1980’s, the vast majority of the landscape architects in the federal land management agencies (US Forest Service, BLM, National Park Service) were LAEP graduates. It’s important to understand that the very inexpensive USU non-resident tuition at the time was a critical factor in this reputation, attracting bright students from all over the country and indeed the world.

14. What connections existed between the Department of LAEP and the landscape architecture community as a whole?

LAEP had great relationships with the federal land management agencies. The faculty also had good connections to private sector practice, through their professional consulting, colleagues from the time they were in school, and also through the growing number of LAEP alumni who stayed in touch with the LAEP department. It is important to note that Joe Porter, Don Ensign, and others who established Design Workshop were early alumni and their influence through the years, all the way to today, cannot be overstated.

15. What types of jobs were available to graduates from the Department? What were your career goals upon graduating from the program?

It was a very good time to be a landscape architect. Overall, in those years Federal agencies were hiring, indeed the US Forest Service employed more landscape architects than any other private or public agency in the country, probably in the world, well over 400 as I recall. The baby boomers (including myself) were coming of age and energizing everything about society, culture, environment, design, and economy. It’s important to note, however, that the year I received my MLA degree, 1982, was a national recession year and there were some hard economic times, but the recovery was fairly rapid.

My initial career goal, when starting graduate school, was to work in a natural resources related position, such as with the US Forest Service, National Park Service, or BLM. I knew almost nothing about BLM until moving to Utah. In 1979 I attended a guest presentation by Mr. Stewart Jacobsen and Mr. Reed Stalder, landscape architects with BLM (cf “InSites 1979”, LAEP newsletter, on the department website). I recall Reed’s description of the BLM Visual Resource Management (VRM) System. I had been exposed to the US Forest Service Visual Management System the previous quarter (see discussion elsewhere). Stalder and Jacobsen’s enthusiasm caught fire with my own predisposed love of beauty in the natural landscape. My eyes were opened and I knew then why I was studying to become a landscape architect and what I would do with my career. It was in my second year of graduate school, when I was employed as a teaching assistant in 5 different courses, that I knew I also wanted to be a University professor. I combined these two goals, visual resources analysis and teaching/research, into my life’s career in academia (University of Idaho and Utah State University), public practice (US Forest Service seasonal appointment as a landscape architect, and also with Colorado Division of Highways doing land rehabilitation on Interstate 70 through Glenwood Canyon), and private practice consulting through my own company Ellsworth and Associates, landscape architects, inc. established in 1988.

16. Are there any stories or anecdotes about your time at LAEP that you would like to share?

See previous comments.
QUESTIONS: The History of the Department of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning
Faculty Oral History Questions (2 hour Long Formant)

1. What is your full name? When and where were you born? Where did you live as a child? What are your prominent memories about your childhood and early years that you feel influenced your decision to eventually become a landscape architect?

John Carroll Ellsworth
1953, Hot Springs, Arkansas

I lived with my biological mother, father, and older brother in a comfortable bungalow family home built by my great-uncle in 1905.

I had the proverbial happy childhood. I spent many hours roaming the woods and mountains behind my home, by myself and with my grade school friends. A creek flowed from the national park mountain past my front yard. I spent a lot of time in that creek, catching minnows, water dogs (salamanders), crawdads (crayfish), and anything else that crawled (surprisingly I don’t recall ever encountering a snake even though there were several species, several poisonous, that lived in those woods and along that creek). My mother would also take me, my brother, and some of our friends and their mother(s) to the Gulpha Gorge creek at the Hot Springs National Park campground of the same name. In reality this was just on the other side of the mountain where we lived, but in my young mind it was a major expedition to pack up the family car, drive there (10 minutes), and have great fun catching crawdads in that creek. Later, six months after I graduated from the University of Arkansas with a degree in Natural Science, at age 24 I would be a seasonal National Park Ranger in that very campground, checking visitors into their campsites and interpreting the natural environment and history for them as needed.

I enjoyed reading, especially the children’s natural history books by Thornton W. Burgess. His stories of Jimmy Skunk, Prickly Porky, Old Man Coyote, Sammy Jay, Jerry Muskrat, and many other animals fascinated me. I would spend hours on my bed with those books, gazing out the windows at the woods and mountains surrounding my backyard. Then, I would set out exploring those natural areas (especially the creek running in front of our house) looking for those same animals, finding some of them and many others indigenous to the area. Our mixed hardwoods and coniferous forests and creeks were the real embodiment of the nature Burgess exalted in his books.

I also spent three summers at a camp called Brookhill Ranch (still in existence today). It was the first years of that camp, and a very personalized experience. Don and Hettie Lou Brooks and their two young sons Tim and Rodney set up the camp as a working ranch experience with horseback riding, archery, .22 caliber rifle target shooting, singing, acting in plays, hay wagon rides, and lots of other fun things. It was idyllic. In my second and third summers I was a “junior counselor”, which meant I helped with the bus rides from town to the ranch (about 20 miles away), helped teach horseback riding and archery, and performed other duties as needed. Of note, I was pretty good with a bow and arrow, and became Arkansas state champion in the “junior men’s” division of Field Archery when I was about 12 years old. We slept in screened bunk houses, about six to eight kids to a bunkhouse, with boys in one group of bunkhouses and girls in another, properly located some distance apart to avoid any late night adolescent philandering. It was here that I became enamored of being outdoors all the time, especially sleeping for weeks at a time in those open-air
bunkhouses.

I also spent a good deal of my time as an adolescent in the autumn hunting with my brother, father and his friends and their sons. We hunted birds mostly – ducks of various species, mourning doves, and bob-white quail. Hunting taught me how to read a landscape, how to see the landscape and pay attention to the spaces, objects, and movements and patterns within it. These skills would serve me well later in College where I became an avid and accomplished backpacker, rock climber, and canoeist as well as bird watcher (not just hunter).

These were my formative years, and my experiences along those childhood creeks, at Brookhill Ranch, hunting, backpacking, fishing, hunting, and the other outdoor activities were the foundation upon which much of my later desire to learn and teach about natural landscapes was established.

2. How did you become interested in landscape architecture? Were there any particular social trends or events that caused you to become more interested in landscape architecture?

My home was just a few blocks from the edge of Hot Springs National Park, which most people considered to be one and the same with the city. I was very aware of the National Park Service every day growing up and this influenced my interest in all things related to nature and people. In undergraduate school at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville I studied botany, geology, and anthropology. In my last year I became aware of the profession of landscape architecture during a conversation with a fellow student, saw the natural fit with my undergraduate degree. I applied to graduate schools around the country and was accepted at several including Utah State University. I decided to go to USU because it was in the mountains (nature) and I was an avid rock climber and backpacker and angler. The LAEP department also had a reputation as a natural resources oriented program and that fit my interests.

In the 1970’s there was a television public service announcement showing surface mining in the western US as one aspect of how we were degrading our environment. This was very powerful to me and for some reason I identified with the surface mining. Participating in surface mine reclamation became a personal goal.

I’m not sure why mining was so important. I was familiar with several mines in Arkansas but most were hard rock mines, not large surface mines. I knew about the large open pit and surface mines for coal in the great plains. Those TV images were very disturbing but also motivational as something I would enjoy working on (reclamation). The 1970’s were the beginnings of what became known as “the environmental movement” and I was deeply motivated and involved. I was one of the initiators of an outdoor education and participation program at the University of Arkansas through the Arkansas Union (student union) programs office. I chaired the “Outdoor Recreation Committee”, students interested and skilled in activities such as canoeing, backpacking, rock climbing. I taught classes in these topics, led backpacking and rock climbing trips in various areas in the Ozark and Ouachita National Forests, and canoeing trips on the Buffalo National River and other rivers and streams. We also sponsored environmental education programs, the most significant of which was “Environmental Awareness Week” which was several days of speakers and programs in the Arkansas Union. This would have been around 1974-77 (completed degree requirements December 1976, degree awarded class of 1977).

I also had a friend majoring in horticulture who told me about landscape architecture as a major. There was no such program at the University of Arkansas at that time, although they initiated one a short time later. I spoke with the one Landscape Architect on the horticulture faculty, Dr. Al Einert, and based on that discussion and what my friend had to say about it, I decided to apply for graduate schools in landscape architecture. It’s important to note I didn’t have a deep understanding of landscape architecture, but USU was in the west, where those surface mines were, and the LAEP department literature indicated an emphasis on natural resources, so I thought it would be a good place to go. Looking back, I’m amazed at how I made
that critical decision based on relatively little information and research. I graduated with a degree in “Natural Science”, but my only job offer upon graduation was for $7,000 per year cruising timber with Weyerhauser Corporation that had a significant present in central Arkansas. So, I thought graduate school in a more marketable field was the way to go, and I thought my BA in Natural Science was good preparation for a landscape architecture graduate degree (and at USU, it was).

3. What is your professional education? Where did you attend university? What was the emphasis of the program? What goals did you set for yourself upon graduation?

I received a BA degree in Natural Science from the University of Arkansas in 1977. It was a mixture of botany, geology, and anthropology with a smattering of other courses. My freshman year was at Centenary College of Louisiana in Shreveport (didn’t like it there), then three and a half years at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville.

As mentioned previously, I first heard about landscape architecture from a friend in undergraduate school (see details in previous question). So, I decided to pursue an MLA degree.

At USU, the emphasis was on natural resources and management of the same. There was a strong connection with the College of Natural Resources, and I took several courses there, including mined land rehabilitation, range plants, principles of range management (all related to my interest in mined land rehabilitation, obviously), and also courses in environmental perception from Dr. Richard Schreyer. Rich held a PhD from the University of Michigan where he had studied with Stephen and Rachel Kaplan, both of whom turned out to be critical mentors in my thesis research.

Otherwise, the LAEP department program provided a solid foundation in fundamental LA skills, critical analysis, and site design. I was able to apply that knowledge to what became my driving and passionate interest, visual analysis and management of landscape scenic resources (especially as applied to drastically disturbed landscapes, such as mines, highways, oil and gas, etc.). So, my early interests, from childhood and into undergraduate school, in nature, people, wildness (national parks, backpacking, climbing, etc.) were satisfied with the education I selected and received at USU LAEP.

My initial career goal, when starting graduate school, was to work in a natural resources related position, such as with the US Forest Service, National Park Service, or BLM. I knew almost nothing about BLM until moving to Utah. In 1979 I attended a guest presentation by Mr. Stewart Jacobsen and Mr. Reed Stalder, landscape architects with BLM (cf “InSites 1979”, LAEP newsletter, on the department website). I recall Reed’s description of the BLM Visual Resource Management (VRM) System. I had been exposed to the US Forest Service Visual Management System the previous quarter (see discussion elsewhere). Stalder and Jacobsen’s enthusiasm caught fire with my own predisposed love of beauty in the natural landscape. My eyes were opened and I knew then why I was studying to become a landscape architect and what I would do with my career. It was in my second year of graduate school, when I was employed as a teaching assistant in 5 different courses, that I knew I also wanted to be a University professor. I combined these two goals, visual resources analysis and teaching/research, into my life’s career in academia (University of Idaho and Utah State University), public practice (US Forest Service seasonal appointment as a landscape architect, and also with Colorado Division of Highways doing land rehabilitation on Interstate 70 through Glenwood Canyon), and private practice consulting through my own company Ellsworth and Associates, landscape architects, inc. established in 1988.

4. Did you work elsewhere prior to joining the LAEP faculty? Could you briefly discuss those experiences, and how they may have played into your decision to teach landscape architecture?
During graduate school, I was a seasonal landscape architect with the US Forest Service, Uinta National Forest, in Heber City, Utah during the summer of 1978. I worked with an LAEP undergraduate student, John Squire, who had worked there the preceding summer. We spent most of the summer re-designing the Lodgepole Campground including plane-table surveying. We had no landscape architect supervising our work, however Mr. Pat Thomas, USFS Landscape Architect did visit with us once or twice to explain plane-table surveying. He was the first federal service landscape architect I had ever met. It was a good summer spent outdoors in the Utah mountains most of the time. I also was on the “Heber Hot Shots” firefighting crew, and was called out on three Utah fires that summer. One was an all-nighter working side-by-side with the crew of inmates from the Utah state prison at Point of the Mountain, who called themselves “the Pink Flame-n-Goes” (a play on “Pink Flamingos”). That was a very interesting night, especially for the two or three young women on our crew who had the undivided if unwanted attention of every one of the Pink Flamingos.

During the summer after my second year of graduate school, 1979, I worked for the Colorado Division of Highways in Glenwood Springs on the construction of Interstate 70 through Glenwood Canyon. At the time, this was one of the most expensive highway projects ever undertaken, over $300 million with $20 million dedicated to landscape and site work. My supervisor was Jim J. Lance, landscape architect and LAEP alumnus from just a few years prior. At the time, I was becoming well-versed in many aspects of disturbed land rehabilitation, erosion control, and specifically mined lands and highways. I was very current on the research literature, and Jim appreciated my enthusiasm and knowledge. I was assigned several tasks throughout the summer including irrigation system maintenance, supervision of large equipment (Caterpillar D8K bulldozers) on shaping and sculpting of drainages that intersected the new highway and were bisected by it, record-keeping on the native plants experimental plots that were installed to test how well various plants would thrive when it would finally become time to install plants and seeds, and various other tasks Jim assigned. This was a very important summer for me, cementing my interest and commitment to the rehabilitation of drastically disturbed landscapes.

After my third year of graduate school (thesis not yet completed) I went to work as a landscape architect at Forsgren and Perkins Engineering (now Forsgren Associates) in their Logan office. There had been at least two LAEP MLA graduates employed there before me, Bruce Hinckley and Deborah Hollowell. I worked on several projects including a golf course in Utah (Mayflower) and another in southern California (Los Coyotes), a proposed small industrial park in North Logan, and a highway project in central Utah.

For a brief period of time in 1980 I worked on one or two projects for landscape architect Richard Rosine, owner of a small consulting firm called PDA Design Group (PDA).

I consulted very briefly for Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI) to the state of Utah Division of Oil, Gas, and Mining on data collection related to planning for proposed surface mining in the Alton coal field in southern Utah.

In the fall of 1982, thesis completed and MLA degree in hand, I searched for entry-level academic positions around the country, but there were few of interest. Late in July or early August, I contacted the BLA program at the University of Idaho and inquired regarding any open faculty positions. Paul Blanton, the Dean of the College of Art and Architecture told me they needed a full-time landscape architecture faculty member for the fast approaching academic year to serve in place of one of their three full-time faculty on a one year leave of absence (Dan Morabito). Blanton offered me the position and I accepted. I ended up spending three years replacing Morabito twice and James Kuska once, while each was on leave or sabbatical. In those three years I taught 13 different undergraduate courses, half of them twice, total of 19 course deliveries Young, enthusiastic, and new to teaching, these years were my trial by fire. In my second year, the landscape architecture students nominated me for the Teacher of the Year Award for the entire University.
The courses I taught included almost every one in the LA undergraduate curriculum except graphics, planting design, and basic design theory. Specific courses that come to mind included (semester system): site design sophomore, junior, senior years both semesters; grading and drainage; construction materials and methods I and II; history of landscape architecture; computer applications; and several others including some directed studies with landscape architecture students with special interests.

My three years at the U of I were a fantastic introduction to teaching (my appointments did not require research nor did I have the time!). My success was due in large part to my prior experience with five assignments as a teaching assistant at USU, my enthusiasm, the small class sizes (generally about 15 students per class), and my currency in many professional topics combined with my very recent practical experience (construction, grading and drainage, land rehabilitation, computer applications). My academic workdays were very long. Each time I taught a course it was my first or second delivery and very time consuming to prepare, but the experience was very important and deeply satisfying. I was active in the Christmas Holiday design extravaganza sponsored each year by the Moscow downtown merchants. I involved my students in this and many other civic events. I was the faculty advisor to the student chapter of ASLA as well. I enjoyed my students in those three years immensely, to this day remember almost all of them by name, and have stayed in touch with several over the last 30 years. It was the University of Idaho where I learned the fundamentals as well as the joys of effective teaching.

During the summers of 1983 and 1984 I stayed in Moscow, Idaho enjoying many new friends. There were many young adults like me, some very creative and exciting, many artists. This was a community very unlike Logan, and I took advantage of my new association with artists and architects to expand my own appreciation for those aspects of my life and profession.

5. How did you become involved with the Department of LAEP?

I completed my MLA degree from USU LAEP in 1982 so I knew the department very well. After my three years of nine-month appointments teaching in the landscape architecture department at the University of Idaho from 1982-85, I started again searching for another academic position. I applied and was selected for the internationally advertised Assistant Professor tenure-track position at USU LAEP, and started my appointment in the fall of 1982.

I did some research of my files from this time period, and discovered some documentation of my application and selection process for the position at that time.

I responded to the faculty position announcement advertised spring 1985. It stated:

“Position: One full-time, nine-month tenure-track position at the Instructor or Assistant Professor level (depending on qualifications), beginning September 1, 1985.

Qualifications: Master of Landscape Architecture or Bachelors of Landscape Architecture with a terminal professional degree in an allied field. The applicant must have a strong foundation in traditional areas of the discipline, including proven capabilities in design and site engineering as demonstrated by a professional portfolio. Expertise in computer technology related to landscape architecture is also desirable. Preference will be given to those applicants with teaching and/or professional experience, and exhibiting evidence of exemplary achievement in areas of research, publishing and/or public service.

Responsibilities: Teaching duties will include courses in landscape construction and other areas of the core curriculum in both the undergraduate and graduate programs, emphasizing applied classroom computer technology where appropriate. Other responsibilities include student advising, academic committees, and general program assignments. Research activities, public service, and professional practice are expected.
Salary: commensurate with qualifications, plus a substantial benefits program.”

On March 15, I mailed my resume and portfolio as my application for the position, noting I was in my third year as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Landscape Architecture at the University of Idaho. Following is my “Statement of Intent to Pursue Academic Practice of Landscape Architecture at Utah State University by John C. Ellsworth, ASLA”.

“Although my time at the University of Idaho has been valuable and enjoyable, my personal and career goals are not being met.

My personal goals are to live in an area that allows access to appropriate outdoor recreation. My favored recreational pursuits are mountaineering, skiing, hiking, bicycling, and related activities. At this point in my life, it is very important not only to advance my career but also to live in my preferred environment.

I am dedicated to the academic practice of landscape architecture. I was nominated by the students in the Landscape Architecture Department at the University of Idaho, on their own initiative, for the Outstanding Faculty Award for the entire University in 1984. I am very interested continuing my work in the areas of landscape assessment and disturbed land rehabilitation, particularly as applied to the semi-arid West, and in the applications of computers to Landscape Architecture, particularly in teaching and research.

I have experienced much success and personal satisfaction from teaching and research. I have begun to formulate a personal philosophy of the teaching-learning process, based on instructor enthusiasm and empathy, student involvement and interaction, subject matter relevance, and positive reinforcement. I believe a good educator must be knowledgeable and current in the subject matter, but more importantly he must be enthusiastic, perceptive, aware, and have a positive attitude. He must be able to communicate effectively with the students, empathize with them, and recognize meaning and learning as it occurs.

Successful research must be relevant, defensible, and clearly communicated. Landscape architectural research, in particular, should be innovative,integrative, and focused on the potentials of the profession. It must be scholarly and respectable to allied professionals. I am convinced that academic Landscape Architects must conduct respectable research in order to move the profession forward. I believe that the Doctor of Philosophy degree is essential to facilitating this forward movement and consequently, I plan to pursue that degree at some point in the future.

I would like very much to have the opportunity to continue my academic practice of Landscape Architecture.”

As part of my application, Mr. Paul L. Blanton, FAIA and Dean of the University of Idaho College of Art and Architecture, wrote the following reference letter on my behalf.

“Dear Sirs,

It gives me great pleasure to recommend Mr. John C. Ellsworth for a position on your faculty.

Professor Ellsworth has been teaching here at the University of Idaho in the Department of Landscape Architecture since 1982, and has filled several teaching positions while permanent faculty have been on leave of absence. He is a very dedicated, responsible, and creative professional. His standards are high and his student evaluations of his teaching have been excellent.

John is a creative designer and technician. He gives promise as a competent researcher, also, and is working on several grant proposals and papers. He has been instrumental in the organization, administration, and execution
of various field projects and works as the faculty advisor to the ASLA student chapter.

If the University of Idaho would have an additional faculty position added to the landscape program, Professor Ellsworth would be offered the position. It has been a real pleasure to have him work with us.

I strongly recommend John Ellsworth to your search committee.”

On April 30, 1985 at 8:00 am, I received a phone call from Craig Johnson, LAEP acting Department Head, offering me the position. Salary negotiations proceeded over the course of the next week, we arrived at a mutually agreeable number, and I accepted the offer of employment. On June 22, 1985, I received a letter from USU President Stanford Cazier stating, “The USU Institutional Council, at its meeting on 22 June 1985, approved your appointment as Assistant Professor in the Department of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning, College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, effective 9 September 1985 ...”.

6. What role were you hired to fill within the Department? How did that role evolve during your tenure at USU?

Assistant professor, tenure-track. I started out teaching mostly undergraduate courses including senior design studio, construction I (grading and drainage) and II (materials and methods, retaining walls, wood structures). Over the course of the 24 years of my appointment I also taught the freshman level Introduction to Landscape Architecture course, junior design studios, graduate level research methods, undergraduate thesis projects, graduate MLA thesis projects, and other courses.

My role evolved and changed in various ways, as would be expected over a 24-year career. Unchanging was my involvement as a classroom teacher and researcher with a myriad of responsibilities for student advising, committee work, and service (see below). I was directly involved in department administration as director of the graduate program for many years and with various administrative duties assigned by various department heads over the years. I was responsible for the administration of the numerous funded grants I received.

I served as chair or member of numerous masters thesis committees in LAEP and other departments.

I served on numerous promotion and tenure committees for faculty in departments of LAEP, theatre arts, art, College of Natural Resources, and other departments.

I served on the USU Faculty Senate from 1996-99 and as chair of the Committee on Committees from 1996-98.

See question 10 for discussion of my research.

My service activities were broad and varied. As one of the few faculty who were members of ASLA, I was happy to advise the student ASLA chapter for many years. I also served as advisor to the Zeta chapter (LAEP) of Sigma Lambda Alpha, the national honor society for landscape architecture. I initiated and secured funding for a major speaker series of Landscape Architect Artists that resulted in several world-class guest speakers including George Hargreaves, Martha Schwartz, Peter Walker, Robert Murase, Laurie Olin, Kathryn Gustafson, and Robert Irwin among others. My interest in this can be traced back to my time at the University of Idaho College of Art and Architecture and my involvement with the Moscow, Idaho Downtown Association artists.

I served on the Executive Committee of the Utah ASLA chapter as president-elect 1988, president 1989,
past-president 1990 and vice-president for education and licensure 2001-05. I was involved in many UASLA activities during this time, including the design and delivery of the first Utah review session for the Landscape Architecture Registration Exam (LARE) held in Ogden in the spring of 2003.

Other service activities included service on the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture Board of Directors as Region 2 Director from June 2005 – January 2009, chair of the CELA National Task Force on Online and Distance Education 2002-04, Utah representative to the ASLA national Partnership for the Advancement of Licensure (PAL) meetings in 2001 and 2002, and sole academic member of the BLM National Landscape Architects Leadership Team. I served on numerous USU committees through the years, too many to list, and was responsible solely or in part for hundreds of thousands of dollars dedicated to the acquisition of computer technology at USU specifically configured for computer aided design and planning for use by our students and faculty.

I was (and am) a licensed landscape architect by examination (Uniform National Exam, 1989). My initial license was in Idaho, followed by Utah, New Mexico, Wyoming, Montana, Oregon, and Colorado. I continue to maintain my licenses to this day as part of my professional consulting practice.

I served on the state of Utah Landscape Architects Licensing Board for two 4-year terms, July 2005 through June 2013. I was fully involved in all Board activities including representing the Board at the February 2006 spring meeting of the Council of Landscape Architectural Registration Boards. I served as chair of the Board from October 2010 through June 2013. During my final years on the Board, I led the Board through much of the process of establishing Continuing Education requirements as Rule (process started during the final year of Randall Boudrero’s term as chair). We solicited input from the public and current landscape architects through public notices and direct contact with the Utah chapter of ASLA. Drafts of the details of the proposed CE requirements were made available to UASLA and on one occasion a meeting was held with their executive committee, myself, and Richard Oborn the Bureau Manager representing the Utah Division of Occupational and Professional Licensing (DOPL) for the Landscape Architects Licensing Board. The success and almost total lack of controversy in this process was due to the diligence of the members of the Board and the involvement of the Utah ASLA chapter executive committee. I was also active in 1987-88 in the successful efforts to re-instate landscape architecture licensing in Utah and was instrumental in facilitating the appointment of academic practitioners on the Board, resulting in the appointments of Vern Budge, Michael Timmons, and myself over the next 24 years, as well as Greg Jolley (BYU academic practice landscape architect) in 2010.

I established and served as chair of the Utah ASLA Council of Fellows Advisory Board, 2008-12. This ad-hoc committee was composed of Utah’s current ASLA Fellows (myself, Jan Streifel, Leonard Grassli, David Racker). Our voluntary charge was to assist the UASLA Executive Committee in identifying prospective nominees for Fellow designation from the list of eligible as provided by ASLA national each year. We would review said list with the Executive Committee, then based on their recommendation contact the potential nominees, gauge their interest and willingness to be nominated, and assist each in putting together a nomination packet. Several promising candidates were identified during these years, however some were either unwilling or did not have the time to work on a nomination packet. The two nominees we did support were unfortunately not selected for Fellow status by ASLA national. The passing of Dave Racker on May 3, 2011, and the retirement of Leonard Grassli in 2012, left only Jan Streifel and myself on this committee, too few to constitute a viable committee therefore the ad-hoc committee was dissolved.

I received thirteen Utah ASLA Merit and Honor awards over the years in the categories of research, communication, and analysis and planning.

I was one of few faculty members in the history of LAEP to be elected Fellow of the American Society of Landscape Architects, inducted at the ASLA annual meeting in Salt Lake City in 2004. Previous faculty
honored with Fellow designation included Laval Morris, Kenji Shiozawa, and Karen Hanna.

Please refer to my curriculum vitae for a comprehensive list of teaching, research, and service activities.

7. What significant changes within the department (curricular, physical, etc.) did you witness or affect during the time you were on the faculty? Can you identify any pivotal moments in the history of the Department?

There were many changes over my 24 years. Departmental leadership changed many times, often resulting in the instatement of an existing faculty member as temporary department head while we conducted a national search for a new department head. These interim appointments made it challenging to maintain the focus of new initiatives in the department. There were core faculty, myself included by the time I had been on the faculty for several years, but the leadership position of department head is critical. The most significant change occurred when Karen Hanna was hired as department head. With all due respect to the achievements of the faculty up to that time, Hanna brought a new and innovative approach that rippled throughout the faculty and students. The changes were not fully supported by all, but in my estimation the path she set us on, toward new technologies, new programs, new faculty, and new innovations in education served the LAEP department very well.

Faculty numbers expanded from my arrival in 1985, while the student numbers remained relatively stable or dropped slightly during some years. This was a relief for the core faculty, however the expectations for funded and published research increased at an even faster pace. I had always been interested in research and publishing, so I was able to adapt successfully, resulting in my achievement of tenure and later promotion to the rank of Full Professor, the first such earned promotion to that rank on the LAEP faculty since Jerry Fuhriman many years previous.

Our facilities, especially the physical space in the Fine Arts Visual building, were highly useful in the 1980’s and 1990’s. However after the turn of the century improvements were needed especially in computer access. In 2004 department head Karen Hanna asked me to lead the effort to secure funding to enhance the internet access throughout our faculty and studio spaces. We were successful in efforts to convince the USU administration to install hardware internet access throughout our upper division and graduate studios, an improvement costing hundreds of thousands of dollars. Of course, as with all computer technology, it wasn’t many years before wireless access systems were installed across campus, but at the time of the hardware installation we had one of the best-equipped landscape architecture academic studio environments in the nation if not the world.

8. How do you feel that the Department was or has been affected by and responded to larger changes in the national/international consciousness, considering evolving views on the environment and society in general?

Utah State University is isolated. Although not at the center of the landscape architecture universe, we were well positioned for professional practice in environmental analysis and management, public lands management, and large scale regional planning in the western US. These areas have been changing rapidly since the 1960’s with the passage of landmark environmental laws, the enhanced environmental consciousness of many Americans, and the maturing of the baby boom generation. LAEP has responded well in these areas, and led the way in many aspects of each. The department has branched out into more urban design and planning expertise which is appropriate and relevant given the development pressures in urban centers in the American west. The expertise and background of the faculty has recently become more international, which was not a major influence when I was on the faculty (we had exchange programs with Slovenia, some international field trips, but few international faculty as are present now).

I believe a major challenge for the department in the coming years will be balancing an emphasis on our region, the American west and specifically the intermountain west, with an international focus. The citizens
of the state of Utah expect and deserve the faculty and programs in their public Universities to address the problems, issues, and opportunities of Utah and our region, yet most realize (or should) that extending our expertise and involvement beyond our “home range” can result in better solutions for local issues.

9. Do you feel there were specific emphases in the Department during your tenure? How have these emphases evolved? How did these emphases correlate with trends within landscape architecture as a whole?

The emphases of the LAEP department during my time as a faculty member were varied. In my opinion the most important were (in no particular order) design and planning with natural resources management at the core, large scale planning, delivery of a strong and sound education in the fundamentals of landscape architecture design and planning at both undergraduate and graduate levels, and at the graduate level support not only for students with these interests but also for those whose focus of interest lay outside faculty expertise.

I think these emphases were present and strong when I started my MLA degree program at USU in 1977 and continued through my voluntary early retirement in 2009. This consistency speaks well, I believe, to the strength of these core areas and their relevance to Utah and the region.

10. What were your areas of focus or concentration in the LAEP Department? What do you consider to be your major research contributions, publications or projects, related to your areas of specialization?

My main research focus was always related to visual resource analysis and management. I authored many peer-reviewed publications including journal articles and book chapters and delivered hundreds of professional presentations at conferences and other venues. This research emphasis was augmented by my private practice consulting work with my firm Ellsworth and Associates, landscape architects, inc. established in 1988. I often used examples from my consulting work with federal land management agencies, especially BLM and US Forest Service, in the classroom especially in my senior level visual resource analysis and management course that I taught for many years. Likewise, the academic research by myself and my graduate students was informed by my private practice experience. It’s important to note I maintained a distinct line between my academic and private practice, that is, I never used a private client current project as an academic course project. This dual involvement in academic and private practice was often praised by the department heads through the years in my annual reviews and other venues. Many students viewed my real-world professional work as one of the strongest aspects of my teaching credentials.

I was also the first LAEP faculty member to design and deliver a completely online course, LAEP 1030 Introduction to Landscape Architecture (2001-02 development, summer 2002 first delivery). I delivered that course each semester and summer for several years. This was one of the first three online landscape architecture courses in the world, and I believe the first full course totally online. This was a highly successful and award-winning course, praised by the staff in USU distance education as a model of a well designed and delivered course. It was used as a model by many other faculty at USU and was the topic of numerous professional presentations at distance education and other conferences. During the summer of 2002, I was the principle investigator, with the assistance of one graduate student and one adjunct faculty member, on a funded research project to design a complete online degree-granting curriculum for a professional MLA degree for students who already possessed a BLA. This had the potential to be the first complete landscape architecture degree that could be earned entirely online, a truly ground-breaking initiative. However, this approach to landscape architecture graduate education was not viewed favorably by all and as a result was never implemented. This was one of the greatest disappointments of my academic career at USU.

My most important research projects were my master’s thesis “Visual Assessment of Rivers and Marshes: An Examination of the Relationship of Visual Units, Perceptual Variables, and Preference” (which continues to be cited in professional peer-reviewed publications to this day (cf. Kuper, Rob, 2013. Here and
Gone: the Visual Effects of Seasonal Changes in Plant and Vegetative Characteristics on Landscape Preference Criteria. Landscape Journal 32:1, pp. 65-78; my long-term on-going repeat photography research after the 1988 wildfires in Yellowstone National Park (now, 2013, in its 25th year); my work in course design and delivery for the Bureau of Land Management at their National Training Center in Phoenix, Arizona; and my leadership on several applied research projects over more than a decade related to various design and planning challenges for the Cache County, Utah landfill and surrounding landscape including a proposed Environmental Education Center.

My masters thesis is important because it was one of, if not the first research effort to systematically examine the relationships among established paradigms for research into landscape visual resources, i.e. the expert, psychophysical, cognitive, and experiential paradigms. Indeed, Zube et al’s four paradigms were only clearly articulated concurrently with the completion of my thesis research (cf. Zube, Sell, and Taylor (“Landscape Perception: Research, Application and Theory”, 1982, Landscape Planning 9:1-33).

My long-term (now 25 years) of repeat photography research in Yellowstone National Park has been presented at numerous professional conferences and other venues for more than 20 years. A non-scholarly summary was published by invitation in Landscape Architecture magazine April 2009 issue, titled “Wildfire in Yellowstone Then and Now: Documenting Change in a Visually Dramatic Landscape”, and is the best source for a brief, cogent summary of the work.

The genesis of this wildfire research began on a faculty “retreat” (fishing trip) to the Island Park, Idaho area in late September/early October 1988. The historically huge wildfires in Yellowstone National Park had only recently been extinguished, primarily by snowfall. Several of us toured the park in a couple of vehicles, and of course I took several hundred photographs of the recently burned landscape. Our route began at the West Entrance, then to Madison Junction, south to Midway geyser basin, and back north past Madison Junction to Gibbon Falls. I can’t be sure that was the exact sequence of our tour but that does describe the landscapes we encountered and I photographed. In the summer of 1989 I returned to Yellowstone on a personal vacation, and was intrigued by how some of the burned areas were changing (revegetating) while others were not. I quickly realized that I could take repeat photographs if only I had my color 35mm slides from the previous fall. The next day, as I recall, I drove back to my home in Logan, found my slides, and quickly returned to Yellowstone. I drove around those areas of the Park mentioned above, locating as many of the 1988 photo-points as possible and took repeat photographs from most of them, making notes as to their locations (some of those original notes were quite crude and would have to be revised and detailed on later trips). By then, I was realizing I had laid the foundation of a long-term research project. When I returned to Logan, I examined all the slides from the two trips on a light table and began to organize a systematic approach to the research, including making 4”x6” prints of the locations I wanted to repeat photograph, placing those into clear plastic 8.5”x11” sheets, and including the written descriptions of the photo-points’ locations alongside in a 3-ring binder. I have continued this process for 25 years, completing the 25th anniversary photography in August 2013. I missed only one season of repeat photography. I intend to continue on a five-year basis simply because the visual changes are less dramatic now than in the first 20 years. I have given numerous presentations about this research locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally at peer-reviewed professional conferences, to community groups, to ASLA meetings, and many other venues.

The US Forest Service has accepted that fire, be it wildfire or prescribed, is an agent of visual change in the landscape requiring attention and management. The National Park Service has not assigned the same level of management importance. My ongoing research (perhaps the longest continuous landscape architecture visual resources research on record) has been well received and may, in time, have some lasting influence. I intend to continue this research as long as I am able.

My work with the Bureau of Land Management National Training Center in Phoenix began in 2000 during my sabbatical. Knowing my reputation in landscape visual simulation (I had trained the majority of the
dozen or so BLM landscape architects in visual simulation while they were my students at USU over the years), Mr. Richard Hagan, BLM landscape architect representing the national training center requested I design and deliver a three-day, 24-hour course in the subject. It would be for BLM non-landscape architects who had responsibilities on their districts to assess visual resources. This was philosophically problematic for me, as I felt strongly that only landscape architects were truly prepared, by education and experience, to assess visual resources, certainly not the real estate specialists, office managers, range managers, and wide range of others that BLM envisioned taking the course. Hagan was philosophically in agreement, however given that BLM had only a dozen or so landscape architects yet over 250 million acres of public land under their management, and the threats to the visual landscape being potentially severe from increasing development including oil and gas, surface mining, roads and highways, wind farms, and solar farms, he convinced me that with my help we could at least establish a cadre of BLM staff in many if not most districts with a basic understanding of visual simulation. The BLM NTC had delivered a training course in their Visual Resource Management system for several years, and I had been involved in the training cadre for that course (including the lead trainer role on one or more occasions), so Hagan knew I was familiar with BLM policies and procedures and he had witnessed my teaching skills in person. I accepted his reasoning, and spent much of my sabbatical year working with the NTC staff as I developed the course in Visual Resource Simulation (NTC course #8400-06). Our first delivery was highly successful, achieving some of the highest student evaluations in BLM NTC history. Post-sabbatical, I continued to deliver the course at NTC annually for another decade.


During 2005-07 I was PI for a major study of alternative end-uses for the Cache County landfill. The final product was titled “Sleeping Beauty: Master Plan for an Environmental Education Center for Logan City and Cache County, Utah”. Numerous professional presentations resulted from this work, delivered locally, regionally, and nationally. The grant for this effort supported two graduate students’ master’s theses, Yi Luo’s “Programming and Conceptual Design of a Visitors Center for a Proposed Environmental Education Center for the City of Logan and Cache County, Utah” (2008), and Kristofor Kvarfordt’s “Planning for Closure of the Logan City/Cache County Landfill and Surrounding Landscape” (2009). This project received one Honor and two Merit awards from the Utah ASLA chapter (blind peer review). Luo continued with her education, completing a PhD at Texas A&M University in 2014. Kvarfordt became a partner in a local civil engineering and planning firm, Cache Landmark. The Environmental Education Center project itself was put “on hold” when the country went into “the great recession” in 2008/09.

11. Reflect back on the student body during your time on the LAEP faculty.
   a. Can you make any generalizations regarding the demographic profile (residency, age, gender, and marital status) of LAEP majors during the time you were teaching?
   b. Did you observe any significant change in this profile over the years that you taught?
   c. Would you say that the LAEP student body mirrored the USU student body in general or were there differences?

Student body demographics changed significantly, in the LAEP department and at USU overall. In the 1980’s and early ‘90’s, many if not most of our students were non-resident, mostly male but a significant percentage of female, mostly caucasian, and some diversity of age range. Later, at some point the non-resident tuition was increased and resulted in a big change in our student demographics. There were more Utah resident students in our courses, and a higher percentage of male students for some years although that
seemed to change somewhat after the turn of the century when we started enrolling more female students. In my opinion, the diminution of student diversity in our courses at times translated into lower quality outcomes. This was compounded by the fact that more of our students were married and often had families to support. They were less able to commit to the long hours of studio work required to achieve the highest levels of performance in design and planning. The students were no less intelligent, capable, or interested in their chosen profession, but their time was so tight due to other commitments that the overall level of academic achievement suffered. This had a long-term effect, to the point where, by the time I retired, I was concerned about the levels of academic achievement. When these kinds of changes occur over the long term, incrementally, it is sometimes difficult to recognize them. This represents another important challenge for the future of the LAEP department, in my opinion.

12. How did technological advances affect landscape architecture education during your tenure with the Department?

As mentioned elsewhere, computer technology for landscape architecture became available in the 1980’s, more prominent in the 1990’s, and absolutely critical after the turn of the century. This technology, in the form of CAD, imaging, GIS, graphic rendering, and others has revolutionized the way landscape architects do their work. During the 1980’s, the faculty were very concerned, and many very anxious, about their ability to “catch up” with the fast advancing technologies while they were overloaded with teaching classes, initiating research and creative activities, serving on committees, and all the dozens of other obligations. In the 1990’s things weren’t much better. Some of us were computer literate and embraced the new technologies, while others struggled. After 2000, it was becoming more and more difficult to remain professionally relevant without competency in computer skills. Sometime later, however, it seemed the faculty began to realize the students were our best resource for computer applications. Those students had grown up on computers and the internet, were familiar and at ease with the technologies, and really didn’t expect the faculty to be the master instructors of AutoCad or ArcGIS or Photoshop (although some of us, in particular Professor Nicholson and myself, were considered highly proficient in some of these technologies). The students were ready, willing, and able to show the faculty, if need be, how Sketchup or Autocad could be seamlessly integrated into courses. When faculty realized that their student teaching assistants already had the requisite computer skills to prepare digital base maps or set up user groups, it constituted freedom from the previous 20 years of tech-anxiety and allowed most faculty to breathe a long and deep sigh of relief.

13. What were your major accomplishments during your time on the faculty? What would you consider to be your legacy at the Department?

My major accomplishments in teaching were the positive influence I exercised in the preparation of thousands of students over a 27-year career (3 at the University of Idaho, 24 at Utah State University). These accomplishments were the result of the collective efforts of the dozens of faculty members with whom I served, not by any means mine alone. The successes of our alumni are the metric by which these efforts must be judged, and perhaps as expressed in some of the testimonials being gathered from alumni in the research in which I am taking part here. I am fully aware there will be a variety of points of view, some former students will sing praises and others throw stones, however I believe my efforts at teaching the next generations of landscape architects were respectable.

In research, my major accomplishments were in my continuing dedication to understanding the nature of landscape scenic beauty and my ability and record of communicating such to others in presentations, publications, professional practice projects, and in my own personal appreciation. Philosophically, analytically, practically, aesthetically, and even whimsically there is an inherent, genetic, evolutionary, basic, fundamental need in all people to relate to the landscape, something in us that causes us to involuntarily say “Ahhhh!” when we first see the Grand Canyon, or our first snow-capped peak, or big river,
or beautiful enclosed glen that we have known all our lives and is so familiar it is felt to be a part of our individual being. That is the legacy of my research, one man’s attempt to better understand this personal reaction to, and interaction with landscape we all share.

In service, my work with ASLA, CELA, the BLM, the US Forest Service, National Park Service, and with many other federal, state, and local agencies, professional practitioners, and professional organizations across a wide array of professional disciplines resulted in significant and meaningful outcomes, some of which endure to this day.

So, what is my legacy to the LAEP department? Successful students, dedicated and passionate academic inquiry as well as public and private practice, and service, all performed in the interest of my profession, my professional colleagues, my students, the people at large, and the landscape we share.

14. Did you ever, during your time on the faculty, feel concerned about the future of the Department, either from the standpoint of professional accreditation or the internal University decision-making process?

I was never seriously concerned about a loss of our accreditation. We had dedicated faculty and a critical mass of very good students so that we were never at serious risk of losing accreditation. The University decision-making process always contained a wild card or two. There were occasional concerns regarding the department being transferred to another College (Natural Resources? Agriculture?) where we might lose the autonomy and status that we enjoyed in the College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences as one of the premier departments. LAEP brought in the most research funding; not huge amounts, however more than most of the other HASS departments but significantly less than College of Natural Resources or College of Agriculture. Of course, there were changes in University presidents, provosts, and deans on an unpredictable basis. Those people controlled the fates of individual departments, so acting in the LAEP department’s best interests while realizing that power may rest in another person tomorrow required savvy political skills by department heads and faculty. There was a time, in the late 1990’s, when the option of moving LAEP to the College of Natural Resources was real and present, a move strongly opposed by almost all of our faculty. Fortunately, LAEP remained in HASS until its move to the College of Agriculture (a short time after I retired). For the record, although I was not involved in the discussions about that move, I believe the best decision was made and it will be good for LAEP to be in the College of Agriculture.

15. What would you describe as being the high points for the Department, what would you describe as being the low points?

High points include the excellent reputation of the department held by academic, public, and private practitioners as well as the general public. This is the strongest aspect of LAEP and must be nurtured and protected, for a good reputation is exceedingly hard and time-consuming to achieve yet can be destroyed in a moment.

The hiring of some excellent faculty through the years has been critical to the department’s success. This goes back to the 1960’s, when Johnson, Fuhriman, and Budge were hired. With few exceptions, the quality of the faculty has been outstanding to excellent. Many stayed to make LAEP their career, while we lost a few others who have gone on to make very important and significant contributions elsewhere.

Although this happened after my retirement, I believe the hiring of faculty with PhDs is one of the most significant positive changes in the history of the department. The level of research expertise and everything that goes along with that (funding and publishing success, ability to mentor graduate students at the highest levels) promises to raise the LAEP department, and the profession, to a level of expertise, respect, and relevance that has not been seen before. There is the risk of losing some faculty expertise in the fundamentals of everyday traditional practice (according to ASLA, most landscape architecture work is still
residential design), but with careful consideration and attention this can be avoided, the traditional aspects of professional practice can be maintained and even enhanced, and LAEP faculty and students can achieve world class status as researchers and innovators.

Low points in the department, in my time, were always related to politics, departmental and University-wide. Universities can be incredible strongholds of pettiness and jealousy, usually based in individual insecurities and desires for personal power over others. There were many times when the politics had many of our faculty on the edge of looking elsewhere for meaningful employment (and some made that transition). The security blanket of a regular paycheck, relative freedom to control your own classroom, freedom to set your own research and creative activities agenda, and the promise of unequaled job security via tenure are very strong antidotes, if not bromides, for politically-based stress and anxiety. If a way could be found to excise these self-serving aspects of human nature from our genetic code, the University (and the world) would be a much better place to call home.

16. As the LAEP Department moves into the final quarter of its first century, what do you view as being its greatest legacies and challenges?

The greatest legacy is the preparation of thousands of students, generations of them, to become successful professionals, contributors, and leaders in the improvement of societies and our shared environment, and the promise of continuing the same in the future.

The greatest challenge is tied directly to the legacy, that is, continuing to prepare these generations of students to make a better future even as the environmental challenges (global climate change most prominent) and societal challenges (population growth, political unrest, clash of cultures under the pressures of diminishing resources, increasing conflict, and environmental degradation) will be constantly at work to harass and stymy our efforts and threaten the most basic foundations of civilization.

17. Were there times that you felt the Department was on the leading edge of innovation? Were there times that the Department fell behind in innovation?

It is important to understand that Universities can be incredibly innovative environments, however they can also stifle new ideas that don’t fit within “the box” (even if the box is relatively large and squishy). LAEP has led the way in design and planning for natural resources systems management, especially on public lands, for a half century. The faculty and students have been innovative in many aspects of this, including large scale regional planning, wildlife habitat planning considerations, visual resources management, and adapting along the wildland-urban interface under the demands of ever expanding development. LAEP has assumed that role in the profession and succeeded.

I discussed the computer technologies previously, and the challenges the department has faced. In the early years it was challenging just to keep up much less innovate. In the last decade, faculty and students have learned how to embrace the technologies and apply them to the kinds of issues and challenges for which the department has developed a high level of expertise.

18. What is your opinion of the state of landscape architecture education today? What direction do you perceive landscape architecture education as heading? How do you believe these changes may affect the Department of LAEP?

All education is changing radically. The mostly tried and true methods of face to face learning and learning by doing are being challenged by sophisticated distance education methods that some believe will replace face to face learning. In the middle ages, one learned by apprenticeship to a master, whether it be a blacksmith, shoe cobbler, sword maker, or carpenter over many years. Those methods still exist, and are growing in many areas that require highly developed craftsman skills. The range of educational
opportunities will continue to expand. The availability of just-in-time knowledge and skills acquisition finely tailored to very specific often time-constrained learners’ needs, and short-course certifications will become more prominent and supplement (if not supplant) formal degrees granted by old-line public Universities. Landscape architecture, one of the few professions that blends science, art, engineering, and sociology into one of our most broad and invigorating professions, is ripe for these types of content, knowledge, and skills delivery in education. Our students take courses in such a wide variety of subjects, all important for their professional development, yet some of what is contained in a standard 15 week course is not essential to their professional education as a landscape architect. The challenge will be to separate the wheat from the chaff (I usually avoid clichés but this one is so apropos), to determine how to most effectively deliver the necessary knowledge and skills and yet also allow for inspiration, excitement, and insight that comes from being exposed to new, often seemingly irrelevant (but intriguing) novel ideas and concepts.

How will these changes affect LAEP? There will be daily decisions to be made about these new opportunities, about what might work and what might not, about what to try and what to pass by. These decisions will not be easy, will require careful thought and discussion, and mistakes will be made. It is, and will be the province of the faculty, the students, and the practicing professionals to make these decisions together, to risk mistakes and failure, and keep moving ahead. It will be incumbent upon the University to suppress or abandon many of the traditional approaches to learning. A University may become a series of seamlessly interconnected novel approaches to research and education where success is measured in ways we have not yet imagined.

19. Are there any other stories, anecdotes, or topics about your time at LAEP that you would like to share?

See previous comments.