

Living artwork

Landscape architects prime canvases then let nature take over.

By Emma Breyse

When Allison Fleury finishes with a piece of work, it's rarely done. That could take as long as two or three years from the time she leaves it with a client, and it's going to keep changing even after that.

"What I leave a client with is the backbone," Fleury said. "My job is to make sure that backbone has everything it needs to grow out into the vision I had during the work."

For a painter or sculptor, this would be an especially avant-garde portion of an artist's statement.

For Fleury, it's a pretty basic part of her job description.

Fleury is a landscape architect, making her job part craft, part artistic vision and part crazy amounts of attention to ever-shifting detail.

A landscape architect works with a piece of land to create a visual effect that also suits the way the space is used and the way the client wants it to look.

"You start with a concept and work from there," Fleury said. "You're always thinking about how to achieve that and still incorporate things like traffic patterns and ease of use."

Like a painter, Fleury uses color and texture to direct the eye and create the desired effect.

Like a sculptor, she works with the natural shapes and properties of her medium to make her statement.

And like an architect or textile artist, Fleury creates appealing visuals while considering function and structure.

The difference is that she does it with plants, water, artificial features and the contours of the land.

Unlike any other kind of artist, the landscape architect's final product will make a different statement with each season. The statement will change as the plants grow and depending on the type of maintenance the owner chooses to apply.

"I work usually with creating visual effects with the shape of plants and the contours of a piece of land," said Meg Whitmer, a seasonal Jacksonite who works as a landscape architect. "It's a very big-pic-



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After sculpting the landscape, planting the flowers and trees, and designing the water features, landscape architects stand back and let nature take its course. Above shows a Jackson Hole project by Allison Fleury.

ture type of art."

Whitmer also volunteers in the costume shop for the nonprofit Dancers' Workshop. She said it's surprising how much the skills cross over.

"It's texture, it's color, it's overall visual effect, it's hands-on," she said. "So in some ways I can use my experience as a landscape architect when I'm doing that. But at the same time, it's totally different. Cloth is a totally different medium."

She also gets contracts for public artwork, which further blends the line between function and aesthetics.

A look through the portfolios of the area's landscape architects shows what they mean.

Everything has to fit the scheme, from the curve of a driveway to the way an architect handles high-water spots in a yard.

At least once, Fleury said, she has turned a place where water runs off a roof into a streambed that fills up during rain storms and then becomes an attractive stonework feature in dry weather.

Even on land without distinguishing characteristics, like a ranch house yard, the possibilities are endless. One firm creates a flower bed with waist-high flowering plants surrounding a young aspen tree. One stays low to the ground with bright flowers. One sets up a sitting area with flat paving stones that could almost have happened by natural accident.

None of the yards will always look the way it does in the picture. Several years later the aspen tree will be much taller, making that flower bed all wrong for plants that need direct sunlight. The flowers are annuals, which means they'll bloom for only one season and will need to be replaced.

And the weather will change the look and feel of the stone.

The art won't last as it is; the idea is to choose a vision that will evolve with the land.

Thinking that far ahead takes advanced training. Indeed it requires a special degree to be called a landscape architect, rather than a landscape contractor. A look through degree programs shows a curriculum that's a cross between art school and trade school, which makes sense given the job description.

"Sometimes it's hard to explain what I do," Fleury said. "With a painting, you're done and that's it, that's how it looks. With landscapes, you're working with live plants and real people, and that means you have to understand that it's not really yours."

"It can be hard to leave a project when you're done," she said, "because you do get attached to a concept and you want to see it change and keep working with it."



Color, texture, composition: A landscaping project can be similar to creating a painting or sculpture.