



the accidental by LORI FERGUSON

# ARCHITECT

*Matt Urbanski '85 stands with Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates' latest project, Brooklyn Bridge Park, NYC. Photography by Dan Z. Johnson*

A biology major planning to study nutritional biochemistry, Matthew Urbanski '85 took a friend's suggestion to explore a career in landscape architecture, and he's never looked back.

Although he's officially known as a landscape architect, Matthew Urbanski '85 is really a composer of spaces and the natural elements within them. As a principal with the firm Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, Inc., (MVVA), Urbanski has spent the last 25 years redefining people's perceptions of how public spaces can look and function, designing landscapes that delight and engage users, and playing a critical role in virtually every major project MVVA has completed here in the U.S. as well as in Canada and France.

"All the men on my father's side of the family are doctors, and I think I was supposed to be one, too," observes Urbanski with a soft chuckle. "But one of the lessons I've learned over the years is that you shouldn't be too deterministic in your life—remain open to the possibilities, and when an opportunity presents itself, take it!"

Urbanski spends his day working in a realm steeped in possibilities; parks and campuses rank among his favorite creative canvases. Together with Michael Van Valkenburgh, he has served as a lead

designer on numerous projects including New York's Brooklyn Bridge Park, Segment 5 of Hudson River Park, Maggie Daley Park in Chicago, and Penn Park in Philadelphia, to say nothing of his alma mater. And yet, he confesses, he discovered the profession of landscape architecture almost by accident.

"I majored in biology at Albright and was interviewing in biology-related fields my senior year," Urbanski recalls. "I was interested in nutritional biochemistry, so I headed to Harvard to look into the master's and Ph.D. programs." Before he departed, however, an artist friend of the family, whose garden he tended, made an off-hand suggestion that during his visit to Cambridge Urbanski check out Harvard's Graduate School of Design. "In retrospect, I think she knew me better than I knew myself at the time," he says with a laugh.

When Urbanski walked into the school, everything changed. "I saw everyone drawing and working on little models and thought, 'I could go to Harvard and do this!'" He instantly decided he wanted

to attend, but it was too late to apply, so he spent that summer taking horticulture classes at Delaware Valley College of Science and Agriculture during the day and art classes at night and building his portfolio. The following year he entered the School of Design.

This bold career about-face proved to be prescient—landscape architecture turned out to be a perfect fit for Urbanski's interests. "It's one of the last generalist professions," he explains. "I was a science major in college, but I realized at some point that I was intrigued as much by the aesthetics of science as I was by the science of science. The modern practice of science is very specific, and that really didn't fit my personality. To practice landscape architecture, you need to have knowledge in a number of different fields, and I found that very appealing."



Dan Z. Johnson



Keith Sherwood

# Brooklyn Bridge Park

Chicago's Daley Park  
Hudson River Park  
Philly's Penn Park

engaging and thought-provoking, which I love because it gives children lots of different ways to interact with the environment and get a read on the space.”

In Hoboken, New Jersey’s Pier C Park, for example, Urbanski and his colleagues created an intimate interior playground that engages children of all ages. The space is divided into pre-school and school-age play areas and contains structures for climbing and hiding, playing in water and sand, and more. “We’re living in a time when parents and children are confronted with many perceived dangers emanating from the world around them, and while the world can certainly be a dangerous place, it’s rarely as threatening as our media-intensive environment would suggest,” he says. “In building kids’ spaces, I’m trying to combat that fear of the unknown and unfamiliar.”

Urban environments, particularly parks, also fascinate Urbanski. Parks play a role in the competitiveness of cities, he explains, because today people live in cities largely out of choice rather than necessity. “Young people and families used to migrate to the suburbs because they wanted to feel connected to nature and have

Urbanski relishes the variety of the profession, which allows him to draw upon his knowledge of biology, ecology, horticulture and design to compose and curate nature in beautiful, provocative and highly specific ways. “Every one of our jobs is tailored to the precise environment we’re working in; we’re not producing a standardized commodity.”

Children’s play spaces are among Urbanski’s favorite projects. “I don’t like the term playground, it’s too grim; it sounds like a place you go and get beat up,” he observes wryly. Urbanski’s play spaces are heavily influenced by the rural landscape of his youth, which he says afforded him “opportunities for self-determination.” The environments he encountered as a child were complex, he recalls, and encouraged him to be both imaginative and resourceful.

“Complexity is good,” Urbanski asserts. “I like to infuse my play environments with all the complexity of nature, particularly through the use of a rich variety of plantings. Plants are living things, constantly growing and changing in size, scale and color according to the time of day, the season, the weather, etc. They inherently bring a level of intricacy to the environment that’s

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places for their children to play, he says.” By creating thoughtful public spaces, especially parks and play spaces, Urbanski and his colleagues make the city more livable and allow young people and families the option of remaining in an urban environment.

As he shares his vision with the next generation of practitioners in his role as an adjunct associate professor in landscape architecture at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design, he says he’s proud of the fact that he’s been given the opportunity to share his expertise with Albright as well. “Being chosen to direct the construction of Founders Walk, which stretches through the center of campus from Albright Woods to Union Street, is an incredible privilege,” he observes. “As a student, I used to walk through the campus and think, ‘There are things here that need to be fixed;’ and 30 years later, I’ve been given the chance to do just that.”

In conceiving his redesign, Urbanski says he sought to create a continuity and flow throughout the space through the materials, lighting and path gradient he chose, while at the same time infusing the environment with a variety informed by context. “I composed the spatial and planted experiences in response to the different sections of campus—so the feeling in front of the Campus Center is different from the feeling in front of Sylvan Pond, which is in turn different from the feeling in front of Gingrich Library,” he explains. “I hope that my fellow alumni like what they see and that they feel the environment appears both natural and improved.”

Striking this balance is one of the greatest challenges in landscape architecture, Urbanski concludes. If you’re successful in your design, there’s a natural inevitability to it all and people feel as though it’s always been that way. “For instance, someone remarked of Brooklyn Bridge Park, ‘I love the park because it’s so clean.’ At first we were taken aback—we focused all of this time and energy on creating an inviting natural environment, and all people notice is that the park is clean? Then I realized, if people are so comfortable in the space that their focus is on the absence of cigarette butts and overfilled trash bins, we got it right!” ■