

Podcast Mike and Saloni

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SPEAKERS

Mike, Saloni

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- M** Mike 00:09
Hi, my name is Mike Firmand, and I work in the Career Development Office at the Graduate College at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, you right now are listening to the Graduate College Podcast, where we take a deep dive into topics related to higher education and offer insight and resources to help you be your best and succeed in graduate school, this podcast episode is called, "Where are they now?", where we catch up with the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign online and hear more about what they've been up to since earning their degree. And joining me today is...
- S** Saloni 00:42
Hi, my name is Saloni Chawla. I am a landscape designer at a landscape architecture firm called Stimson in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and I did my masters of landscape architecture from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and I graduated in 2018. And I've been in Massachusetts ever since.
- M** Mike 01:03
Great. Well, thanks so much for talking to me today. I'm really excited to get a chance to hear more about what you do, because to be honest, I know nothing about landscape architecture so I'm curious if you could you like, tell me what your job is like, what do you

do, what is it typical week like for you.

S

Saloni 01:22

So, in, like, a firm and as a landscape architecture practice we mostly focus on the site design. The scale can vary from as small as a small residence to as big as a campus master plan. At Stimson, they have majority, I would say 80 to 90% of the projects which are campus master plans. And then some residents design projects as well. We design bars, gardens, you know riverfronts pathways parking lots. Basically, most of the things that you see around the building as a site, and we work with architects and civil engineers in collaboration.

M

Mike 02:05

I'm curious to hear more about like, what is the most rewarding aspect of your work?

S

Saloni 02:15

So there's a lot of work that goes into designing and it's teamwork and but we do the drawing is a long and tedious process, it looks very glamorous and interesting from the outside but we spend hours and hours and iterations of doing a design. But I would say, and then we have, you know, sometimes it doesn't happen very often but sometimes late night before the meetings but but when you after the whole meeting goes in then you see the satisfaction from the client and they see that they're very happy and excited about the design. I think it's very rewarding. Um, other than that, I would say that drawing on a paper and a computer screen is like great but when you see that thing being built in front of your eyes, it's just it's a different feeling which is amazing, on a scale so big so I think when I see that happening when I was excited when I see my designs and my work being realized into, you know, actual design, it feels wonderful.

M

Mike 03:23

I bet it does I bet that process of transformation into something becoming a real thing sounds really cool. How do you get your ideas for your designs?

S

Saloni 03:35

Um, so a lot of times we do brainstorming sessions where, and each project mostly is a team work, where we have designers and associates and principal architects working together. So the first step is always to get a brief of the project with the clients and then

list down all their expectations and their desires for the project what exactly they're looking for. Then we do some brainstorming where we sketch, different concepts and it doesn't have to be a specific view, we sometimes do it in plan view sometimes a collage of, you know, different images as well. So, that brainstorming session in the group is very like that generates a lot of ideas sometimes like people come up with different ideas and like we end up joining all the ideas and bringing to the table something new and exciting. And it's a it's a long process. We go back and forth. We look at some reference and precedent projects as well, that were built on the same lines to get more inspiration, more or less, it's like a very hands on approach of, like, using whatever media you can doesn't have to be just hand drawing, images, even writing about it or videos or like it's it's it's a very broad and like a very organic process.

M

Mike 05:14

I wanted to switch to hear more about your job search process, and how you found this role at Stimson. So can you talk us through how you went about when you were looking for jobs at the end of your graduate career like, how did you go about finding positions and applying to jobs?

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Saloni 05:35

Sure, definitely an interesting experience. When you graduate from design school you, they mostly the employers expect you to have a design portfolio and a portfolio, making a portfolio is a never ending process, I've seen people spending hours and hours and days just to refine their work. If I would say like the design you never reach a point where you're like this design doesn't need any more improvement, there's always a scope being a designer, you can never say that okay this is done like it doesn't need just any thing else. But at the same time I learned from my friends and my colleagues around me and my professors that, you know, don't try to achieve perfection, because that's never going to happen. Work hard, pour all your heart into your work, but then also make sure that you are on time. So I made sure that as soon as I wrapped up my thesis I started compiling my projects into my design portfolio and then started sending them out. I started networking a lot, a little late, but I realized that like, it's a very important aspect to just having your application materials is not enough. So I would approach professors and like my seniors and people who are already finding people finding alumini from LinkedIn and approaching them and sometimes, you know, setting up chats, calls, coffee dates, asking them about critique on myself getting some review on my work. So, that had a lot I remembered my conversation with you during my resume and you know network everyone that came in that was very helpful I got some great advice from you and that did help me amp up my resume but arriving at Stimson is a very interesting story because

I was infamous for applying and looking for jobs and like I was on a bit tired with finishing up my thesis and I cannot understand that school, so I thought I would, and my cousin lives in Boston and I thought I would learn a week, but travel and visit him and his family and, I mean, even if I'm there I can still keep sending my application materials, whenever I want. So I made a vacation trip and I was here and during my time in Boston, I started approaching and focused my search only to the places in Boston, and around. And in my emails I would also tell them that, you know, even if like even if there are places that didn't have any vacancies I would still show my curiosity to go and just get it and get a chance to speak with them about the forms work or like even showcase my work that I've done, or just like build some connections. So I would always include this time embossing campaign and be willing to come down and meet with you if that works out; and that did help, so I got responses from three places that I could schedule an interview with one of them was an informational interview. They said that they didn't have any openings but because I was sad and they liked my work, they were interested to meet with me. And that went really well and it was interesting that like a week later I had offers from all the three of them, and Stimson was my top choice so I went ahead and I accepted the offer.

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Mike 09:10

That's really great. Why I guess why was Stimson your top choice like what were you looking for how are you assessing these places, and these offers in as they came in?

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Saloni 09:24

When I was looking at, you know, the websites I knew of a couple of people at Stimson, that I had, I mean I didn't know them very well but I got connected through to them through some people and I wanted to, I learned some great things about this whole work construct at Stimson their projects are very interesting, because they do so much of institutional and master planning than campus designs that was like one of my interests that I wanted to get into so that seemed like a very good opportunity, I looked at their work I was very impressed. And the whole. Even after meeting with them I realized that the whole, like, there, there is a hierarchy in the staff but but when you walk together, it seems like everyone is respected very well, it's not just, like, one person at the top giving approvals or having to have the decision making power. So that all seems very interesting and then there are other factors like they have a farm at their other office at Princeton, Massachusetts. And they have this material his lab tests, and you know, have this nice extra bit of materials that we use on the site so their approach to the project seemed very wonderful and very exciting and it still felt like, I'm like, going to be enjoying this design process with them very well. So, I think that made me go ahead with them and I like to date I think it was a wonderful decision that I made and I'm very happy being here.

M

Mike 11:02

Sounds like you know obviously a very interesting job search process and I'm glad you were able to bring your own values in choices to make that successful decision. I just had like one final question for you, kind of tying back to that job search process. What is some advice that you could pass on to graduate students that are looking for jobs right now? If you could talk about that networking and that outreach that you did because that sounds like something that was really beneficial for you.

S

Saloni 11:37

Right, right. So, yeah, so I learned, want to go back to my point that focus on your portfolio and your resume but also, like that's not the only thing that you should work towards. Networking is a huge, huge factor that helps you, and I started networking a little late in my process. I mean eventually it did help but I would say that, don't shy away from it, I am sort of an introvert, and a little shy so like it took me some time. But I would recommend everyone that just go for it. A lot of times people would say no but like sometimes, they would say yes, and you would get to meet great people you would get wonderful insights, a different perspective towards your own work. And you will build some wonderful connections, I mean I did. So, and it doesn't have to, you know, you don't only have to approach people who can help you with getting the job, they might connect you with somebody else. They might even present you an opportunity that you were not thinking about. And they might help give some advice on your work. Or you might learn something about their work. So, definitely network with connections, meet with people, that's going to help in the long run.

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Mike 12:58

Yeah, that's perfect advice I'd say that that power of getting one yes is worth all those knows that you may get in the process. Great. Well, thanks so much for sharing about your work. And that process in finding your job, it was really exciting to hear about it, and we really appreciate you joining us for that.

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Saloni 13:24

Thank you so much for having me. I'm glad I could talk about it. I hope it helps. Whoever listens to it and yeah, I'm here to share.

M

Mike 13:34

Well thanks again Saloni, and thank you for listening, and please be on the lookout for more podcasts in the future, on our website at grad illinois.edu, I'm Mike Firmand, and you just listened to the Graduate College podcast.