First-time participants in the ASLA EXPO went to San Diego to show their wares. But they also went to observe, learn, network – and form collaborative partnerships.

BY RUSS KLETTKE

Executive Summary

• The ASLA EXPO is different from most shows. The very specific needs and interests of landscape architects make vendors’ tasks clearer.

• Networking – on the EXPO floor and off – with other vendors yields many and varied benefits.

• Designers and vendors in this industry are equally earnest about environmental sustainability and the nurturing of emerging professionals.

First-time exhibitors at the ASLA Conference on Landscape Architecture and EXPO offer a lot to Conference attendees. That includes new, innovative and often first-in-category products. What they get in exchange are new customers, of course, but they also went to know the industry in ways that yield long-term results.

We spoke with a handful of companies that were new to the annual gathering in 2019 in San Diego. In some cases, these industry vendors were meeting with landscape architects en masse for the first time. Here are these first-time exhibitors’ first impressions and experiences:

This was an opportunity to educate an important market on new products. For example, Sustainable Northwest Wood showcases western juniper, a product with outstanding performance characteristics that are unfamiliar to many designers (natural rot resistance in ground-contact applications). Terry Campbell, sales and marketing director for the company, says this lumber is sourced from an invasive species, western juniper, which has harmed the high desert region of Eastern Oregon; commercial harvesting of western juniper helps restore native grasslands.

Karim Piran of iBBQ nabbed a booth in what he describes as a less-than-ideal location to introduce the company’s Angara™ outdoor grill. The product combines a dining table with a gas grill, the use of which fosters “social grilling.” Fortunately, that booth location didn’t prohibit the California-based company from meeting residential landscape architects doing work in the US, Australia, Mexico, Spain, Belgium, Dubai and Saudi Arabia. Pirani plans to return for the Miami Beach EXPO in October 2020.

Most attendees are specifiers. “All landscape architects can be specifiers in one way or another,” says Sandi Walsh, general manager for Tree Hugger Solutions, makers of Tree Brace™ Kits. She says he always had a vague sense of how specifications are made. But from conversations with landscape architects, he now has a more detailed and nuanced understanding of how they are written into projects. He also learned a little more about how trees are staked in particular ways.

Glenn Goodfellow, the vice president of business development for Poitras Industries, a metal fabricator that makes urban fixtures (bus shelters, benches, bike racks, etc.) as well as architectural and building decorative elements, has previously worked with outdoor grills in an environment. Other words used by exhibitors to describe attendees: “Knowing this audience we were able to approach them with just the right materials.” Other words used by exhibitors to describe attendees: “Knowing this audience we were able to approach them with just the right materials.” They have a strong appreciation for landscape architects and education.

They ventured out of their booths to make connections. “You can’t just wait inside your booth,” says Goodfellow, who makes it a practice to work the room and to attend social events where possible. That’s how he made a connection with another company that might soon turn into a co-manufacturing relationship for Poitras.

Sustainable Northwest Wood’s Campbell says he explored the floor and met some furniture manufacturers who otherwise import raw materials from Europe but now can consider the company’s wood, harvested closer to home, as an option. He also made his way into educational sessions to broaden his own understanding of the industry. Flanground’s Walsh found evening events to be productive for sharing ideas and general networking, while LandscapesPlus Raleigh hopes to co-sponsor their own after-hours event in the future.

They were impressed with students and emerging professionals. Several exhibitors noticed the attention ASLA provides to members at the outset of their careers. Observing the Alumni Tailgate event, with dozens of participating schools, and the student portfolio reviews, it was clear to them that this industry fosters development of future landscape architects. “The ASLA is very focused on students,” notes iBBQ’s Piran. While other trade shows might have an occupationally homogeneous mix of attendees, these new exhibitors noticed that by far the people they spoke with were landscape architects. “Landscape architects have a different view,” says Poitras’ Goodfellow. “They are more pragmatic in how products are deployed in an environment.” Other words used by exhibitors to describe attendees: “Knowing this audience we were able to approach them with just the right materials.” They are passionate about what they do... there is definitely a higher level of professionalism, “and perhaps ultimate compliment. ‘Their work is so beautiful.’

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