

THE PROS AND CONS OF INTERNATIONAL DISTRIBUTION

The accelerated business activity for landscape architecture is global. Yet some products made overseas just aren't as good as what's made in America.

BY RUSS KLETTKE

Executive Summary

- ▶ **American landscape architects work on huge international projects**
- ▶ **Some American suppliers have succeeded at exporting products**
- ▶ **In-country presence – people, manufacturing – works best, but is not required**

Conditions created by and still lingering from the COVID-19 pandemic have been disruptive to the landscape architecture supply chain – just when demand is near an all-time high. Still, it's useful to step back and assess where that will take us in the years to come.

Smart businesses factor for emerging and growth markets. For some companies that can include expanded geographical distribution, from a regional concentration to national and even international customers. Both come with challenges, of course,

but in the post-pandemic reset the idea merits possibility thinking.

Industry analysts at *ResearchAndMarkets.com* project the global construction market to increase by a robust 10.8 percent (compound annual growth rate) in just the next four years, with annual spending expected to reach \$22.9 trillion (USD) by 2026. Asia-Pacific markets will get the most of that activity, followed by North America. Emerging markets (Brazil, India, China, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia) in particular are poised for extensive building.

“Building construction companies are increasingly using green construction techniques,” report those analysts. Those projects would be inclined to take a conscious approach to sustainable landscapes as well.

The American Society of Landscape Architects brings together people from inside and outside the US at the annual Conference on Landscape Architecture and EXPO. With the 2022 meeting in San Francisco, there might even be a pronounced presence of international attendees given the city's global appeal.



The Yanjiao Art Center landscape design, near Beijing, is from the Denver office of Design Workshop. DESIGN WORKSHOP

grow lights that were higher quality than those available elsewhere ... because those products were unique in either their function or their quality [compared to] locally available material or other foreign sources.”

As with the other designers interviewed, Greenspan notes it's hard to compete on price if the product must be imported.

Annual Conference and EXPO is national and global

Attendees at the Annual Conference and EXPO come from every state. There are also between 200 and 300 landscape architects who, in a typical year, come from 30 other countries. In 2018, the largest contingents were from Canada (159), Germany (17), United Kingdom (16), Australia (11), and the Netherlands (10).

This November's gathering in San Francisco should equal or exceed that kind of turnout. For companies already doing business overseas it's a good chance to connect after the pandemic years. For industry partners looking to expand distribution, nationally or internationally, it's a great place to start the conversation.

“The most important service characteristic is consistent representation and connection to the designer,” emphasizes Kona Gray. “We find that our most successful relationships are based on true alignment with project needs and not just a transaction.” ■

Know how global distribution works – and doesn't work

What are the opportunities for industry suppliers to sell outside the US? Many already do, but it's not a simple matter of putting products onto ships. We asked several American-based landscape architecture firms that frequently work on overseas projects. Here is what they say about it:

Jim MacRae, Denver-based principal with **Design Workshop** (the firm has eight offices in the US): “We've worked in many countries and have specified American-made products for a variety of projects. Many American-made landscape products are designed and built better than locally made landscape products. Additionally, some American manufacturers have more choices for product styles, materials, colors, and finishes. Most of the American-made products we specified are site furnishing and sometimes landscape lighting and modular paving systems.”

He adds that in-country sales reps to manage export issues, contractor procurement coordination, and price negotiations are important. Better yet, particularly in larger markets, manufacturing there

makes American manufacturers more competitive from tax and delivery time standpoints.

Michael Grove, **FASLA**, **PLA**, and chair of landscape architecture, civil engineering, and ecology at **Sasaki** (Boston), acknowledges they've not succeeded at this: “We have been able to find lighting, playground equipment, and landscape furnishings locally in both Asia and Europe. Many of our clients require local representation, a regional factory, and ongoing support and maintenance post-construction.”

“I think the largest gap is in landscape furnishings, as it would be nice to have more selection and there seems to be a bit more variety among US manufacturers.”

Kona Gray, **FASLA**, **PLA** and principal at **EDSA** (Fort Lauderdale): “We have specified products sourced from US vendors for projects outside the US for decades ... in the Caribbean, North Africa, South America, and the Middle East. However, in many cases, the products we specify have been substituted with locally manufactured replicas.”



Of the thousands of ASLA EXPO attendees, a large number work on national and international projects. EPNAC

“The products in demand outside the US include site furniture, lighting, bollards, bike racks, and specialty landscape elements. In many cases we provide custom fixtures for special circumstances. The good news is some vendors we specify have a US and EU presence.”

Adam Greenspan, partner at **PWP Landscape Architecture** (San Francisco): “We have specified [American-made] rigid plastic drain mat that was not available locally at the project location, plants that were not able to be sourced in the region, and

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