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LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN
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DIRECTOR PARK

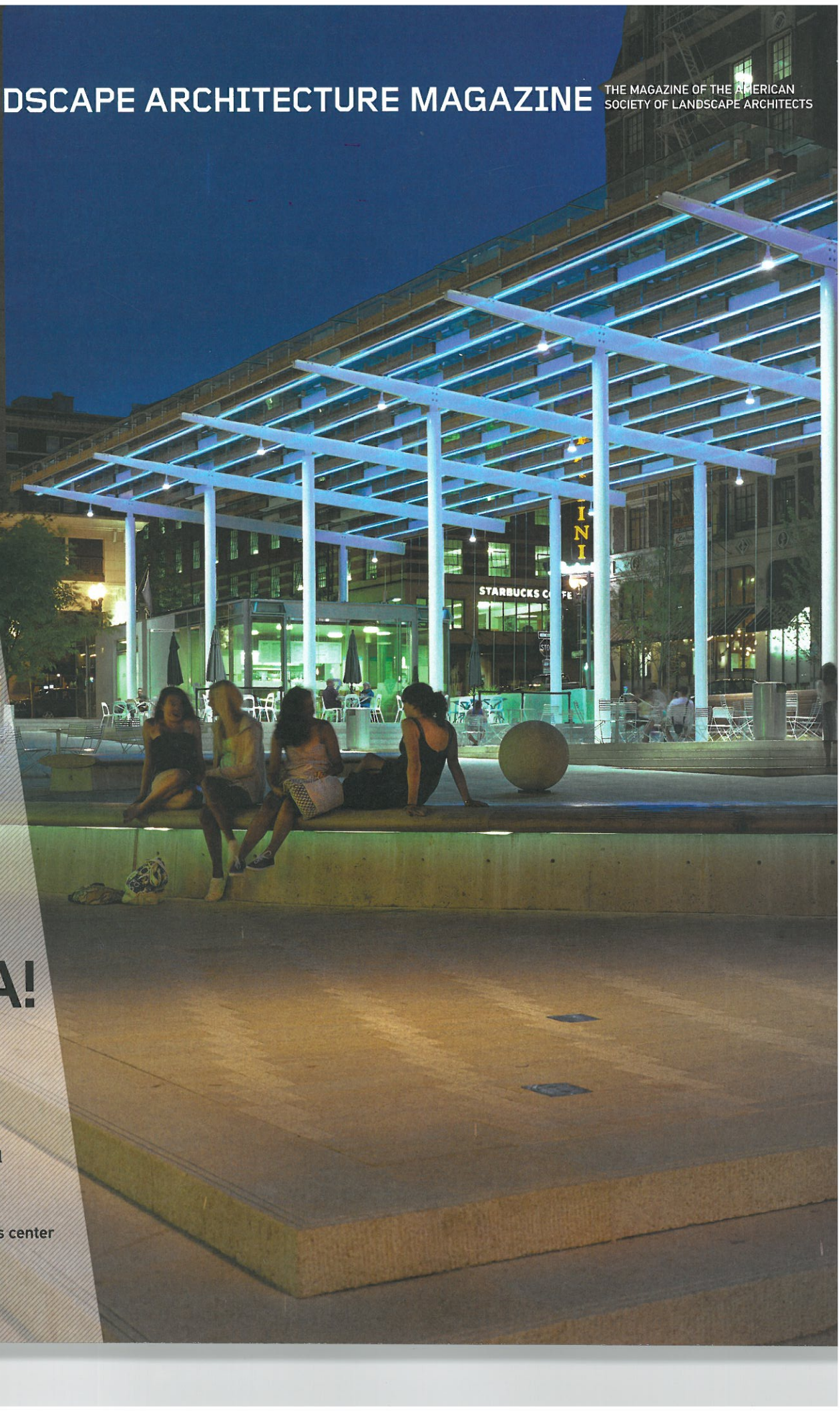
The OLIN touch, downtown

MOVE IT

ZGF cleans up the transit mall

DETROIT BOUNTY

A fertile new farm at the city's center



SOCIALLY YOURS

SO MANY WAYS TO PUT YOUR WORK ON THE WEB. WHAT'S WORTH YOUR TIME?

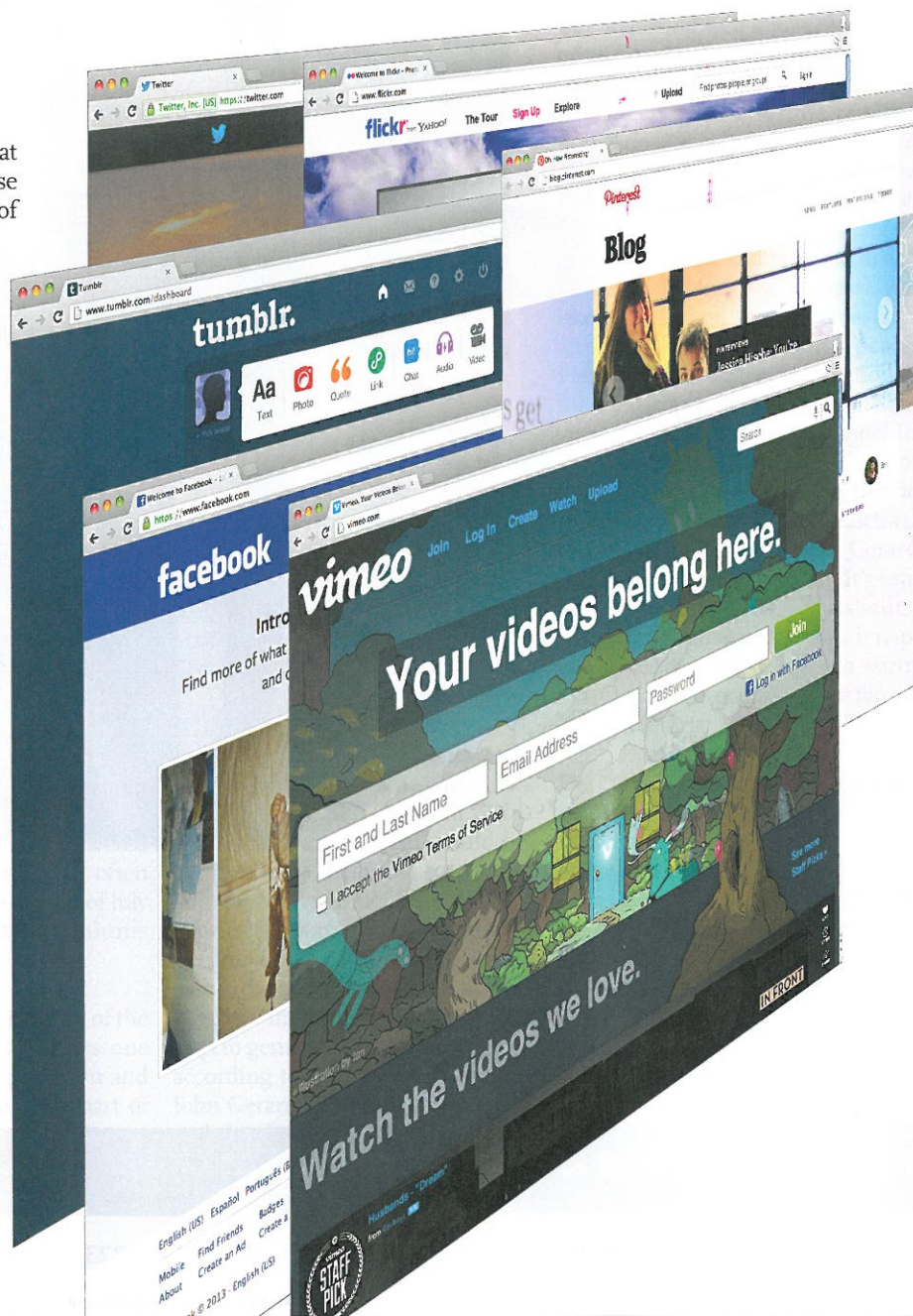
BY AMANDA KOLSON HURLEY

Banal tweets (“Just had an awesome sandwich at Corner Café!”), status updates steeped in false modesty (“So humbled to be named Attorney of the Year”), and viral cat videos: None of these would exist without social media.

Over the past few years, traffic on websites like Facebook and Twitter has exploded. According to a Pew Internet survey conducted in late 2012, two-thirds of all Internet users are now on Facebook, and 16 percent are on Twitter—an increase of 100 percent from two years before. Social media is the whole world’s public square, and sometimes, it can seem like a Babel of pointless chatter. But if you listen closely, you’ll hear smart people having serious conversations, too.

As the use of social media has grown, so has its role in professional networking and marketing. Although landscape architects have taken to social networks, they are somewhat less visible than other design professionals—owing to their smaller numbers, but also, perhaps, to their natural reticence. Most landscape architects would rather grade a site or research plant species than draw attention to themselves.

But making time to communicate the value of what you do is important, for the profession as well as your own reputation.





“The big challenge [for landscape architects] is becoming multifaceted storytellers,” says Sarah Kathleen Peck, who runs the popular Landscape Urbanism blog and handles communications for SWA Group. “Because the profession is smaller [than others], we need to be doing it more. If we don’t talk about what we do, there’s a lost opportunity to advocate for the work that we do and that we believe in.”

With so many social media platforms, and new ones popping up seemingly overnight, where’s the best place to begin? There’s no single answer that suits everyone, as each network operates differently. There’s also no consensus on which platforms are more or less valuable to landscape architects. But the communications experts who were interviewed for this article did agree on the cardinal rule of social media: Know what you want to get out of it.

ABOVE
Landscape Urbanism’s blog run by Peck.

RIGHT
CMG’s page on Facebook.

“Start with the end in mind,” counsels Amanda Walter, a communications consultant and coauthor of the book *Social Media in Action*, a guide for architecture, engineering, construction, and planning firms. “It’s essential to understand your goals and objectives. These will drive the decisions around your target audience and what you are trying to get them to do,” Walter and coauthor Holly Berkley write.

The biggest platform of all is Facebook, which has more than 1 billion users around the world. Not long ago, it was where you reconnected with childhood friends and griped about your daily commute, but the site is becoming more brand driven and now has 50 million pages for businesses, organizations, and fan groups.

Layout changes have made Facebook less of a straight news feed and more of a multimedia platform, so it’s a good place to share images. “I’ve noticed that on Facebook, people

are really hungry for images,” Peck observes. According to Facebook’s own analytics, including a photo in your post will increase engagement by 120 percent on average.

CMG—Conger Moss Guillard, based in San Francisco—is the firm Walter points to as savvy Facebook users. Scanning their image-rich company page reveals a few wise practices. They never bombard their fans, typically posting two to three times weekly. (Posting too frequently can lead to “dislikes.”) They know a lot of their audience is local, so they share landscape-related news from around the Bay Area. They’re generous, not self-centered: Out of eight posts made between late January and mid-February this year, only one directly promoted CMG’s work, and two indirectly.

This illustrates a key principle of Walter’s, which is to treat social media engagement as you would a cocktail party full of strangers. At a cocktail party, “[y]ou wouldn’t start loudly



LANDSCAPE URBANISM, TOP: CMG, BOTTOM

**GOOD CITIZENSHIP
ON TWITTER MEANS
VIEWING AND SHARING
OTHERS' CONTENT**

announcing your business and latest projects the second you stepped foot in the door," she and Berkley write in their book. "Not only would it be rude, but it would be a complete turnoff to all the other guests. Instead...Listen. Ask questions."

It also doesn't hurt to be funny. "The latest in _____ urbanism" was CMG's Facebook quip on a Design Observer essay about "container urbanism."

Still, Facebook isn't for everyone. Jason King, ASLA, is something of an old hand at social media, having founded the well-read blog Landscape + Urbanism back in 2007. Before he wrapped it up last year, the

blog was getting about 2,000 visitors a day, and King has nearly 2,000 Twitter followers—but Facebook seemed wrong, too personal. "I tried a Facebook page for my business," he says. "After about three weeks, I realized, I don't want a Facebook page for my business." Communications professionals say Facebook is best suited for designers with a strong local network and especially those who do residential design, a highly personalized service.

By contrast, Twitter—which streams pithy updates of up to 140 characters—is for "following" rather than "liking" or "friending." Photos don't display in a user's feed (although they can be posted and then accessed with a click). It's a logical place to share news like project updates, awards won, an office move, and so on. But it's more than a faceless ticker. Viewing and

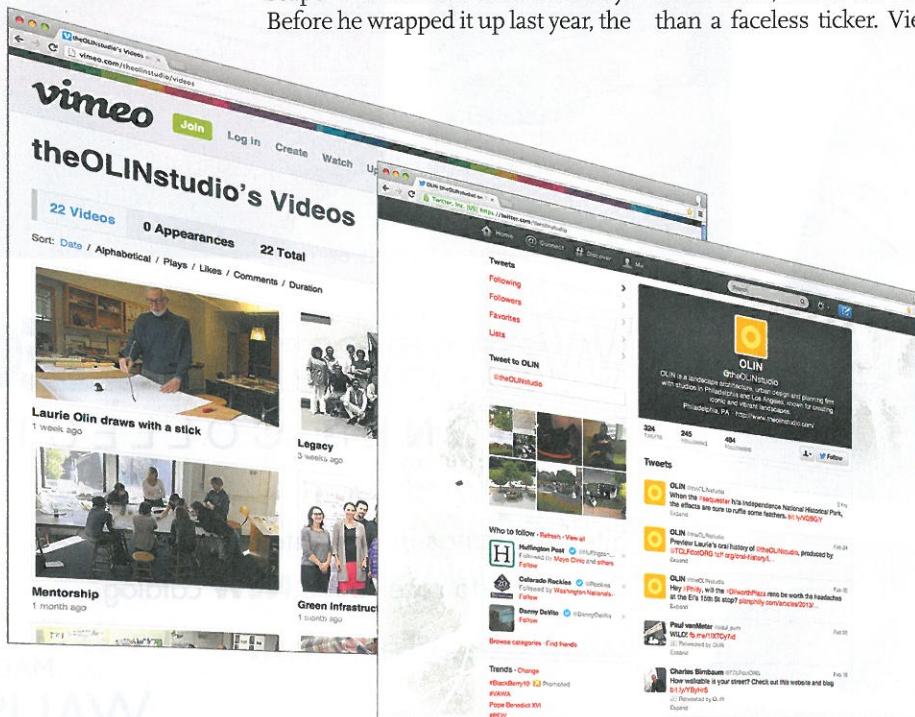
sharing other people's content is how you become a good Twitter citizen, and it connects you with your target audience—whether clients, collaborators, journalists, or another group. It may seem paradoxical, but a light, unselfish touch is what helps attract a personal following.

Communications staffers at landscape architecture firms say they see an uptick in their website traffic from using Twitter. "We do see, through Google Analytics, a spike," says Elizabeth Kulkarni of Andropogon. Daneil Mazone, formerly of OLIN, writes in an e-mail that "overall viewership of our website has increased by 40 percent from Twitter traffic alone." Back when OLIN started tweeting, she notes, the firm tried automating its feed. "Needless to say, this was not successful. You have to put the 'social' in social media."

Scanning your Twitter feed is also an efficient way to stay informed about what's new in the profession and the world, King points out. "When I was blogging a lot, I had my RSS feed, and there were probably 100 blogs I'd look at regularly," he remembers. "Twitter sort of allows you to filter things without having to follow every single post of every single [blog]."

Although reading and sharing other people's posts is good etiquette, you shouldn't restrict yourself to it. When it comes to transmitting other people's news, you'll never be the Associated Press. You have to contribute something that's yours and give people a reason to follow you.

BELOW
OLIN's Twitter
and Vimeo pages.



PRINCIPALS: YOU CAN'T JUST LET MARKETING STAFF RUN YOUR BLOG. YOU HAVE TO GET INVOLVED.

In other words, you've got to develop high-quality content. This is the big catch of social media: While it may take a few minutes to compose a tweet or post on Facebook, you need to have something fresh and worth talking about, like a new blog post, video, or photo album. And those things take time to assemble well. "I spend a lot of time writing articles," Peck says. "Putting together image collections takes time."

A blog is the medium that firms choose most often to present their content. (Even so, according to ZweigWhite's Social Media in Action Survey, only 16 percent of A/E firms had one as of 2011.) Blogs can be especially effective at revealing the personalities behind the projects—a level of connection that people crave on social media and that can have a positive, albeit indirect, impact on business.

"What people are really interested in is the point of view and personality of the firm," Walter says. Blogging, used in conjunction with Twitter and Facebook, drives traffic to firms' websites and can showcase the expertise of the firm leaders, or offer a taste of the office culture.

Take a broad view of your assets, both Walter and Peck recommend. You are more than the sum of your projects. "People, projects, and ideas: Those are your three assets as a design firm," Peck says, and you should

be telling good stories about all of them. Mazone recounts that one of OLIN's most popular blog posts was not about a project or award, but about founder Laurie Olin's love of bow ties. "That [bow tie] post went viral almost instantly," she writes—because it was lighthearted, fun, and driven by Olin's personality.

A successful blog can't be the province of communications and marketing staff; a cross section of the firm, at least, needs to be involved. If establishing the firm's principals as thought leaders is a goal, they will have to contribute—even if they're very busy or don't enjoy writing. "Find someone who's a good writer," who can work with your colleagues, advises Walter. "If you don't have one in-house, hire one." In this arrangement, the firm leader should still be the one coming up with the concepts. Peck says this kind of writing partnership has worked well at SWA,

where many of the experts don't speak English as a first language—which "doesn't mean they don't have great ideas."

The model that usually offers the best return on investment, Walter believes, is having a firm blog that you can promote through "side doors" (Facebook, Twitter, and their uncool but dependable sister, Linked In). "But you need to keep it updated," she adds. Hosting a blog isn't for the time starved. Sometimes, working with a PR firm to craft the occasional blog post and then place it in a well-read publication makes more sense than trying to grow your own audience from scratch.

Another, less time-intensive option is microblogging on a site like Tumblr. Tumblr posts often have



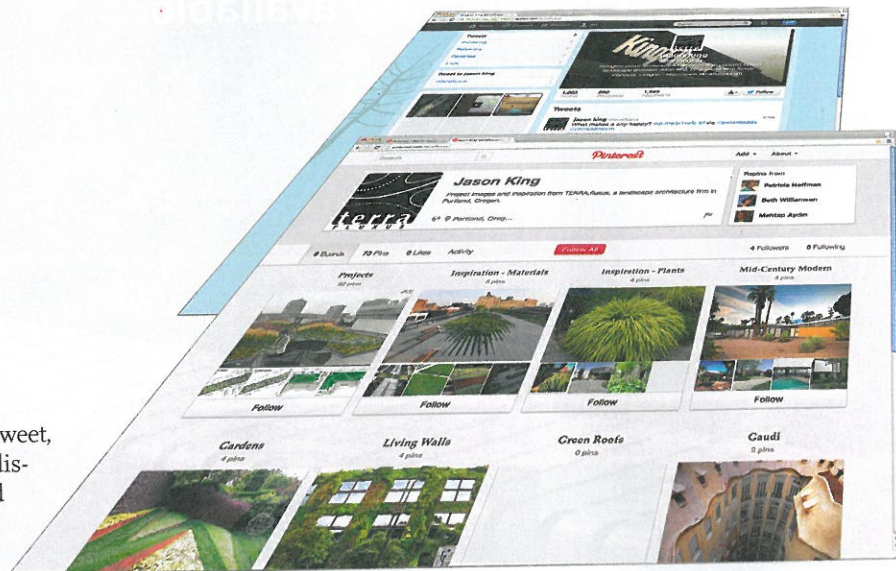
ABOVE
OLIN's "bow tie" blog post.

YOU CAN'T EXPECT LEADS
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TERRA.fluxus's Twitter
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Andropogon's Tumblr,
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no more words than a tweet,
but the platform can dis-
play large images and
videos like a standard
website or blog—a
bonus for a firm
that has a big
image library
or just likes to communicate visually.
Andropogon's Tumblr, called Androbogon, is a regularly refreshed stream of great images, animated GIFs, and videos, about half of which show the firm's own projects.



The return on investment in social media is notoriously hard to gauge. Firms shouldn't expect direct project leads from a blog, Twitter, or Facebook. But an active social media presence will boost your ranking on Google, Walter says, and of course there's the extra traffic to your website from the Twitter or Facebook clicks. Strengthening your connection with existing clients is one benefit that Mazone cites from OLIN's blog. Jason King, who now blogs at the website of his Portland, Oregon, practice, TERRA.fluxus, says that he has gotten work from social media, but at one remove.

"A lot of the business that I've gotten has come from speaking at a conference or leading a tour. The opportunities to do [those things] are directly related to...social media. It's putting you in the places and giving you that validity where you're going to find the job leads."

Mark Zuckerberg launched Facebook from his dorm room only in 2004; Tumblr just turned six, and Twitter, seven. Social media is still growing up—so experiment. Don't feel like you have to be on every platform, Walter urges; focus on the ones that feel comfortable. New sites are emerging all the time, like Pinterest, which launched in 2010 and already has millions of users. Conceived as a virtual pinboard, it could cause an exodus from Facebook—or, more likely, be claimed for different uses.

Peck suggests that landscape architects use Pinterest as an inspiration book, a place to keep photos of signage, seating, and plantings they like. Think you'll never be a "pinner"? Give it a year or two. ●

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TERRAFLUXUS, TOP; ANDROPOGON, BOTTOM