

# Executive Profile

## RENE BIHAN

### PRINCIPAL, SWA GROUP

**HQ:** San Francisco.  
**Background:** Started at SWA in 1988 as an entry-level landscape designer. Became partner in 1997, took over as managing partner of the Sausalito office in 1993 and opened the San Francisco office in 2003. SWA now has 190 employees in six offices. SWA was the landscape architect for the California Academy of Sciences, the four-building Foundry Square complex in San Francisco, and the condo tower One Rincon Hill.

**First job:** Odd-jobs for my father, who was a landscape contractor in Detroit.

**Education:** Bachelor's, landscape architecture from California State Polytechnic University; master's, landscape design from Harvard.

**Residence:** San Francisco (North Beach).

### Business strategy

**How's business:** Business is very good. We are very strong in overseas markets and are seeing a substantial rebound domestically as well. We are right back to the size we were in 2008.

**Biggest challenge for your business:** To keep the brand recognition

high for SWA. We're at the top of the heap now, but as we go deeper into the developing world we're having to work with less sophisticated development and construction teams.

**What will change at your company in the next year:** We have employees on the ground in Shanghai now.

**Goal yet to be achieved:** To do a major world-class public park project in San Francisco proper. We have won awards all over the world for projects like Beijing Finance Street, for Victoria Gardens (in Los Angeles), for downtown Salt Lake City, but somehow in San Francisco it hasn't happened for us.



### Management philosophy

**Guiding principles for good management:**

To educate at every level. We have to educate our clients as to why they should invest in our ideas. We have to educate our staff in terms of developing an idea to the absolute highest level that it can be.

**Best way to keep competitive edge:** Hire the best people coming out of school and invest the time to train and mentor them. The latter is more important than the previous.

**Why people like working for you:** There is the old adage that if you build a fence, you'll get sheep. We're really about giving people freedom, with proper mentoring.

**Mentor:** My father, Marcel Bihan. He came to this country penniless (from Brittany, France) and built a small business. The main lesson he taught me was that hard work, brains and sweat all had to be in sync.

### Judgment calls

**Best business decision:** To reorganize as a ESOP (Employee Stock Ownership Plan).

**Hardest lesson learned:** The best design doesn't necessarily get chosen. We had a situation where we had an absolutely correct solution to a site problem, but the client never really bought into it. We pushed too hard and they didn't like it, so they let us go.

**Toughest business decision:** Letting good people go in 2008. It's very difficult to hire good people; it's much more difficult to let them go.

**Biggest missed opportunity:** In 2008 I resigned from the San Francisco Art

Commission because I felt I needed to focus on restructuring the office. It went against my core value of public service and being a good citizen. It was a regrettable decision.

### True confessions

**Like best about job:** Working with so many creative and diverse people.

**Like least about job:** Agencies that issue 200-page (request for proposals) with dozens of requirements that have nothing to do with the quality of the project.

**Pet peeve:** Trying to get people to clean up after themselves. Working with creative types is like herding cats.

**Most respected competitor:** There are a lot of companies being formed overseas by people who were trained and educated in the U.S. that are going to be dynamite. Shanghai-based Turenscape won three 2010 American Society of Landscape Architects awards this year, which was unprecedented.

**First choice for a new career:** I might try industrial design. I have a passion for well-designed products.

### Predilections

**Most influential book:** "Designs for the Real World" by Victor Papanek.

**Favorite cause:** Art education for youth.

**Favorite movie:** "Raging Bull."

**Favorite restaurant:** La Folie.

**Favorite way to spend free time:** With my two sons in Tahoe.

**On your iPod:** Everything from Baby Beethoven to Public Enemy.

**Automobile:** 1998 Audi A4 with 190,000 miles on it.

— J.K. Dineen ■