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The Construction Issue

Top Builders & Designers, Top Projects

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IN THE 1980S, A FORMER GOLF DRIVING RANGE WAS TRANSFORMED INTO THE U.S. 280 ENTRY FOR MEADOW BROOK CORPORATE PARK. NIMROD LONG & ASSOCIATES, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS, TURNED REQUIRED STORM RUNOFF RETENTION INTO AN AMENITY, A PAIR OF LAGOONS WITH A WATERFALL VISIBLE FROM THE ROAD LEADING INTO THE OFFICE PARK.



City Shapers

The state's leading landscape architecture and urban planning firm was a formative part of the economic metamorphosis of Birmingham. Nimrod Long's handiwork shaped city center parks and U.S. 280 corporate campuses and is currently sculpting New Urban pathways in Mountain Brook, Hoover, Vestavia Hills and Trussville.

BY PHILIP MORRIS

PHOTOS BY SYLVIA MARTIN

Someone driving down the parkway at The Colonnade, a sweeping road lined with willow oaks whose tall straight trunks clip by like living columns, may not give it a thought, but this is a work of land-

scape architecture. Though it seems inevitable now, the site at the intersection of I-459 and U.S. 280 in Birmingham started as a clean slate in 1988.

The Colonnade Parkway, which harmo-

nizes office buildings, parking lots and a shopping village with continuous open space punctuated with lagoons and a grand cascade fountain is one of hundreds of large and small scale projects that Nimrod Long



FOR THE SUMMIT, A HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL NEW SHOPPING DESTINATION DEVELOPED BY BAYER PROPERTIES OF BIRMINGHAM, THE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS WORKED WITH ARCHITECTS CMH IN CREATING AN INVITING PEDESTRIAN PROMENADE FRONTING THE SHOPS. THEY ALSO DESIGNED THE PARKWAY AND PARKING AREAS.

& Associates of Birmingham has designed since the firm was founded in 1978. In the process, their work has helped change the face of the metropolitan area and enhanced many locations beyond.

“We came along as a firm at a fortunate time,” says Nimrod Long III, who heads the firm of 12, including nine landscape architects, from an office in a restored warehouse on cobble stone-paved Morris Avenue downtown. “When we started in the early 1980s, Birmingham was being transformed from a depressed heavy-industry town into a diverse and vibrant service economy. They had just opened I-459 and Taylor-Mathis [an Atlanta developer] had set a benchmark for quality on U.S. 280 with the Inverness development. Riverchase Galleria, Meadow Brook Corporate Park, International Park, The Colonnade, Liberty Park and other large-scale developments followed quickly.”

Nimrod Long & Associates was involved in all of the latter. One of the most visible and dramatic in its impact, the 175-acre Meadow Brook Corporate Park, serves as a good illustration of what landscape architects bring to the table. The site on U.S. 280 in Shelby County had most recently held a golf driving range, so the frontage was mostly open field. In developing the master plan, the landscape architects laid out the main entry drive to run between the only stand of mature trees. They took a functional requirement for rain runoff holding ponds, usually ugly basins stuck away somewhere, and turned them into the signature feature: A 13-acre lake animated by a



huge water jet which runs up over a waterfall, under the entry road and into a lower 2-acre lake.

“There had been flooding below before the development,” says Long. “Those lakes can rise three feet and still keep the release at about 60 percent of what it was when there was nothing on the site but grass. And here it serves as an amenity. People love water. It’s another form of open space.” The landscape architect, looking at the bigger picture as they are trained to do, also convinced Daniel Corp., the developer, that the grand view across Meadow Book’s lagoons and sweeping lawn would be an important feature along U.S. 280 as it built up — a fact clearly visible now.

While some landscape architecture firms might focus on particular clients or kinds of projects, Nimrod Long & Associates represents the breadth of the practice providing land planning, landscape architecture and urban design. Clients include developers,

architects, general contractors, corporations, municipal, county and state agencies, as well as individuals.

“We are usually responsible for everything outside the building, and many times we will work with architects on the siting of buildings, too,” explains Long. “In a master plan we handle the layout of roads, the relationship of different uses, location of buildings and parking, open space amenities, pedestrian and vehicular connections. Planting becomes part of the design, but if we do a good site plan and road layout, putting parking and service areas where they are supposed to be, you don’t have to come in and try to hide things with plants. We feel simpler landscaping—grass, trees, fewer kinds of plants—are better looking and easier to maintain in the long run for most large-scale projects.”

The firm lists its projects (see box for a selection) under these categories: urban design, parkway design, greenway and trail

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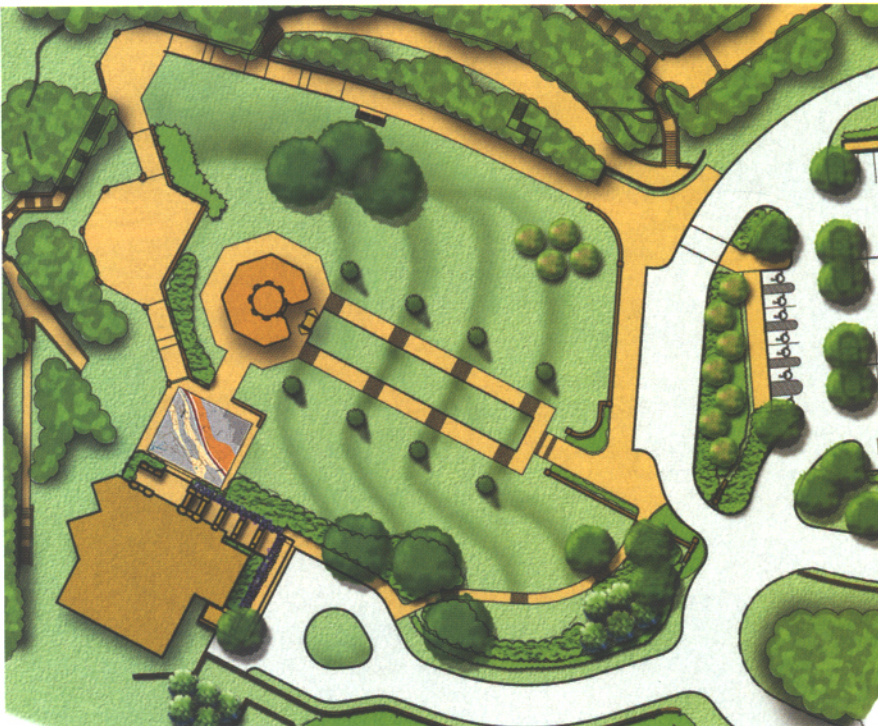
NIMROD LONG & ASSOCIATES DEVELOPED THE MASTER PLAN FOR THE PRESERVE, A 300-ACRE PEDESTRIAN-ORIENTED NEIGHBORHOOD IN HOOVER, BEING DEVELOPED BY USS REAL ESTATE.

design, comprehensive site planning, master planning, landscape development and recreation planning. Sometimes a project will include more than one category, such as International Park for BE&K, a large engineering firm, which included master planning, parkway design and comprehensive site planning. Under landscape development fall the largest number; recent ones include The Summit shopping center and two new 11-story office buildings in downtown Birmingham, Concord Center and One Federal Place.

Some of their current projects represent the diversity of clients and project types that Nimrod Long & Associates likes to maintain:

- Birmingham-Southern College — With Dave Giddons as project lead, the firm was retained to do a “beautification” plan, a process that quickly evolved into a comprehensive reworking of the campus, reinforcing the original quad and organizing new building sites to create additional quads, removing an existing road that divided student housing from the rest of the campus, replacing an ugly concrete plaza opposite the expanded student center with

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Photo by Dave Giddens



OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS, NIMROD LONG & ASSOCIATES HAS OVERSEEN THE TRANSFORMATION OF BIRMINGHAM-SOUTHERN COLLEGE'S CAMPUS. THIS BEFORE/AFTER PAIR SHOWS AN UNDER-USED CONCRETE PLAZA REPLACED BY AN INVITING TERRACE THAT DOUBLES AS OUTDOOR DINING FOR THE EXPANDED STUDENT CENTER.

an inviting outdoor terrace, connecting all areas with new sidewalks lined with classic light standards and screening unsightly views with plantings.

- **The Preserve** — For USS Real Estate, a major land owner and developer in the Birmingham area, the firm master planned a new 300-acre traditional neighborhood development with sidewalks, parks, a range of house types and lot sizes with smaller lots near a village center and estate lots on outer streets. "This movement toward walking neighborhoods can have a huge impact on communities and lifestyle," Long says.

- **Aldridge Gardens** — On land donated by longtime Birmingham nurseryman Eddie Aldridge, the City of Hoover, under direction of a non-profit group, is turning the former residential site with an existing lake into a public garden. The firm is working with the accomplished garden designer, Mary Zahl, establishing the layout of roads, walks and major shrub placement and working with her on detailed plantings.

- **Vulcan Park** — For Vulcan Park Foundation, project landscape architect Joel Eliason is heading the development of a master plan for the park, returning it to the original 1938 WPA-era character with native stone walls and under-stated plantings. Terraces below the tower, wiped out in a late 1960s modernization, will be recreated.

Also currently in Nimrod Long & Associates offices, and a source of great satisfaction, are the sidewalk and trail projects for Mountain Brook, Hoover, Vestavia Hills and Trussville. The first phase of the Mountain Brook system, which began in the early 1990s incorporated disconnected existing sidewalks into loops linking the suburb's three commercial villages, growing from 4.5 miles to the current 22 miles. This will expand to nearly 40 miles over the next five to 10 years. They have transformed the area into a neighborhood in which walking dogs, jogging or pushing strollers are a vital part of life.

Such work gives Nimrod Long & Associates, and the substantial number of landscape architecture firms now established across Alabama, a real sense of accomplishment. "Our philosophy as a firm is that every time we work on a project we ought to enhance the overall quality of life of the community. We want to leave a legacy of projects that do that." The profession promises something of the same for the whole state. •

Philip Morris is a nationally recognized authority on urban design, an outspoken critic of bad design, and a frequent and entertaining lecturer on both subjects. Two years ago he retired as editor at large at Southern Living magazine, for which he is a contributing editor. He lives in Birmingham.