



An aerial photograph of the Fallen Heroes Memorial in Alabama. The brown and tan bricks represent the fatigues worn by service men and women during the War on Terror. The concrete and rock salt paving symbolizes the sand on the battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan. (Photo submitted by WAS Design)

Providing a Sense of

PLACE

WAS Design celebrates 10 years as Landscape Architecture alumni return to roots

By Vanessa Beeson

NEARLY TWENTY YEARS AGO, THREE landscape architecture students got to know each other in their design-build class at Mississippi State. They joked how they should go into business together. That joke developed into an idea that turned into an eventual business venture. Through smart strategy, hard work, and dedication, the business celebrates its tenth anniversary this year.

CHAD WATKINS, JARED ACY, and Troy Strunk, landscape architecture alumni who attended MSU from 1996–2001, are the three principals of WAS Design. The firm's corporate headquarters are situated in Foley, Alabama with satellite offices in Mobile, Alabama and Jackson, Mississippi.

After graduation and a few years in the workforce, Watkins and Acy took jobs in the same small firm in Gulf Shores. Strunk was working for a firm in Pennsylvania.

"We started talking and decided we could go out on our own," Strunk said. "I moved down from Pennsylvania. We, along with our families, took a leap of faith and trusted we could get enough work. It started out with just the three of us in a small rented space in Gulf Shores."

The firm now consists of the three principals, three more licensed landscape architects, two designers, a draftsman, a graphic designer, and an office manager. WAS Design offers three primary services: traditional landscape architectural design, community and land planning consultation and design, and marketing services including three-dimensional perspectives and site plans. They have a broad client base which includes industrial, governmental, institutional, and hospitality sectors. They also work with private developers and public planners on residential and community design.

One particular emphasis is destination design, which describes the project the group recently executed at the new Courtyard by Marriott in Starkville.

The project is adjacent to the Mill at MSU, a \$40 million economic development project that transformed the historic John M. Stone Cotton Mill – formerly known as Mississippi State's E.E. Cooley Building – into a 10,000 square-foot conference and meeting complex. The Courtyard by Marriott's outdoor features a uniquely-shaped pool that includes a

wading area with fountains. The nearby whirlpool spa includes a waterfall feature and sitting area. Just outside of the pool area, guests can cozy up to one of two fireplaces or take a seat around the outdoor bar.

Watkins spoke of returning to their roots in Starkville for this project.

"It's neat to get to do some work back where we spent so much time, to play a part in a revitalized, reimagined area of Starkville is exciting," he said.

He explains how destination design translates across sectors.

"Destination design is something we incorporate beyond a hospitality setting. We also utilize the concept in residential and tourism design," he said. "It is about creating a quality of experience, whether you are at home or on vacation."

Watkins considers three noteworthy projects among highlights over the course of the last ten years: the Centennial Plaza and Bell Tower, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the city of Foley, Alabama; a complete landscape renovation of the Pensacola International Airport; and the Welcome Center for the Alabama Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau in Gulf Shores, Alabama.

"We designed a water feature for the Welcome Center that was unlike anything we'd done before," Watkins said. "It is a fountain with three dolphins coming out of the water. It was designed as a landmark and traditionally, you would characterize it as a photo opportunity. Now those opportunities are called selfie spots. We designed the fountain for an optimum selfie, staying current and relevant regarding how people memorialize their trips today."

While Watkins is proud of the successes of the last ten years, he said the firm also had its share of challenges. He explained how strategy and caution helped them weather those storms.

"We started off really lean, began as inexpensively as possible, and we do



LEFT: Left to right: Chad Watkins, Jared Acy, and Troy Strunk at the Courtyard by Marriott in Starkville, Mississippi.

our best to keep costs as low as possible," Watkins said. "When the economic downturn of 2008 hit, which especially hurt housing starts, hospitality, and tourism, three of our core markets, we were prepared. Then the oil spill hit, and that impacted the market even more, and we were able to get through that. Running lean really served us well for that three or four year stretch."

Now, however, the company is growing and expanding, opening a new office in Mobile in 2015 and recently expanding into the Jackson market.

"Having been in business for ten years, we have a track record. It's easier to sell what you've done than what you can do. I am looking forward to expanding deeper into our market verticals like hospitality and expanding across different sectors within the communities we already serve," he said. "You can't get the experience until you've been given a shot and we are thankful to those people who gave us that shot."

He said his degree at MSU has been beneficial.

"About two years in, I realized I learned an awful lot, the further into my career,

the more I look back on the things I've learned and resource that knowledge," he said.

His advice to current students is to think big.

"Think bigger when you get into that first job. You are not just a production employee. Everything is about solving problems and finding solutions," he said. "A young person can be a real asset to whoever they are supporting. Pay attention. Our field is a visual field; landscape architecture is all around us. The power of observation will provide more growth in this field than any time at a desk."

Acy agreed that field experience is essential for a burgeoning landscape architect.

"When you are in school, go to work for a successful working firm where you can get the hands-on professional experience," he recommended.

Acy said the firm has stayed busy in the field, and discussed specifically the company's expansion into the Mississippi market. He is the principal who oversees the firm's Jackson office.

"Being in a capital city like Jackson has diversified our portfolio significantly,"

Acy said. "We are currently engaged in a broad spectrum of projects that include a government facility, college campus, and a nonprofit entity within the state."

The firm recently began working on the Mississippi Department of Transportation District-1 Headquarters in Tupelo, Mississippi. The project's scope includes planning a gated main entrance, outdoor gathering areas and green spaces, and irrigation. The firm is also designing a pedestrian corridor for the heart of campus at Copiah-Lincoln Community College. Also in Copiah County, WAS Design is helping make a camp for kids with disabilities come to life. According to the foundation's website, Mississippi's Toughest Kids Foundation will be the only fully-accessible camp for children and adults with serious illnesses and physical, mental, and emotional challenges.

"The core of the camps will feature two central greens or pedestrian parks. All of the main facilities and cabins will front the greens and will be connected by a series of covered walkways," Acy described.

"Other amenities include a pool and lazy river, ball fields, a Christmas tree farm,

equestrian center, ropes course, natural creek, a fifteen-acre lake, archery, wildlife observation, star gazing, a garden, and a series of multipurpose trails."

The year-round facility will work in partnership with special needs groups to provide great camping experiences for children throughout the state.

"Working with organizations like the Mississippi's Toughest Kids Foundation means a lot to us as a team," Acy said. "It gives us a chance to help and honor members of our community who need it most."

Another community-based project, The Fallen Heroes Memorial, in Alabama seeks to honor those who served, and ultimately, lost their lives for their country.

Located at the U.S.S. Battleship Memorial Park in Mobile, Alabama, the memorial was designed and constructed to honor all of the men and women from the state of Alabama who died while serving the country since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the U.S.

The symbolic design incorporates all five branches of the U.S. military, includes an etching of the names of each service member who died, and pays tribute to the twin towers of the World Trade Center, while drawing an emblematic connection to American soil.

Acy said as the company continues to fulfill the needs of the communities in which they serve while also expanding into markets across Alabama and Mississippi, as well as parts of Florida; the team looks forward to growing the business in the next ten years and beyond.

"At some point, we are kind of teetering on that edge of being able to transition from working in the business every day to working on the business every day," he said. "That's one thing from a strategic standpoint that we would like to move toward. Projects always take precedent over how we can improve our market and expand our footprint. We'd like to grow in that manner." ❖