

An Eclectic Path

Following her interests has led Clara Kwon on a journey between city and country

TEXT BY ERIC GORDON, OALA

This is the third in a three-part series that explores the variety of options available to students upon graduating with a degree in landscape architecture. This series looks at the choices made by three successful young professionals as they reflect on their first five years of post-graduate work experience. After graduating from the same class at the University of Guelph with their Bachelor of Landscape Architecture degrees in 2005, each has taken a different route towards their current positions, which are in themselves diverse. They have each chosen different geographical and cultural environments in which to work, representing isolated, rural, and urban contexts, as well as public sector, design-build/entrepreneur, and private sector placements, respectively.

In this issue, we profile Clara Kwon, OALA, a landscape architect with du Toit Allsopp Hillier, an interdisciplinary firm located in downtown Toronto.

Clara Kwon, OALA, spent two years at the University of Waterloo in the undergraduate Planning Program before pursuing her BLA at the University of Guelph. During her studies at Guelph she spent a summer working at Humber Nurseries in Brampton, Ontario, in an encyclopedic department of more than 3,000 varieties of perennials. Upon graduating, Clara followed her interest in organic farming out to B.C., where she spent five weeks helping out on farms on an island that was completely off the grid.

This interest in farming led her to a book by Masanobu Fukuoka called *The One-Straw Revolution*, which explores a philosophy of farming whereby a symbiotic mix of edible plants naturally forms a self-sustaining source of food—requiring minimal human input. This reading prompted her to visit a small farm in Quebec to see first hand how this technique was being implemented.

After her agricultural foray, Clara headed back to Toronto to jump into the practice of landscape architecture. As she explains, "I was very fortunate to be hired as a landscape architectural intern at Victor Ford & Associates, a small office in the Trinity-Bellwoods neighbourhood of Toronto. It was great to work across the street from a wonderful park, close to a lot of galleries, and for a very nurturing employer." After a year with Victor Ford & Associates, Clara made a big move to an even bigger city—New York. She had landed a job as a landscape architectural intern with Ken Smith, Landscape Architect, one of the most renowned offices in the country.



02

While working at Ken Smith's office, Clara found herself involved with exciting projects such as a penthouse terrace facing Central Park, and Manhattan's East River Waterfront. Her duties ranged from co-managing the penthouse project to conducting research, coordinating consultants, producing drawings, building models, and coordinating with architects, engineers, and fabricators.

Clara explains that she learned a lot during her time in New York. In particular, she learned to work efficiently in order to keep up with such a fast-paced environment. She also had to learn how to position presentation materials specifically for the viewer, communicating ideas clearly and precisely—down to the last word. Clara notes how working in the New York context taught her a lot about hard materials, as most of the firm's projects were built on a deck or platform of some sort, and seldom were they dealing with an undisturbed sub-grade. However, it was in part this hard-edged quality of New York life that prompted her to return home to the Toronto area. As Clara explains: "I love the city, it's where I feel at home. I love the concentration of people, ideas, food, art, and music. It's stimulating and inspiring. It can also be exhausting. I really missed seeing trees and front gardens and chirping birds (besides pigeons!) while living in New York, although I did love the opportunity to see some of



03

the greatest art in the world with just a swipe of the MetroPass. I really felt disconnected from plants in the city, however, and feel rejuvenated by spending some time in the country."

So that's exactly what she did. Clara left New York and took up a position with the Kayanase Ecological Restoration Company on the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ontario. There she researched business opportunities towards the goal of expanding the company's services to include landscape design. During her time there, Clara also explored other interests, such as taking a medicinal herb course, or spending two weeks as an architectural resident with the Banff Centre for the Arts where, with a small group, she explored the theme of the "critical landscape." After six months with Kayanase Ecological Restoration, Clara headed back to Toronto where she found a placement with du Toit Allsopp Hillier (DTAH)—a highly regarded architectural, urban design, and landscape architectural firm.

Clara has been with DTAH for more than a year, and has been working on a variety of projects. She has been doing some contract administration for the new campus at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT) in Oshawa, where she says she's learning how things get built and getting a better taste of the legal side of the practice. Clara also worked on an 80-acre master plan for the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre near St. Catharines in Ontario's wine country. On this project, she worked with the architectural firm Diamond Schmitt to help elevate the centre into a world-class hub for agricultural research.



04



05

Currently, Clara is involved in the design of a mixed-use subdivision where, under the direction of John Hillier and Brent Raymond, she is helping to create concept designs and site plan applications.

Clara is looking forward to learning about all aspects of the practice, and feels DTAH is a great environment in which to do so, due to their mix of people, skills, and services. It looks as though Clara has returned to the city for the long-term, but how will she manage her clear affinity for plants and nature in an urban context?

Clara admits that getting out of the city from time to time is something she feels she needs to do. For instance, she is currently taking an organic farming class that meets once a month near Kingston, Ontario. Urban environments inevitably offer a larger pool of employers to draw from, but for Clara it wasn't a numbers game—it was always about fit; it was about finding a place that matched her professional goals, as well as her unending curiosity. She is particularly fond of the area near her office: "DTAH is at Bloor and Yonge, Toronto, where restored

and degraded nature and high- and low-brow culture convene. It's a quick drive to the Don River and Evergreen Brick Works, a short walk down to Yonge Street for bargain shopping, cheap lunch, psychic readings, and strip clubs, and to Yorkville for designer labels, ladies who lunch, \$100 olive oils, and the Royal Ontario Museum. It's a great cross-section of Toronto."

Maybe the strongest reason Clara keeps returning to the city is that for her it is home. Clara's career since finishing her BLA has been all over the map. She has followed her interests wherever they may lead, and has grown personally and professionally as a result. When asked what advice she might have for new graduates, her response is advice that she has clearly followed herself, and with great results: "Be curious and follow your heart."

BIO/ ERIC GORDON, OALA, WORKS AT BROOK MCILROY INC. AND IS A MEMBER OF THE GROUND EDITORIAL BOARD.

01/	Clara Kwon worked on DTAH's master plan for the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre.
IMAGE/	DTAH
02/	During her residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts, Kwon visited the Columbia Icefields and did two installations.
IMAGE/	Clara Kwon
03/	The installation of pavers on the East River waterfront in NYC
IMAGE/	Clara Kwon
04/	North Pond at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology in Oshawa (UOIT)
IMAGE/	DTAH
05/	South Pond at UOIT
IMAGE/	DTAH