

# Landscape Alchemist

J. Trout Lowen



ERIC MOORE

The walls of Oslund and Associates'

tunnel-like offices

above Washington

Avenue are bare brick,

with an emphasis on

bare. The few interior

walls are white, and,

like the brick, blank. A

blank canvas, agrees founding principal and landscape architect Thomas Oslund. "That's the way we like

it."

That minimalist look isn't surprising, given the 50-year-old Oslund's admiration for Japanese design and Buddhist philosophy—a quotation from the Daisen-In Temple in Kyoto hangs over his desk for inspiration—and his penchant for breaking things down to the elemental.

Oslund likens his approach to design to peeling an onion. Whether an urban park, a private terrace, or a corporate campus, he analyzes a site as an archeologist might, stripping away its history until it gives up its

secrets.

“It’s much more about revealing and understanding the landscape in a different way than just decorating,” he explains. “We always start with trying to understand the site, why it is the way it is; the historic and geological implications.” Finally, Oslund adds the fantasy aspect. “What it could be,” he says with a quick grin.

Oslund’s design alchemy has earned more than two dozen local, national, and international awards, both before and since he founded Oslund and Associates in 1998 with managing partner Jay Coatta. In 1992, Oslund received the prestigious Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome. Last year, his design for a penthouse garden at Washburn Mills won the American Society of Landscape Architects Design Honor Award.

For his current project, the 7.5-acre Gold Medal Park adjacent to the new Guthrie Theater, Oslund found inspiration in the way water flows toward the Mississippi River. His design features a raised mound and serpentine pathways. Nineteen benches built from exotic ipe wood slats are illuminated from beneath by LED lights that give off a gentle blue glow. Work on the park was complete in November, but the area remains closed to the public until Arbor Day. The new plantings, including nearly 300 trees, need time to take, he explains. Until then, the Guthrie’s Endless Bridge offers an excellent aerial overview of the park—a view that was also one of the site’s challenges. Oslund wanted his design to be as successful from 50 feet above as it is for those strolling through it. “That’s the magic,” Oslund says. “The juxtaposition of that spatially is quite amazing because it’s like two different places. And I think it’s pretty cool that that happens.”

*J. Trout Lowen is a freelance writer and editor.*

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