

## PLANNING A LOW COST LANDSCAPING STUDIO AS A CAREER START FOR YOUNG PROFESSIONALS

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### *Abstract*

*Despite the market opportunities, dramatically low ratios of the Romanian landscape architecture graduates choose to start private businesses in their professional field. In an attempt to improve these facts, the present paper provides some of the start-up data required for any business plan. Following a brief market analysis there are identified the main design and counseling jobs that a small landscape studio should be able to perform. The personnel requirements, the IT infrastructure (hardware and software) as well as miscellaneous equipment scheme are configured for minimum start-up costs. The medium financial indicator of the landscaping specialist work-hour is calculated after integrating the liquidation period of the studio assets at 1/3 of their usage expectancy and the general benefit ratio at 10%. In conclusion, the landscape architecture students are advised to gather up the start-up sum for the rewarding business that they are preparing for.*

**Key words:** *business management, landscape venture, residential landscaping, Romanian market, studio infrastructure.*

### INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the landscape architecture graduates that are looking to develop independent careers in their area of expertise in Romanian market context, in support of their business plan building effort (Stark, 2003).

Romanian landscaping market, 10 years after the field professionalization start, still has together the goods and the bads of the new-found niches:

For landscape design, the customers are few but generally wealthy these days, as it was the case 10 years ago;

The landscape architecture and planning branches target the public sector, but this is hardly a feasible choice for a start-up venture, since abusive national regulations favour newcomers exclusion from public auctions; private enterprises occasionally require landscape expertise for marketing purposes, but occasions are few and inexperienced small firms involvement are rarely accepted;

Landscape restoration is a shallow niche to point at, since historic gardens and parks are scarce in this country.

This state of facts leaves the new businesses with the small to medium sized residential landscaping opportunities, extended at best

with consultancy services targeted at public administrators or public services contractors that might require landscape marketing expertise (Russel, 2010), mainly for commercial or political-aimed manipulation efficiency (Lazar-Bâra, 2011, 2012).

The mass group of the residential services consumers consist of several market segments (Thilmany, 2008) by demographic and cultural considerations, but they share common lifestyle features and buying behaviour. They are usually people between their 30's to 50's, socially active, living in suburbs, strongly connected with city life, travelling abroad on a regular basis, having above average self-image standard, highly vulnerable to marketing techniques but also relying on their friend's advice, they would rather go for top advertised products than investigate proposals based on quality assessments. Their culture concerning environmental and landscape substance is not above the general society's level – unsustainably low – while their formal expectations concerning the gardens they pay for are high, since their landscape quality benchmarks are built mostly on short exotic escapades or based upon soft media's visual marketing. They pay for landscape services rather for social image or property value

improvement, since they rarely can appreciate the intimate garden living.

Unlike the case in western cultures, they are rarely willing to sacrifice personal comfort or change lifestyle in support of social or environmental sustainability, since they rarely pay for anything that fails to provide immediate benefits.

Despite the narrow opportunities it offers these days to new-comers, landscaping market generally follows social development, and Romania is slowly but steadily going west with consumer behaviours' changing under the model's pressure. In Sweden for example, the concern for climate change is increasingly determining common people counteracting attitudes, up to lifestyle changes (van Borgstede et al., 2013). It can be presumed this is also a predictable trend for Romania, just as it is right to anticipate civic and social responsibility increases in the following decades.

As a well organized western landscape market reference, the USA case is well illustrated in the book of Walter Rogers – *The Professional Practice of Landscape Architecture: a complete guide to starting and running your own firm*. The national context presented in the book should be a bench mark for many European countries in terms of professional regulations, prospects, responsibility and revenue as compared to the incomes in other professional fields. In the USA, just as in the other old landscaping tradition countries, the private-sector clients are more diverse than in Romania, ranging between private companies, NGO-s and individuals with various social and cultural backgrounds (Rogers, 2011). The landscape business usually don't limit to these, approaching most of the areas that a landscape architect is prepared to cope with – according to Walter Rogers, in 2011 there were 12 main categories: sustainability-targeted projects; international projects; community development – that used to be a niche in Romania until the 2008 real estate market collapse; streetscape contracts – also a declining market, but owing mostly to the EU financing changes (Lazar-Bâra, 2012); parks and leisure; private businesses site developments; urban and

regional planning – still unavailable to most landscape professionals

Compared to constructions, real estate, architecture or public services, this is a small sector in economy considering the financial and human resource requirements, but the market potential on middle to long term perspective is high.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to plan a sustainable start kit for a small residential landscaping studio, the paper will rely on a synthetic market analysis – focusing on present state, but also depicting tendencies.

Based on landscape practitioners' empirical observations, the Romanian landscape consumer's buying behaviour will be analyzed using the SWOT framework (Russel, 2010) (Table 1).

The market analysis shows several niche features (Stark, 2003) : the low customer and subject diversity define an easy targetable market for residential landscaping, with accessible clients; the business growth potential is only restricted by the national economic backward state – while global perspectives are quite positive, considering the expertise requirements to mitigate at least the environmental threats (Heinberg, 2011); there is no established market leader and the ways are open to new comers.

To sustainably approach this design and counseling niche, the landscape architecture graduate's competencies should be solid in the fields of landscape composition, environmental sciences, plants and planting design, building materials, garden history and design, visual and computer representations, project management, small business marketing and management. Further knowledge is required for the entrepreneur to be able to cut costs on transportation, IT, legal and accounting services to fulfill the client's price expectation: driving license, building and ensuring basic maintenance to the IT infrastructure, basic knowledge of market, environmental, building and urban development regulations, trademark issues as well as basic accounting skills.

Table 1. Buying behaviour of the Romanian single family residential landscaping customers

	Strengths (favouring quality / competition)	Weaknesses (unsustainable)	Opportunities	Threats
Motivations	Personal (species aesthetic preference / nostalgia); functional (sanity/ security/ healthy food/ privacy)	Economic (property value investment); social status; fashion; keeping family busy at home	Western culture offensive; middle class protection and development policies	Consumerism; General and environmental culture decline
Offer prospecting	Internet; friends; garden fairs and cultural events; university and professional body recommendations	Glossy media and books; highway and mall advertising; contractor's and reseller's recommendations	Foreign fairs and public competitions; national market transparency increase	Decrease of foreign pressures toward the opening of the market would consecrate landscape formalism and mediocrity
Customer benchmarks	Instinct and logics (rare); local/ regional aesthetic landmarks; personal experience; professional advice	Tourism promoted landscapes (exotic or national); commercial brochures and advertising induced references; miscellaneous advice	National landscape references – promoted for tourism support; foreign reference aids	Exotic holiday landscapes; foreign landscaping materials advertising
Buying decision	Service reliability; personal connection; design coherence; business portfolio – similar tasks, on similar sites; environmental, social, urban and cultural commitment; price justification	Advertising; graphic quality of the designs; design speed – regardless the subject complexity; business portfolio – public clients; lowest price	Site events (small disasters, sanitary or phytopathological emergencies, various building phases, occasional functional peaks – weddings, receptions, new fauna etc)	Contractor's preferences; joined commercial proposals of contractors and landscape architecture offices; the businesses' premises accessibility; seasonal preference (usually on spring, before Easter)

The business plan for a starter – especially on a niche market – is not facultative (Stark, 2003). Written in a synthetic manner, it should contain at least the following (Stark, 2003; Bangs Jr., 2005) : a market analysis – structure, competition, tendencies; marketing strategy – operable niches, business identity, pricing, promotion plan-client reaching, sales potential; a financial analysis – expenses/earning for one year, liabilities/assets' values; a financial strategy – collections, insurances and back-ups (fundamental for Romanian starters), cash-flow, investments; a general business strategy; the technical operations' planning – contracts and management, intellectual property protection, licensure (for connected fields), project management and work flow, asset's maintenance; human resource strategy – skills, tasks and responsibilities need and forecasts, labor costs, performance, team management. Specific to a small landscaping business is the flexibility requirement – since design offices should capitalize on the larger projects' collaboration opportunities.

To build the minimum asset list needed in a residential landscaping studio, the paper analyses the firm tasks that require most of the businesses' resources in Romanian context, as requirement drivers:

- Marketing: market identity – management decision followed by promotional material's production; advertising and contact maintenance – web page construction and maintenance, paper and social media presence, public events presence – physical presence mobile assets (banners, roll-ups, kiosks and business fair stalls, mobile multimedia assets); business headquarters (the design of the work spaces and of the reception areas, architectural signaling)
- Landscape studio work (production) : documentation, base plan assembly, analysis, general proposal – blue-print production and client presentation material (Cantrell et al., 2010), opinion documentation and contractor required blue-prints, product specifications and technical memorandums.

- Field work: documentation visits – site measurements, picture taking / movie capturing, soil and plant identification and/or sample collection; client interviews – command outlines formulation, contract discussions, proposal blue-print discussions; set-up assistance – plan picketing / on-site blue-print adaptation, input material quality control, subcontractor’s monitoring – irrigation (Smith et al., 2010), field works coordination; field monitoring.

To fulfill these tasks, the basic productivity assets are computers – hardware and software infrastructure.

A starting venture with the minimum personnel scheme should provide each of its employees independent working conditions to maximize flexibility.

The following IT asset categories were identified:

1. Operating and security systems
  - Linux / Windows + antivirus
2. Productivity tools (*office*)
  - Text processors, spreadsheet tools, slide-show editing
3. Data and management tools
  - data base tools, encryption and cloud access
4. Communication and multimedia tools
5. Computer aided design (CAD) tools
6. 2d graphics and interactive design tools
7. 3d presentation tools
8. Project management and field works assistance tools.

For each of these categories there were analyzed the possible options according to the following criteria: price, real-life productiveness (following empirical analysis carried out on professional Romanian landscape architects) and flexibility.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The work-hour cost estimations following the IT infrastructure analysis reveals that public-license software solutions approach is more efficient on the short term, but it lacks flexibility.

Start-up investment estimation for the lowest budget would basically approach the GNU licensed software (GNU Operating System,

2013), with minimum software investments for CAD and graphics stations:

-The 1<sup>st</sup> station: management, accounting, estimating, print server, business archive, back-up  
GNU Linux based Hardware – HP Pro P3500 MT Sandy Bridge G550 2.6GHz 4GB 500GB GMA HD Free Dos + Monitor HP 20 inch W2072a: 1800 RON (price.ro, 2013)

-The 2<sup>nd</sup> station: CAD, graphic design, 3d presentations, data storage Windows based-OS=650 RON, antivirus=400 RON  
Hardware-HP Pro 6300 MT Intel Core i5-3570 3.4GHz 4GB 500GB AMD Radeon HD 7450 1 GB: 3500 RON (ibd.) + monitor LED DELL UltraSharp U2713HM 27 inch: 2500 RON (ibd.)  
Commercial licenses: Brics Cad Pro – all in one, v. 12: 600 euro; Corel Graphics Suite X5: 180 RON (ibd.); 3d studio max: 3500 \$; GNU licensed software: Open Office Suite, Dryad (Plant Generation Software packages, 2013)

-The 3<sup>rd</sup> station: CAD, graphic design, data storage  
GNU Linux based Hardware-HP Pro 6300 MT Intel Core i5-3570 3.4GHz 4GB 500GB AMD Radeon HD 7450 1 GB: 3500 RON (ibd.) + monitor LED DELL UltraSharp U2713HM 27 inch: 2500 RON (ibd.)  
GNU software: Open Office Suite, Gimp etc  
Commercial licenses: Brics Cad Pro linux – all in one, v. 12: 600 euro  
-The 4<sup>th</sup> station – mobile: field work CAD, graphic design, basic 3d presentations  
Linux based Hardware-Laptop Asus 17.3" K73SD-TY047D Core i5 2450M 2.5GHz 4GB 750GB GeForce GT 610M 1GB: 2500 RON (price.ro, 2013)  
GNU software: Open Office Suite, Gimp etc  
Commercial licenses: Brics Cad Pro linux – all in one, v. 12: 600 euro  
Considering the general lifetime of the equipment at 3 years and the desired liquidation at 1/3 of this time span, the IT investments should ideally generate incomes to cover all business investments in the first year. The work-hour fee of a landscape studio could therefore be found using the following formula:  $(IT + I+X+W) / 2320$

-Where IT is the IT total investment – equivalent to ~ 31000 RON in the present case- I represents current office expenses (rent, maintenance, utilities, consumables) -X stands for unexpected expenses-W are the company’s wage expenses-2320 represents the number of work hours for an employee in one year. To

conclude the presented case, with known yearly and unpredicted expenses of 18000 RON and 4 people working – involving 24000 RON / year wage expenses, the work-hour reference price for landscape architecture services reference should be 31.47 RON. Printing and presentation documents as well as transportation and field-related expenses, just as documentation costs were not included. They should be counted separately in the deals closed by the starting venture. Despite appearances, landscaping business is tricky considering the complexity of the market features, the human and technical issues, the home trade opacity and the hostile legal and administrative environment. Previous experience in the business that graduates are venturing into is a way of painlessly anticipating the specific challenges, know competition and build key-connections with potential clients and promoters, lawyers, accountants, even bankers, public administration, potential partners, contractors, materials purveyors – especially plants and stone, potential employees, architects, engineers and various specialists. Branch experience as employees before turning into employers is otherwise recommended in various industries (King, 2005; Thilmany, 2008), considering that cumulated bankruptcy risks of small business start and that of the niche market approach.

## CONCLUSIONS

The shallow client profile diversity shows the deep gap between the Romanian and the western landscape markets, and the long way that lays ahead the new ventures.

The complex professional grounding that landscaping students acquire in college might be considered excessive when the business target is individual private landscaping – the prevalent employment niche – but it should provide the graduates enough flexibility to handle exceptional contracts thus ensuring business's sustainability (King, 2005; Stark, 2003). Furthermore, the landscaping market will hopefully approach the western diversity soon enough, which will make human resources a major national issue.

Landscaping studio infrastructure is the easiest issue, even for a small business. Business connections and basic experience are required to minimize start-up risks. Technical competence and professional ethics are basic sustainability conditions.

The work-hour reference price for landscape architecture services should stand as a guide-mark for clients looking for a fair business.

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