



Jose Raul Buitrago (1965-Present)

Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture

**University of Georgia, College of
Environment & Design**

"I love sharing my knowledge and expertise with the next generation—it's the best reward. I also enjoy changing their perception of what a 'minority' is supposed to be." José Raul Buitrago, 2006.

Overview

Jose Buitrago is an associate professor of Landscape Architecture at the University of Georgia, College of Environment and Design. His current interests include: Cultural landscapes, computer rendering applications, global sustainability and health, clean energy/green technology, heritage tourism, and Spanish-Caribbean design. Formerly he worked for a large landscape firm, Buitrago says that academia was the perfect path for him because he is able to teach and contribute to the professional field. He notes that landscape architects play a crucial role in making environmental concepts become realities.

Early Life and Career

José Raul Buitrago grew up loving science, art, and the amazing biodiversity of his native U.S. Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. "Puerto Rico has influenced my career so much," says Buitrago, now a tenured associate professor of landscape architecture at the University of Georgia. "The island itself is an ecological marvel. From the environmental and geological point of view, we have all the biomes in the world except arctic tundra. Going from one side of the island to the other is so different, and I was always fascinated by that."

Buitrago initially studied engineering as an undergraduate at Penn State, but as the program progressed he found he didn't like it. Looking for a way to combine his "need for art" with a love for science and the natural world, Buitrago found the perfect balance in landscape architecture. He earned his Masters of Landscape Architecture from Harvard in 1997, and went on to work for a large landscape architecture firm in Fort Lauderdale. While Buitrago gained valuable experience and oversaw the first successful implementation of one of his designs there, he also found the atmosphere to be "too corporate." Although it meant taking a pay cut, he decided to make the transition to academia, a move he hasn't regretted. "I love teaching," he says. "I love sharing knowledge and expertise with the younger generation—it's the best reward. I also enjoy changing their perception of what a minority is supposed to be."

Importance of Mentoring to his Career

Though he enjoys breaking stereotypes, Buitrago says being one of the few minorities in an overwhelmingly white field—from undergraduate school on—has been a continual challenge. However, he found a sense of community as a member of Penn State’s—and the nation’s—first Hispanic fraternity, as well as the Puerto Rican Student Association. He was also a McNair scholar; an honor he credits with providing a support structure to move through higher education. “I had a lot of mentors who pushed me to pursue a graduate education, and my eventual career,” he says. Professor James R. DeTuerk and Dr. Mike Radis offered support and encouragement at Penn State; at Harvard, Professor John R. Stilgoe “showed me the best way to be a professor,” Buitrago says. His mother, an educator, was also a big influence.

Contributions

Buitrago says that a career combining landscape architecture and academia has turned out to be the perfect path for him. “I get to teach, but I also get to work in a real, professional field,” he says. “Landscape architecture is very practical and hands-on, and I can pass on my knowledge and skills directly to my students.” He notes that landscape architects play a crucial role in making environmental concepts become realities. “As we love to say, the researchers have the facts and the data, but they don’t necessarily know how to implement them,” he says. “We are the ones who know how to translate those ideas into the built environment. In that way, landscape architecture is at the forefront of the environmental field.”

Buitrago says that, with global increase in environmental concern, the need for landscape architects who are knowledgeable in eco-friendly green technologies will skyrocket in the near future. Noting that the field is wide open to anyone with talent and interest, he encourages minorities who may not be familiar with landscape architecture to consider it as a career choice. “Go for it,” he says. “Environmental professionals will be very much in demand, especially landscape architects, because we understand everything from planning to engineering. And it offers more than just money...there’s the emotional and psychological gratification you get knowing you are doing something to make life better for future generations.”

For more information

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