

Business

Margaret Robinson and Keiji Asakura work on plans for a project for the City of Houston Parks and Recreation Department. The two are concerned with providing a creative atmosphere for employees at their landscape architecture firm.

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Two entrepreneurs combine art with landscaping in hopes they can play a role in improving the quality of life for local residents

Company displays growing creativity

By MASON LERNER
For The Chronicle

Margaret Robinson and Keiji Asakura know that their work often goes unappreciated. But that doesn't mean that it goes unnoticed.

In fact, the two entrepreneurs think that their landscape architecture firm, Asakura Robinson, plays a significant role in improving the quality of life for many Houstonians.

Both of the company's principals figured out at an early age that they wanted to work in a field that would allow them to blend their love for the science of horticulture with their passion for art.

Asakura moved to California from Japan when he was 16, and after being turned down at the first job he applied for as a grocery sacker, he landed an after-school job at a local nursery.

"I worked there through high school and college years," Asakura said. "That's kind of how I was exposed to landscape architecture, strictly from a gardening point of view."

They opened the firm in 2004 after each tried a brief stint working independently for several years at larger firms. They soon learned that there was more work in Houston than they could handle on their own, and they began to collaborate. Eventually, that led to them opening a firm together.

Their firm has only eight employees, but it handles urban design, landscape architecture and community planning projects that range in size from designing a single garden for a museum to landscaping a 1,000-acre master-planned community.

Two better than one

The reason they decided to become partners was that their brief forays on their own proved they couldn't go it alone.

"It doesn't take much to overwhelm one person," Robinson said. "We started to team up because we were both overwhelmed with work and we saw an opportunity. The market in Houston was very favorable, and we became registered as a minority business with the city and the state."

By registering as a minority-run small business, they were able to start landing the kinds of projects that could directly affect the community.

"When we started the business, we both wanted to pursue public work," Robinson said. "We were both at a point in our career where we wanted to pursue the kind of work that excites us."

"It's a matter of quality of life," Asakura said. "When people think of quality of life, they think about having a good school, good park systems, beautiful streets, museums and so on. We can contribute to all of these areas. That's where we really contribute the most."

Biggest challenge

The biggest challenge their company faces doesn't involve drumming up business, they said. Profits, Asakura said, are on target to meet or beat 2005. Instead, the company wants to develop a working environment that gets the most creative work out of its employees.

The two are always brainstorming for ways that will make it more fun to work in their office without hurting productivity.

"Creativity, freedom, individuality — this is sort of an office ethos that every office or corporation talks about," Asakura said. "But as a little tiny company that doesn't have a large budget, to make these types of things happen is a challenge."

Asakura Robinson holds a retreat every quarter so employees can spend time in a nonwork environment. They plan activities like spontaneous art lessons to break up the workweek, for example.

Whenever they can, they have an inter-office "computer free" day that forces everyone to talk, write or draw if they want to communicate.

David Kopek, an environmental psychologist, said it doesn't take much to enhance creativity in the workplace.

Beanbag chairs or sofas and allowing the use of a wall for brainstorming activities are just a couple of inexpensive and easy ways to boost creativity. He also noted that a light atmosphere coupled with physical activity helps.

Creative minds

"I think creativity tends to flow better when you have the mind occupied," he explained. "If the mind is concentrating on something else, like tossing a basketball back and forth, the mind is preoccupied with the passing of the ball back and forth, but the subconscious starts working, and that's where a lot of great, innovative ideas come out."

Asakura and Robinson know that the success of their business hinges on their ability to harness their employees' talents so that each project the company works on is neither too artistic nor too scientific.

"We are doing a number of things within the constraints of our small-business budget," Asakura said. "We push for a creative process, but how do you create that energy? How do you burn that coal hotter? That is what we are trying to do every day."