

An Artist Outdoors

Landscape architect Michael Dollin of Urban Earth Design is an artist.

He uses nature's eco-systems as his paint on canvases that can spread from the micro-yards of tract homes to the Valley's sprawling McMansions (Dollin calls them "private resorts") to the gridiron grounds of the new University of Phoenix Stadium in Glendale.



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Like many in the design industry, the spark for what was to become his career was always there even in childhood. "I guess I was scientifically oriented as a kid, into biology. My parents wanted me to be a doctor, but I wasn't so sure about that. In high school, I had a landscaping business with my brother. We started off mowing lawns, then moved into garden construction. I was always an artist at some level, [as well]. I would draw, make cartoons, do oil paintings, and even take art classes. So, I always considered myself a bit of an artist, but was also a science guy, and I loved the outdoor environment," Dollin reminisces.

Putting his hobbies into action, Dollin, an Ohio native, trekked out west to attend the then infant landscape architecture program at the University of Arizona. Five years later, he walked away with a Bachelors of Landscape Architecture and began his career with a multi-disciplinary firm in Houston, TX. After getting his feet wet working on city planning projects, park design, and more, Dollin and his wife decided they'd had enough of the Lone Star state and headed back to the Valley.

After being laid off during the recession in 1989, Dollin, who had wanted to start his own firm, went into business for himself at a time when becoming an entrepreneur was more high-risk than ever. With the new small business acting as a side job, he also began teaching at ASU where he still holds a title today as assistant clinical research professor for the College of Design. Evolving from a one-man show to employing roughly 10 talented designers, Dollin's urban design firm is stronger than ever under the moniker, Urban Earth Design.

Urban Earth is responsible for the landscape and urban design of numerous public spaces including the Barry Goldwater Memorial, Heritage Square and Science Park and the Papago Park Center, but one of Dollin's favorite so far is the Arizona Cardinals' new home, University of Phoenix Stadium. Reflecting on his firm's role in the project, his favorite perk has been "working with top-shelf architects and designers from around the world."

As Urban Earth continues to excel in the Valley and expand its reach into northern Arizona and New Mexico, Dollin is nothing less than grateful to be a career that has proven to be a perfect fit for him and that can harness his creativity.

"I am really lucky to be in this profession. I get to be creative and be a creator. The inertia in this community can be frustrating, but the great thing about being a designer or an artist is I get to engage in motion by healing and repairing earth," noted Dollin.

"It's a great challenge to be creative in this day and age, but it's worth it. Plus, it's a great time in Phoenix for design. People [in the Valley] are committed to design." [Tim McIntire and Laurel Petriello, photo: Don Crossland]

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