



Photo by Candice Ward



Culture Meets Design at 818 Studio

Boutique firm pushes the landscape architecture envelope

It's immediately obvious that 818 studio is not your average landscape architecture firm. It's written all over the walls. Literally. Floor-to-ceiling chalkboard walls facilitate frequent energetic planning and design sessions, epitomizing the firm's focus on collaboration. And founder Rick Gendron wouldn't have it any other way.

Everything from the decor to the company's name speaks to the value he and the rest of the team put on collaboration. In an industry heavy with firms named after their founders, 818 was named for Gendron's home address where he started the business.

"To make it a collaborative studio environment, he kept the name as something everyone can buy into and be part of," says Carlos Mier y Ponce Arzani, Gendron's partner at 818 studio. "It's hard to feel like you're part of a team if your role is relegated to 'and Associates' like so many other firms."

Established in 2005, the landscape architectural planning and design firm is geared toward fostering growth, collaboration and, most importantly to Gendron, a great culture. Their working mantra is "818 is successful at providing innovative, quality design that excites" and everything in their environment works toward that ideal. Their open office design with writable walls makes it easy to bounce ideas around, and the designers frequently come together to spitball ideas, sketch and discuss concepts for a project.

The people at 818 have created the kind of place where Gendron knows his team wants to work; where job satisfaction and happiness matter quite a bit. The team actively seeks people who are engaged and positive and give them the opportunity to grow as professionals. At the same time, they recognize it is important to have fun, establish a good life-work balance, produce quality designs and truly enjoy their jobs.



1812 14a Street SW | info@818studio.ca | 403.244.8188 | www.818studio.ca

“It’s vital to have the right people to contribute and participate in every aspect of our firm,” he says. “If you’re going to spend eight to 10 hours a day with a colleague, it’s crucial that they are good people. The right mix of team members cannot be understated.”

After all, enthusiasm shows in your work and clients notice it in every conversation, email and design plan. Clients can’t be expected to get excited about projects if their designers aren’t genuinely excited first.

This has served 818 studio well. Now in its 10th year, it is expanding its offices and adding employees. Business is steady, but rather than resting on their laurels, Gendron’s team is looking forward to bigger challenges, and more exciting and diverse things in the coming years.

“After 10 years we are at a crossroads. We could either say this is who we are and what we do and continue along those lines, or we can take advantage of this milestone and break out of our mould and expand, try new things and redefine what we do and how we do it,” he says.

Their design services go far beyond merely site drawings and vegetation. The firm does large commercial/retail projects, multi-family sites, planning and community design, municipal work, as well as research and conceptual studies. Leveraging its experience and success on these projects, 818 studio is looking at larger urban design projects and to incorporate ideas it has picked up through previous work in other areas of Canada and the U.S., Mexico and China.

To accommodate the larger staff and projects, 818 studio is surging ahead with new software to enhance how they present and explain their design plans. Use of 3D renderings has become more common and an increasingly important part of landscape architecture, allowing clients to visualize what the project will look like before the significant construction dollars are expended.

It’s also a great tool in marketing. Even before construction begins, 818’s drawings can be used to create interest and excitement in the project. Afterward, the implemented

landscape design is the first thing people see as they approach the development, and they judge the product first by what they experience between the curb and the door.

“A well-designed site can sell a project,” says Jamie Johnson, senior landscape designer.

Many of their projects are challenged by municipal bylaws and land use requirements, and Gendron’s team is well versed in navigating these challenges and the municipal approval processes. It’s a service they realize their clients need and they undertake as part of their successful site design process.

Once drawings are approved, 818 studio provides a detailed technical package of working drawings and associated construction specifications from which the contractor can build the design. Then the team monitors the construction to ensure those designs are followed and the process stays on track. Acting as agents for clients, 818 designers put together drawings, solicit competitive bids from contractors and manage the project to ensure the client’s vision remains intact throughout the process. They focus on removing all of the stress and headaches from the clients as they shepherd the project through from start to finish.

While the site grading, soil science, approvals and horticulture components add a significant technical aspect to landscape architecture, it is the art that keeps the 818 studio designers excited for work every day.

“We straddle the boundaries between art and science,” Gendron says. “We have to be well-versed in the technical side, but it has to look good, to speak to you, to evoke a feeling. People will expect the site to ‘work’; we have to captivate them with the design.”

And their living, breathing dynamic landscapes do just that. Gendron and his team design for the future, knowing that it will take years for their designs to fill in and flourish to maturity. And like their designs, 818 studio will only continue to get better with time.

