



# B I G I S B E A U T I F U L

**THAT'S WHAT JOE BROWN SAYS. IT'S WHY HE BROUGHT  
EDAW TO AECOM. BUT NOT EVERYONE AGREES.**

BY JONATHAN LERNER / PORTRAIT BY KYLE JEFFERS

**L**ast winter Joe Brown, FASLA, aged 66, was at the pinnacle of a prominent career: He was the chief innovation officer of AECOM, the world's largest engineering, architecture, construction, and management company. Yet his office, on the fourth floor of a forgettable San Francisco building, was modest. It had a sofa and small conference table but mainly left an impression of plain, white Ikea cabinetry. One day, Brown wore an unconstructed denim sport jacket over an open shirt and jeans, and loafers with argyle socks. Modesty can be a feint; you certainly don't achieve what Joe Brown has achieved without thinking big about yourself. Thinking big is his consistent and authentic approach to the world. It's his solution to the problems of cities. It's his impulse as a leader of a firm. It's his contribution and deliberate challenge to the profession. And he's not stingy with it.

From 1992 until 2005 Brown was the CEO of EDAW, which under his leadership grew into the world's largest landscape architecture firm, with an employee roster of 1,200. EDAW was a pioneer in expanding the purview of the profession beyond designing individual sites to addressing natural systems on the regional scale and—just as Americans were beginning to revalue our moribund cities—to addressing built environments on the metropolitan scale. The firm was hugely respected within the field. Then Brown led its sale to AECOM, a multidisciplinary global operation, which now has more than 45,000 employees. “EDAW was the Starbucks of landscape architecture. But big is not big until you get to AECOM,” he quipped.

Discussing success one day recently, he drew a series of sigmoid curves, those tilted, elongated S shapes representing initiation, growth, achievement, and decline in the life cycle of an organization or a career. After each line descended from the apex of its curve, it crossed the bottom of the next where that one was beginning to go up. Viewed together, the curves traced a bumpy but continually rising arc across Brown's legal pad. “You think of success as *that*,” he said, pointing to the top of one curve, just where it began to show regression. “But it's all about *this*,” the place where that descending line crossed the next one, the place from which you'd better leap if you want to continue an ascent. “Life is about making these absolute, radical 90-degree changes. If you

want *this* to happen”—he traced the upward aggregate trend with a sweep of his hand—“you've got to read these intersections.” In the business world sigmoid curves are a common way to depict growth and maturation. If the construct accurately describes the career arc of Joe Brown, however, it reveals little about him as a person. But you certainly don't reach the top of a global corporation by making yourself vulnerable to intimate probing. Still, what could he say about himself that might surprise?

He didn't skip a beat. “I've had a heart attack. This is the first day back. I had a surgery with five bypasses. That's the biggest surprise I can think of right this minute,” Brown said. “I'm just trying to take in the meaning of a

new life. That will do it. I'm going to retire someday soon. I was going to probably work until I had a heart attack and died on some plane between Hong Kong and L.A. I don't think anything less would have reassessed my thinking."

Reassessed his thinking about his own future, he meant; and he did retire within a few weeks, in April. But the medical crisis had not changed his ideas about how to work in the world, or about the practice of landscape architecture. In a 2011 article for *Harvard Design Magazine*, Brown wrote that AECOM was "escaping the cliché model of the singular guy in his studio losing control of construction management and project management and engineering and clients. We are attempting to reinvent the master builder/master designer." Now, quite a few landscape architects and other design professionals work in boutique or atelier situations, or alone, and collaborate with other designers and engineers when they need to. For some, this is an unwelcome result of recession-forced downsizing in the industry. For some, it is a choice. It could be seen as an expression of the decentralizing impact, the creative destruction, of information technology upon the culture of work, a manifestation of the laptopreneurial inclination of millennials. Still, Brown sees the profession as "riddled" with small firms. "That's a choice people made. That's the choice they've been educated to make," he said now. "I bristle at the small-scale model. My whole career has been to disabuse the profession of only that model."

Many urgent environmental, urban, and developmental challenges do need massive, radical solutions. "How do you recalibrate the suburbs of America?" Brown offered as an example. Nothing prevents a solo practitioner or boutique firm from tackling these, and many do—mostly ineffectually, Brown would have it. "There's no point in thinking big if you don't execute big," he said. That is precisely AECOM's strength, given its almost limitless geographic reach and staggering dozens of practice areas. The company's work can range far beyond those projects that would call for much input from landscape architecture—economic analysis of the regional impact of a midwestern auto plant closure, for example, or engineering and project management for an Australian diamond mine, even developing "modern, democratic police forces in postconflict regions." But a lot of the work—Brown guessed about a third of the volume—is large-scale urban or regional planning projects, in which his idea of landscape's role becomes essential. "I think of landscape architecture as almost infrastructure," providing a matrix of connections, he said. For example, "You can't have a rapid transit or highway solution without an environmental solution, without an open space solution—because then it's just a road on a riverbank." Todd Hill, ASLA, who worked both at EDAW and until recently at AECOM, said, "Looking at environmental systems, urban patterns and challenges, things that are bigger and transcend architecture and engineering—that's the kind of upstream mentality that he strives to put in people's minds."

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Few in the field would disagree with the importance of integrating those issues, of designing in a systems context. Mia Lehrer, FASLA, the president of Mia Lehrer+Associates in Los Angeles, says, “In many ways the conversation about landscape urbanism, which I don’t think is attributed to him, certainly was his ambition.” But some people might be puzzled by Brown’s ambivalence toward the more human-scale work of fine-grained projects on discrete sites. Does AECOM do such work? “We create the context usually for those things,” he said. For the 2012 London Olympic Games, “we did the overall infrastructure-like landscape elements, and George Hargreaves designed the park. We guided his moment of park design.” Within a master plan that AECOM did for the Manchester (UK) city center, Martha Schwartz, FASLA, “did a fountain and some seating and a water canal which was quite lovely, a lovely little moment.” He said that such smaller projects can have a big impact, providing inspiration and urbanity, experiences of the “unpredictably predictable.” He added, “It’s not the landscape architecture I do, but it is very needed.” Yet in the next breath he seemed dismissive. “Some [small projects] are very unimportant, like a playground, or a school effort.” He disparaged “small-scale treasured little gardens.” He said, “The profession suffers from smallness. ‘Small is beautiful,’ ‘treasured moments’—I don’t want to offend anybody, but small is not always beautiful. Small is sometimes just small.”

Lehrer found that attitude “unfortunate.” She said, “Small could be about educating community and elected officials. You could do 20 playgrounds in a four-year political cycle, when you can’t do a megaproject. And he’s so not in tune with the mil-

lennials. In L.A., for example, one of the most successful projects is CycLAvia, closing down miles and miles of streets for cycling on Sundays. It has made such a difference in the city. For American cities, it’s humanity.”

But expansive is the landscape architecture—and thinking, and corporation building—that Joe Brown has always been interested in. For his master’s degree in landscape architecture from Harvard’s Graduate School of Design, his concentration was urban design: the bigger context, not the smaller space. His strength has been “how to frame things, more so than the pencil to the paper,” said Leo Alvarez, FASLA, a principal at Perkins+Will who worked both at EDAW and at AECOM. Alvarez calls Brown “a designing strategist and an overall strategist, probably one of the most brilliant guys I’ve ever met, and certainly within the landscape architecture profession I would consider him the best business mind that I have any connection to. The record speaks for itself on that.”

Brown himself claims the label provocateur, someone who asks, “What’s the truth here? What are we missing here? What are we not talking about? What are we lying about? A

lot of people in our professions lie,” he said. “We actually compete to be rhetorically obscure.” He described his role as AECOM’s chief innovation officer as getting people to collaborate. “The process—fundamental communication—is what innovation is about.” He went on, “Engineers actually innovate more than architects. But they innovate in a certain way. It has to be proven to them. Architects say, ‘This will be wonderful,’ and it’s vague. It’s conceptual. It’s very positive. They’re very personality oriented, which is great. But it’s in the arena of ideas rather than reality. Engineers say, ‘It won’t work.’ They’re stubborn.”

The cultural tension between engineers and other designers is one cause of the distress many people—both employees and outside observers—felt and still feel about the absorption of EDAW into AECOM a decade ago. Dennis Carmichael, FASLA, began work at EDAW, where he became a principal, in 1980; he went along to AECOM and stayed until 2011. (Carmichael is a former ASLA president; he is now a principal at Parker Rodriguez in Alexandria, Virginia.) “There were about 70 principals of EDAW at the time of the merger,” he recalled. “There was general skepticism about ‘What are we getting ourselves into?’ Joe was leading us to this, but he was not compelling us. We said, ‘OK, here are our criteria: We get

to keep our name, our culture, the way we do business, our systems, our hiring practices.’ They said yes to all of that. The most intriguing thing they said was, ‘We want your firm because we believe your firm is the best positioned to infiltrate this bunch of archi-

tects and engineers and make it the greenest design firm on planet earth.’ That was interesting and flattering. Well, ever so slowly those things began to disintegrate.” At first, for example, EDAW was rebranded “EDAW/AECOM;” two years into the merger, it was rechristened “Design + Planning at AECOM.”

Another irritant for many is the suspicion of profit’s trumping design integrity. The price AECOM paid for EDAW is not disclosed, but many EDAW principals were shareholders, and the price per share was “quite handsome,” said Carmichael, who was one of them. Beyond that, he said, “I think Joe honestly thought that he would be leading AECOM and transforming a business of 30,000 people, and be seen as one of the saviors of it.” Then AECOM went public. “That’s when things began to change. It would always be prefaced with, ‘The street doesn’t understand. They think it needs to be one word and one brand.’ Anytime there was a change in any one of our systems it was always, ‘The street requires us to do this.’” He added, “We were being told that our most favorable marketing

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strategy on any project is to go with an all-AECOM team. But I'd been working and building business relationships for 25 years. My theory in getting work is, you get the best people who are exactly right for that particular opportunity, assemble the best team. That was at odds with AECOM." The culture, according to Carmichael and many former EDAW employees who left AECOM, was changing irretrievably. "The whole thing just got to be so impersonal, so cold and mechanical, and my approach to practice is very personal," said Carmichael. He called AECOM an "unknowable entity," so large that it was "unfathomable."

That's relatively tame language. Several former employees who worked at both companies characterized AECOM, which has absorbed and submerged a number of other firms from many disciplines, as "a monster." Several termed the loss of EDAW, which was so widely respected, "a tragedy." Some observers even refer to AECOM as "the evil empire." But "monster," at least, can connote both wickedness and enormity. Perhaps it is really just AECOM's size some people find problematic—subjectively, for the impersonal culture it fosters. But some clearly see enormity as problematic in an objective way. "If you're doing the entire country plan for Libya, then it makes perfect sense to be AECOM. But if you're doing Centennial Olympic Park, there's no inherent advantage," Alvarez said. "AECOM gets great work, but the

framework, the organization, appears to be more suited to those megaprojects that can take advantage of this complete offering of services—and at that point the landscape architecture is probably a minor percentage and doesn't drive it." Lehrer also thinks AECOM has a "chilling effect" on the rest of the industry, with its ability to buy up and absorb, or simply overwhelm, competitors, and to

appropriate ideas. She suggested that people actually have come to censor their conversation when AECOM ears might be listening.

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Brown is unapologetic, calling the critics—and much of the profession—"nostalgic" and unwilling to confront the future. This is hardly surprising, not just because he remains identified with AECOM, but because of how he sees the world and

landscape architecture's role in it. "What were we going to do next?" he asked, recalling EDAW as it approached one of those junctures of sigmoid curves. "Either we had to grow and change or we were going to decline. So you take a big risk and you get all kinds of opinions about it."

Carmichael, for his part, spoke of the sale of EDAW with humility and chagrin. "You can't give Joe all of the blame for the disaster of the merger, nor could you give Joe all of the credit for the buildup of EDAW as a great firm. There were 70 other individuals [principals] who all went in with our eyes open. He led

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us to that point, and we made a decision. So all of us have some culpability. I can't be bitter, because I'm part of it. How dare I be bitter? What I am is sad, because the human capital that was lost will never be recovered.”

There are EDAW alumni who remain at AECOM, and happily so.

“What I found exciting, and still find exciting, is that it's not a career path that's all figured out,” said Stephen Engblom, who led EDAW's San Francisco master-planning practice and is now an AECOM senior vice president. “What we've been encountering in the past 10 years [within AECOM] is actually more true to the firm of EDAW, which was always about evolving and changing and not staying the same. [AECOM] is a dynamic organization. I have colleagues who work at architecture firms or landscape architecture firms that have it all figured out,” meaning that they push to excel within “a defined spectrum.” He said, “Those are two very different career paths.” Engblom called the idea that EDAW's landscape orientation and design excellence would seduce engineering-dominated AECOM—the original implication, if not quite a promise—a “metaproject of ours that Joe inspired us all to think about.” He asserted that after nearly a decade there are now “a handful, maybe two handfuls” of giant AECOM projects where landscape architecture plays a leading, or significantly influential, role. He mentioned as examples the firm's concept for Kuala Lumpur, and its neglected river, “a people-first

idea about how you reconnect the city to the river; that's not just a piece of infrastructure.” And he pointed to the plan for reconstructing San Francisco's storm-water system, in which AECOM economists and landscape architects had “a leadership role.” It elevates the civic and design quality of the streetscape while

turning the streets themselves into green infrastructure. “That's something that gets a lot of air time in the profession, but this is a chance where we actually were at the front end,” he said, “sitting down with engineers early in the project to say this is how we can rebuild, and showing the difference that design makes in helping these projects become implementable.”

Describing landscape architecture as infrastructure, as Brown does, might be an inevitable semantic formulation if you lead an organization grounded in engineering. Small firms and modestly scaled projects can yield solutions, but the challenges of environmental sustainability and urban habitability will need grand schemes and big infrastructure, as Joe Brown insists. His view and talents—and commitment to execution—were far too big for any small container. But AECOM was a perfect fit. ●

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