

# Fordham Footsteps: Amy Verel, FCRH '99, Interview Transcript

Matt:

Hey listeners, we've got a bonus episode for you.

Sara:

That's right. When we started Fordham Footsteps, we recorded a few episodes that we didn't get a chance to air. Over the next few months, we'll release them periodically. To start off, we're sharing our interview with Amy Verel, FCRH '99.

Matt:

Amy is a landscape architect. As the weather warms up and people head back outside, we hope you enjoy learning about the journey of one realm who made parks her profession.

Matt:

Welcome to Fordham Footsteps, the podcast that features Fordham alumni, and discusses their path from student to the current career. Some will have a direct correlation to their majors, and others will describe how they took some unexpected turns.

Sara:

Either way, expect an insider's guide to certain industries and some great stories from our esteemed alumni.

Matt:

I'm Matt Burns, associate director for young alumni and student engagement.

Sara:

And I'm Sara Hunt Munoz, senior director for strategic initiatives. With us today is Amy Verel, Fordham College Rose Hill class of '99.

Amy:

Hi.

Sara:

Welcome.

Matt:

Thanks for being here.

Amy:

Thanks for having me.

Sara:

So there's a few letters after your name on your LinkedIn profile. RLA, ASLA, ISA. Talk about those. What are those?

Amy:

Well, RLA is registered landscape architect. ASLA is American society of landscape architects, which is our professional society. And ISA is certified arborist. Just another path of my career.

Sara:

Another branch? Pun intended.

Matt:

What is landscape architect? Tell us for those who don't know, what does that mean?

Amy:

Well, I personally design parks and playgrounds because I work for New York City Parks Department. But a landscape architect designs everything from residential landscapes, corporate, institutional, some do spas, and resorts, and things like that. Anything that's not the building, particularly in more urban areas is the landscape. So landscape architecture is sort of a hybrid between landscape designer and civil engineer. And that's the difference between landscape architecture and landscape designer.

Sara:

When you were an urban studies major, did you see yourself going in this direction or what were you thinking at the time?

Amy:

No, at Fordham, I was originally sort of pursuing an urban planning path. One of my professors, Dr. Kantor steered me in that direction for possible grad school. I had come in as political science major, discovered urban studies got interested in planning, did a few internships--City of Mount Vernon, New York City Planning Department--and so I thought I'd be an urban planner.

Sara:

So politics--like that kind of planning. Okay. And then what changed your mind? What got you into this area?

Amy:

Well, the more I did internships and then started working in the field and then I worked in a little bit more of the design/landscape architecture area. I discovered that I wanted to do more physical planning instead of policy, as much as I'm interested in policy and history. And that in order to do that sort of urban planning, you really have to become a landscape architect or urban architect. There are other ways of doing it, but those are kind of who those jobs, physical planning go to. It was a little process of elimination. I wasn't going to be an architect. So that turns me in the direction of landscape architecture.

Sara:

And when did you know that you had to get an advanced degree to pursue that? Because it looks like you went right from Fordham to get your master's.

Amy:

I went back for my master's when I was 26. So I worked for a couple of years. I worked as a studio assistant in a landscape architecture office. Ironically, I just insisted to them still, I just wanted to be a planner, sort of fell into that job a little bit. And they all said, "Don't be a planner, be a landscape architect." And then I went into a more traditional planning job, environmental planning here in the city. I was looking into grad school opportunities. Basically the path for landscape architect is either to do a four-year undergrad or a three-year master's program. If you have an unrelated bachelor's degree. Just kind of exploring grad school opportunities, that I was either looking at like a two-year degree in urban planning or a three-year MLA.

Matt:

Yeah. It's interesting, because Fordham doesn't have that four-year program you're talking about.

Amy:

Not a lot of schools have it. It's primarily like state schools, [agriculture] schools tend to have programs. And then Harvard and some of the Ivy Leagues have them, but there's only a couple per state.

Sara:

What are some of the projects you've worked on that you're most proud of?

Amy:

My project right now with the parks department that I'm just wrapping up design is the one I'm most proud of to date. It's a tiny little, 10,000 square foot lot in Brownsville, Brooklyn. And right now it's just a patch of asphalt. Literally I can't disappoint people because it's nothing, but the history of it is that in Brownsville, it's a spot where they did heavy urban clearance in the '60s. So it's paved over a building rubble, which makes it a huge challenge to put something new there. Because not only do you have to excavate all that, they just threw the building in the basement and put asphalt on top.

Amy:

I've been on my other kind of positions at parks have been on sites where we just built on those and see everything sink. Not only we have to remove all that, but it's all contaminated. So we've got to spend a lot of money hauling it away. The technical challenges have been a little bit daunting and we had to increase the budget. I kind of pushed for that so that we could do it right. Yeah. And it's a neighborhood, I'm really proud to be giving a really good park.

Sara:

Now, ARE you on site every day?

Amy:

As a designer, I worked in front of a computer in Flushing Meadows[, Queens]. I'll go onsite a couple of times for the design process. At that point, I'm the project manager and designer. And then it goes into

procurement and the city bids it. And then once it goes into construction, we have our own construction team and they're the ones who do the onsite monitoring. And then I would still be the design project manager going onsite as needed and answering questions.

Matt:

And how many projects like this would you have in a portfolio at one time?

Amy:

The way we do it at parks is we work on one main project for a year, is our typical process. So well, you might have maybe two in design, maybe one or two in construction at a time. So it's a little bit of a slower process than one would find at a private firm where you would be on larger teams working on lots of projects. But it's mostly all me doing the work. So that's a little bit different too.

Sara:

So where does the arborist part come in?

Amy:

I was working for a firm on Long Island. It was a woman-owned business enterprise. One of the things in addition to landscape architecture, they did arborist work and they just had all their landscape architects become certified arborists. It's a test to take. And so they'd be like, "Oh, by the way, you're doing this." And we would go out and inventory trees.

Sara:

And what does that mean? Count them or categorize them?

Amy:

So we did work for the public agencies and these would be on transportation-oriented jobs and say, "This is a job site, work's going to occur here". We would go out and count and identify and assess all of the trees that were going to be impacted. And any removals, and what are the impacts of that.

Matt:

Tell us about the trees in New York City. What don't we know?

Amy:

Oh, so much. Probably people don't realize how many there are. The parks department cares for all the trees and all the parks and all the trees planted in DOT right of way, on streets, so people might not know that. Trees are really amazing fellow residents, but also I think a very important and interesting part of our infrastructure. And we have to treat them like infrastructure or they are more prone to become dangerous.

Matt:

And there's been a push in recent years to really get our New York City local native trees back in the ecosystem. Robert Moses in those days had planted a lot of non-local trees. Right?

Amy:

Yeah. That is a very interesting part of arboriculture. The practice planting monocultures, which Robert Moses only planted London planes. Anytime you plant a monoculture, it's highly vulnerable to any sort of pest or in the case of [Hurricane] Sandy, saltwater inundation killed a lot of London planes. So the topic of monocultures versus diversifying what you plant versus what the designers want, which is a uniform look in terms of form. And also there are plenty of non-native trees that are perfectly good residents and good performers and really necessary if you want to have a viable urban forest.

Matt:

So how did you end up at parks?

Amy:

The dream was kind of always to get to parks. I moved from planning to landscape architecture. I always wanted to work on public spaces and I did that at a couple different consultants that did primarily public work, but it's just all I wanted to do was parks and playgrounds and things like that. So a parks department is sort of a no brainer. And New York City has sort of a unique situation where there's hundreds of in-house landscape architects. It's not something that a lot of cities do. A lot of cities just hire a consultant.

Sara:

Talk a little bit about the playground. What makes a good playground?

Amy:

Oh man.

Sara:

Having children of your own...

Amy:

The layers of expertise that have come on since I've had kids, I almost want to give a presentation one of these days to my fellow landscape architects and talk about it. Especially when you have kids at different ages who are mobile, like a four-year-old and a 20-month-old.

Sara:

Different needs and different-

Amy:

Different habits of running, disappearing. I find what makes a good playground is from a parent's perspective, when I can stand in one place and have eyes-

Sara:

On both kids.

New Speaker:

And there's minimal entrances where if I do lose sight of them, that they could pop out of, that I would lose track of them. So that's one thing I've really come to appreciate. And I really liked that for spray showers too, when spray showers are sort of horseshoe shape and enclosed. Otherwise just lots of different play opportunities, both slides, traditional stuff, but also creative play. And the newer equipment is getting much better at that. Some of the older equipment looks like a little rat maze. It says like, run this way, go down this way. And the kids don't find those very interesting.

Sara:

No they get bored easily.

Amy:

Yeah. So just lots of opportunities for creative play, lots of opportunities for ground play. Accessible play.

Sara:

What are some of the playgrounds that you've had a hand in?

Amy:

As a consultant I work on a playground-

Sara:

In Whitestone?

Amy:

In Whitestone. Yes. Thank you.

Sara:

I went to that playground. Yes. I loved it.

Amy:

It's been a little while. Yes. Francis Lewis, that was the very first parks playground I got to work on. So I'm very proud of that one.

Sara:

Great view.

Amy:

Yeah, it's a beautiful park. I haven't worked on one... Another playground yet. Although my next project, which I'm really excited about is Linden playground.

Sara:

Where is that?

Amy:

Brownsville/East New York, Brooklyn. And that's going to be a really exciting challenge. So that's coming up next right after I get successful-

Matt:

What makes it a challenge?

Amy:

It's a big playground. It's a dense neighborhood. There's high expectations from the electives, this kind of playground. It's an acre. So it's just going to be a lot of technical challenges and making sure that the utilities are either up to snuff or brought up to snuff, like the water supply for the spray shower, the electrical for the lighting. And then the fun challenge of designing a really cool playground. But within the parameters that we have to work in is designing for the city, which we have kind of tighter specifications and allowances on custom stuff. So you got to be a little more creative with less.

Sara:

Well, speaking of that, talk a little bit about your non-major experience at Fordham. What are some of the classes that you draw upon now in your career or some of the things that you learned at Fordham that you're still implementing in your day to day?

Amy:

I studied a lot of New York City politics being at Fordham in the urban studies program, and gravitated a little more to those classes. It's helpful to keep a broader perspective on city politics when you're working for an agency and dealing with the frustrations of working for a city agency, which are all real. The struggle is real, but then the benefits are real too. Also the urban history that I learned, particularly with New York City and Robert Moses, I went up to UMass for my master's in landscape architecture. And I also did a dual degree master regional planning. So I was there for four years, basically any project I was given where I picked the topic. It was something that had to do with Robert Moses.

Sara:

Okay. Friend or foe or it depends?

Amy:

Complicated.

Sara:

Yeah. You know the history with him at Fordham. Yes

Amy:

Yes. So working in Brownsville, already very familiar with that history of urban quote unquote renewal. So that informs a lot of the social and historical context working on my project.

Matt:

And were there any particular, of course, we're going to talk about Fordham professors maybe mentors, but anyone in the Fordham community who helped you along the way or helped you make those sorts of decisions?

Amy:

Definitely. Paul Kantor. I don't know if he's retired and Bruce Berg, they're both politics professors. But Dr. Kantor definitely was the one who took an interest and steered me towards planning and then was a good resource a few years later when I applied to grad school, wrote me letters of recommendation.

Sara:

And you were involved in a lot of activities when you were at Fordham also. Talk a little bit about your extracurriculars.

Amy:

Well, I did Fordham Experimental Theater a couple of years. Shout out to Justin Rivers. I was in one of his plays before he was directing off-broadway. I did college Democrats, government.

Matt:

What advice would you have for urban studies majors who either aren't sure what path they should take or are listening to this, and they say, this is exactly what I like to do?

Amy:

I used to be a little bit shy sometimes about talking to people and talking to grown-ups about their careers. But intern as much as you can in places that seem like they'd be interesting. And just talk to people like one would be doing, listening to this podcast. Talk to people about their careers. Because I didn't really know what I wanted to do. And I was like, "Well, urban planning that sounds pretty good." And so I was just like, I'll just check that out. And it's interesting and I probably won't starve to death. But also you can just pick something that reasonably meets those needs, but it doesn't have to be forever. You can wind your way to something else. And that might be more interesting if you do.

Sara:

If you were to wind your way somewhere else, where do you think it would be? What's next after parks?

Amy:

I can't quite decide some days I feel like I should retire from there. My husband is also a landscape architect at parks. He's on a different borough team. He's on the Queens team. We have our own spheres, but we do work in the same complex. I don't think we'd start our own firm, but I think maybe one of us would go into the public sector. He's got a lot of skills that he could do really well going back to the private sector. And that's another thing like we're just sort of taking it day to day.

Sara:

Day by day, project by project.

Amy:

Yeah. And things are going well right now. We're both getting interesting projects. So stay put for the time being.

Sara:



Great. Well, Amy, thank you so much. It was wonderful talking to you.

Amy:

Thank you guys.

Matt:

Yeah. Really great to learn more about this and just a fascinating-

Sara:

World that we aren't exposed to-

Matt:

That's really all around us. So yeah. Thank you so much.

Amy:

Well I would, I do. I really recommend the landscape architecture for someone who's interested in planning or design or the public realm. It's a really fascinating career you can do well.

Matt:

Great.

Sara:

Great.

Matt:

Well thank you again. And that's another edition of Fordham Footsteps. Fordham Footsteps is brought to you by the Fordham University Alumni Association.

Sara:

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