

*No Place Like*

# H O M E

CALS landscape architecture  
alumni return to roots to  
create a sense of place

BY VANESSA BEESON

**A**FTER PURSUING OPPORTUNITIES in places far from Mississippi in both distance and design, oftentimes, MSU alumni return home to reinvest in the Magnolia State. Three landscape architecture alumni did just that. From constructing projects in Harvard and Houston, Abbey Franovich is now back in Starkville. Odie Avery created landscapes in the Upper Midwest before returning to his hometown of Eupora. Travis Crabtree, who studied post-industrial urbanism in Detroit, is now in Jackson, where he grew up.

## CREATIVITY MEETS ENGINEERING

**ABBEY FRANOVICH** planned to play music for a living but found her calling constructing physical spaces while teaching the next generation of landscape architects how to create a sense of place.

The '17 Bachelor of Landscape Architecture alumna was all set to be a flutist, playing from age seven and attending a prestigious fine arts academy. Right before college, however, a change of heart led her to landscape architecture.

"Ultimately, I didn't see playing flute as financially stable so the July after my senior year, I explored other options in Mississippi," Franovich said.

The Madison native enjoyed engineering and psychology, considering both as majors, but also wanted to create.

"My mom suggested landscape architecture, which checked all the boxes," she said. "It blended the sociology of how people behave in spaces along with engineering and creativity. Looking back, it was the perfect degree."

After graduating MSU, she studied urban design at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard with a small, diverse cohort of students from across the world.

"I learned so much about the world and diverse cultures. It was an extraordinarily rich experience and living in a big city was something new for me," she said.

A professor there asked if she planned to return to Mississippi to practice rural design.

"At the time, I didn't think I would but looking back, my professor was on to something. She saw the huge need for design investment in our communities," Franovich remembered.

After Harvard, she worked in a national urban planning and design firm in Houston that designed corporate campuses; healthcare facilities; parks; mixed use, retail, and revitalization projects.

"At first, I was an assistant designer focused on campus design and mixed-use development revitalization planning then I took a management role focused on mixed use and park design," she said.

The opportunity to make an impact in Mississippi compelled her to apply to MSU.

"I always wanted to return to academia.

I was interested in MSU because there were things I learned at Harvard and in practice I wished I had learned as an undergrad. I felt like there was a unique skillset in design and fabrication I wanted to bring to the program," she said.

Franovich also sought to be a female role model for students.

"Nationally, landscape architecture female students outnumber males, but in our program, 75

percent of our students are male, and 25 percent are female. I wanted to help create an environment where women have someone they can look up to and see what they can do in landscape architecture while helping to increase our female and minority enrollment," she said.

Franovich helped bring fabrication capabilities to the department.

"At Harvard, we made things all the time. If we had an idea, we had to create a three-dimensional model. I struggled with that because I didn't really have that experience in undergrad. My biggest mission was creating a fabrication space here where students can test out their ideas in three dimension and see how things come together and are built," she said.

Thanks to a donation from Michael and

Rebecca Bogan, two landscape architecture alumni, Franovich's idea for a land lab, with laser cutters, CNC routers, and 3-D printers, where students can easily build tactile models, became a reality.

"It's exciting for our students to make things and see the benefit of making things, and for the future of our program," she said.

Franovich also seeks to increase food access for Mississippi residents. As an undergrad, she helped design the MSU Community Garden, developing an interest in sustainable systems and food security.

"Food is something that's always talked about in Mississippi. We have this rich fertile land and agriculture, yet we're the most food insecure state in the nation," Franovich said.

In 2021, Franovich oversaw the building and installation of a blues-themed learning garden in the Delta, which was the state's third MSU learning garden.

"We're investing in schools in low income,

low resource areas, identifying schools that would benefit from a learning garden" she said.

Future plans include a grant in collaboration with the Department of Food Science, Nutrition and Health Promotion and the Department of Plant and Soil Sciences to identify missing links in the food system in Starkville.

Whatever the community needs, Franovich is interested in finding design solutions to address them while teaching students of all ages.

"I want to educate children and youth about our profession and engage local communities, whether that's collaborating with a high school wood shop class on a design build project or teaching community members trade skills on a community project," she said.



Abbey Franovich (photo by Robby Lozano)

## SMALL TOWN, BIG POSSIBILITIES

**ODIE AVERY,** '13 Master of Landscape Architecture alumnus, sits in his 1909 folk Victorian home in Eupora, Mississippi. The house has a gabled roof, bay windows with beveled glass, and a wrap-around porch. Original beadboard runs along the wall in what will become the living room. In other rooms, the board has been removed to be refurbished then reattached. Stacks of spindles, boards, and hardware await to be restored and reused. As Avery restores this home, he also works to improve the town where he grew up. As director of public works since June 2022, he's helping reshape the town that helped shape him.

"My experience in urban and city planning, project management, and community engagement is a good fit here, especially since leadership and community organizers have already been moving things forward. I oversee the street department and the water and wastewater department while managing the duties of the building official code enforcement officer, and planning and zoning administrator. It sounds like a lot, but I'm loving every minute of it," he said.



Odie Avery (photo by Vanessa Beeson)

He's excited about the community's growth and momentum.

"It's wonderful to see people who I grew up with have moved back and new people who make their home here. We have great leadership in our Mayor and Board of Aldermen. We also have engaged citizens who want to see our city reach its full potential," he said.

Avery is focused on updating the city's water infrastructure. The team has a project designed and shovel ready that will address the older parts of town once funding is approved. Street improvement is also planned with \$700,000 allocated in funding.

Avery also serves on the mayor's economic development committee.

"Through the economic development committee, the city has received several grants that have been used for community events, police department resources and supplies, and improvements to our parks and playgrounds. The city also passed a rental housing ordinance and has revised many of the processes and procedures for how day-to-day operations are managed for greater efficiency," he said.

Prior to his current role, Avery worked for the City of Starkville as assistant city planner.

"I went to MSU with the city planner who has been an exceptional mentor. He understood the opportunity in Eupora wasn't something that came along every day, and he knew in my heart I wanted to be involved in the day-to-day in my hometown," Avery said.

Before the smaller towns of Eupora and Starkville, Avery was in urban planning in big cities in the Upper Midwest, designing and planting gardens across Detroit and designing high-end residential landscape projects in Chicago's North Shore along Lake Michigan.

"The experience of designing large-scale projects in Chicago helps me in my role here. Everything seems manageable because I have experience organizing and managing very large, multifaceted projects," he said.

After Chicago, Avery designed school gardens in Detroit's urban core.

"I was project manager for a non-profit focused on empowering students in schools to grow their own food. I utilized my experience in landscape design to help create unique spaces and outdoor classrooms where students could learn and grow," he said.

In all, he designed and helped build 54 gardens in Detroit and supported gardens in Chicago and Indianapolis, building a total of eight in those vicinities while helping with nearly 125.

He said seeing how communities take care of each other gives him inspiration and ideas for Eupora as well.

"You don't have a strong town unless you have a strong community. Across the country we've gotten so disconnected from our communities. Seeing how people took care of each other in Detroit and the surrounding communities offered great insight into a system of grass roots, mutual aid, community building I had never experienced," he said.

The house is Avery's first historical restoration.

"When I moved back, I didn't intend to buy a historic property that needed a full renovation, but I've always wanted to restore an old house and I've watched this house since I was young. Also, an excellent group of preservationists in our community have inspired me to take on this project," he said.

In some ways, renovating a house is like working to improve a city, Avery notes.

"You make plans and know the direction you want to go in, but you must spend time strengthening the foundation. That's where we are in Eupora. We have plans and are developing more ideas as projects come to fruition but we're also doing the legwork now so when big projects begin, things move quickly," he said.

Avery said one of his favorite aspects of his hometown is its sense of community and place.

"Growing up here, I realized how important a sense of place is for helping a community thrive. As a landscape designer, I am always thinking about physical spaces I can help create to bring the community together," he said.

## IMPACT INVESTING

**TRAVIS CRABTREE**, '15 Bachelor of Landscape Architecture alumnus, continued his design education in Detroit, Michigan. He was interested in learning how to rebuild cities that once thrived but succumbed to divestment, deindustrialization, and suburbanization. He entered the University of Michigan's Master of Urban Design program, which concentrated on critical thinking and creative design solutions within post-industrial settings such as Detroit and other Rust Belt cities. His time spent there inspired him to return to Jackson, a place that was experiencing similar challenges.

Crabtree practices urban design and adaptive reuse architecture in Jackson. He is an urban planner for the city, a nonprofit project manager, an urban design consultant, and a real estate developer. The Plant is one of the projects that keeps him busy.

Crabtree purchased and renovated the formerly abandoned pipe warehouse to function as a business incubator space and event venue. Located in the industrial park west of the fast-growing Fondren neighborhood, the project aims to exhibit sustainable design strategies like reducing energy consumption, capturing stormwater runoff, producing food onsite, and sequestering carbon using native landscape.

"Our goal was to provide a venue that could showcase sustainable design solutions for our region," he said.

He explained the building's stormwater runoff is captured in a cistern, which irrigates the building's plants. Excess stormwater is stored in an onsite constructed wetland to demonstrate ways to help mitigate Jackson's flooding problems. Additionally, the building is

designed to be passive in its energy use.

"Windows face north to avoid direct sun, so the temperature stays cooler, and the building is white to reflect light instead of absorbing it," Crabtree explained.

The facility has evolved in how it functions as a business based on local challenges like the Jackson water crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. The space has cycled through providing office space, a local makers market, and more.

"Today much of the focus is centered around helping to host public and private events," Crabtree said.

The Plant is a small fraction of Crabtree's efforts in the Capital City. From 2018-2020, working for the City of Jackson Planning Department as director of long-range planning, his efforts helped secure more than \$2.5 million in funding for public space projects. The projects range in type, scale, and location. He co-developed the concept and secured funding for The Oneline Project, a transit-oriented development corridor that extends five miles along Main Street from the Fondren neighborhood through Downtown to Jackson State University. Also, while working with the city, Crabtree co-founded the Fertile Ground nonprofit, a public art and space initiative, supported by the Bloomberg Philanthropies Public Art Challenge, which addresses food accessibility issues in Jackson. With several collaborators, including MSU's Department of Landscape Architecture and the Department of Art's graphic design students, they deployed an edible learning garden that served as an outdoor classroom. Local Jackson artists painted murals and created public art installations across the city highlighting themes that reflected Jackson's food accessibility issues. The project was accompanied by food-focused events and virtual workshops. The team also produced a documentary titled *Fertile Ground*, addressing Mississippi food insecurity, which won a Southeastern Emmy.

Today, Crabtree consults with local developers and organizations under his company TREE. Recent projects include working with Mississippi writer John T. Edge and philanthropist Ray Neilsen, to lead the master planning effort for



Travis Crabtree (photo by Ansley Morgan)

Greenfield Farm, a proposed retreat-style writers' residency, set on a 20-acre mule farm once owned by William Faulkner in Oxford, Mississippi. Crabtree also has been assisting in the design of the Museum Trail, a multiuse trail and greenway that connects Jackson's public space amenities and the Capital Arts District, a one block area in downtown where the arts institutions are located.

Crabtree took an interest in landscape architecture early on.

"I started landscape contracting work at age 15 through college, developing a passion to create landscapes. I knew I wanted a degree in landscape architecture," he said.

Crabtree noted his MSU experience opened a world of opportunities for him.

"The BLA program defined how I approach architecture today. My mentors pushed the theory of using design as a creative problem-solving tool. I owe a lot to them, particularly Professor **Cory Gallo**," says Crabtree. "Today I apply that methodology in Jackson."

Crabtree says Jackson's biggest challenge is retaining residents.

"Many people are leaving the city and the state for better employment opportunities and access to more livable communities. If some of my projects can incrementally move the needle toward making Jackson a more livable place where people want to live, grow, and invest, I will feel like I have created an impact." 🐾