

# A Light & Simple Touch

Two Putney  
Grads on the  
Theory and  
Practice of  
Landscape  
Architecture

If you've never met siblings Soren deNiord '93 and Rayna deNiord '96, here is fair warning. A (seemingly) simple question, such as "What does a landscape architect do?" will have you drinking in a heady brew of cultural references. During our conversations, they traversed the fields of philosophy, poetry, and the visual arts.

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Elements of Rayna deNiord's design at Meta Headquarters in Menlo Park, CA.  
Right: Rayna deNiord '96





Landscape architecture is multidisciplinary and collaborative. While neither Rayna nor Soren followed a straight-arrow path to the profession, their early experience, academic and otherwise, serves them well in the craft, which involves a good deal of art (and science, too).

The deNiord household brimmed with creativity. Their parents, poet Chard and sculptor/painter Liz, filled their home with books, paintings, “scribbled drafts,” and hand-made ceramics that graced the dinner table. Knowing nothing else, it was normal for Rayna and Soren, but in retrospect, the unique values of their upbringing became clear.

“Being surrounded with art and artifacts of their making instilled an ethos for living an ‘art-full’ existence,” Soren said.

Rayna points out their parents were artists who were also teachers. “They prioritized their artistic work and I remember them doing it whenever they could, in all the marginal moments,” she said. Marginal, that is, not only to the demands of parenting, but to the business of earning a living.

When their parents began teaching at The Putney School (Chard in English and religion, Liz in ceramics), Rayna was 11 and Soren, 14. With abundant opportunities to delight in nature and experiment in the art studios, each found self-awareness on the sprawling campus on the hill. Soren studied print-making with Brian Cohen, an early mentor and influence on his work. Rayna reveled in the landscape and the studio arts environment. She reflects, “I didn’t understand the value of the education I received at Putney until much later, when I went looking for something comparable for my own son and had a very hard time finding a school anywhere close to an equivalent.”

“Putney instilled in me an appreciation of process,” Rayna says. She cites Michel de Montaigne, the 16th-century French thinker and father of the essay form. For her, Montaigne’s writing captures nothing less than the experience of being human. Rayna points out that in French, *essayer* means to “try” or “attempt.” At Putney, she “had a lot of freedom and developed an awareness of myself in relation to the landscape. I also woke to the beauty of ephemera and temporality, of horizon, of near and far, and of passage through space where openness, edges, and immersion gave me the gift of perception and the ability to feel awe, wonder, and appreciation.” In a creative response, some of the first images Rayna made that conveyed what she was physically experiencing were monotypes of winter skies. “They captured the form of feeling, of abstraction and atmosphere,” she says. “I was empowered by having a personal way to share that feeling back to the world.”

In his work with Cohen, Soren began to develop printmaking as a way of refining his ideas, and he remains committed to the practice.

“Brian’s refined monochromatic aesthetic taught me how to think with and appreciate the power of negative space, [which is] the white page in print-making,” Soren said. Today, this translates into the



Above: Jacaranda Avenue, Phoenix, Az, one of Soren’s designs. Below: Soren designed this ‘slope meadow planting’ at a private residence in coastal Maine. Right: Soren deNiord ‘93 in front of the “poetry screen” in Portland, Maine, part of one of his design projects.



three-dimensional realm as the use of light in landscape. Print-making allows for layering the elements of topography, hardscape, and plant palette as Soren works out his designs. While he also uses programs such as Photoshop, 3D modeling, and Autocad, each of these has similarities to printmaking.

Landscape architects analyze quantitative data about the “land,” everything from soil quality to the management of natural waterways. They also engage in qualitative thinking about “scape” – assessing the scale of the neighborhood, town or city, and determining which built features will best facilitate social interactions. Above all, they seek to leave a light imprint on the land. Ideally, the landscape architect is involved from a project’s inception, working with architects and site planners to ensure a cohesive design. Even when they come on board later, the landscape architect can assess, for example, what needs to be repaired in the landscape and provide remedies, such as the introduction of more resilient plant species or designs for paths that allow logical movement throughout the setting.

There is always “an idea that drives a project,” Rayna says. For Soren, this means uncovering the *quiddity* — the “whatness” or essence — of a place. Robert Frost’s poetry is a touchstone for Soren. He is drawn to Frost’s search for truth and design as revealed in the natural world. He relies upon an ability to move “between awe and wonder, and accepting what is” in his work.



At Putney, Rayna and Soren each established a foundation in artistic practice. While that would continue to sustain them, it didn't lead to obvious career choices. After only a semester at Brown University, Rayna followed her heart to Cornell, where her then-boyfriend (now husband of twenty-four years), Martin Vopalka (Putney '94), was studying architecture. The years at Cornell were pivotal: in addition to studying landscape architecture, she also became a wife and mother before graduating.

As Soren observed Rayna's academic evolution, he saw that his undergraduate studies in fine arts and land-use policy might lend themselves to a similar pursuit. From Hampshire College, he moved on to the University of Virginia for a master's degree in landscape architecture.

Post-Cornell, Rayna, Martin, and son Maceo found their way to San Francisco. Rayna briefly studied at California College of the Arts (CCA), finding a mentor in graphic designer Martin Venezky. She left school to work for him and learned the importance of, "creating rules and limitations to guide and sharpen creative exploration." Coincidentally, she had the opportunity to develop a graphic language around the "topography of typography" for the fifth and final issue of SF Moma's *Open Magazine*, celebrating the museum's first off-site exhibit about landscape architecture. Not long after, she returned to the profession, realizing it was, "a practice where I could work on both places and objects with people and nature."

Enter a young and idealistic group of like-minded professionals, the founders of CMG Landscape Architecture. Rayna joined the firm in 2004. They grew up together over the course of nearly twenty years. She describes the importance of finding her own creative confidence within a collaborative design practice as a kind of "prosody," a term most often used in the study of poetry or linguistics.

"The term comes from the ancient Greek: *pros*, meaning 'toward,' and *ody*, meaning 'song.' *We speak toward song.* It's this natural variation in pitch and volume that gives color, animation, expression, and personality to our voices," Rayna says.

Rayna references the American biologist, E.O. Wilson, and his concept of "consilience." It means, she says, the "convergence of evidence or the jumping together of unrelated things." As landscape architects engage with a "a diverse range of disciplines and communities," they are always in pursuit of "a unity of knowledge." Given that CMG projects run the gamut of public settings – from urban parks, streetscapes, plazas and waterfronts, to corporate, academic, and cultural campuses – the idea of consilience helps guide an approach to design.

After graduate school, Soren worked for two different firms, and traveled often, his projects often taking him overseas. When he and his wife Tobin Scipione (whom he met teaching at Putney's summer arts program in 1996) were expecting their second son, he decided he needed to spend more time at home. In 2010, he established Soren DeNiord Design Studio, in Portland, Maine.

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Whether working with a public entity or residential client, Soren asks the same question: "What does it mean to feel connected to this place?" Mainers love the outdoors, and Soren tries to "create heightened moments of awareness" in settings that will "embed memory and emotion," whether it's a single-family home, a school, brewery or streetscape.

Soren's primary desire is to simply create, form being less important than the process of "solving problems through design." He approaches each project with a "light and simple touch," and always assesses "the limits of disturbance" on the land. Resiliency is uppermost in his practice. In both hardscape and softscape, Soren chooses materials and plants for durability, longevity, and adaptive qualities, not just aesthetic features. He is as attuned to the design details of a bench or bike rack or gravel path as he is to the master plan.

Early travels in Europe impressed upon Soren the possibilities for creating spaces where "place, truth, and art become inseparable." In Portland, he has served on the board of TEMPOart, a nonprofit that champions public art. "We strive to use public spaces as an armature for art, a mirror of sorts that helps us make sense of our evolving city," Soren said.

Rayna's firm recently completed Meta's headquarters in Menlo Park, an 80-acre site located on the fringe of San Francisco Bay in Silicon Valley. Working alongside Gehry Partners, CMG collaborated with a range of ecologists, engineers, arborists, and soil scientists to remediate, repurpose, and re-envision the site. She was gratified to lead the "feed-forward" process of design, construction, and care over the last decade. "We've been able to see how the landscape is evolving over time, especially in observing lessons learned and having the opportunity to implement approaches that consider succession as part of the long-term design vision and species diversification as an important strategy towards mitigating climate change."

While Soren and Rayna work on separate coasts and rarely have the opportunity to collaborate on projects together, their shared roots and experiences are deep and strong, especially when it comes to Putney.

"Putney is a wellspring of creativity and deep love," Rayna says. As Soren puts it, "Putney is an anchor." ■



## ON THE HILL

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