USU Professor Honored for Creation of Landscape Digital Library

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Benjamin George, assistant professor in Utah State University’s Department of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning, was recently honored for his creation of a digital landscape architecture library.

The Digital Library of Landscape Architecture History (DiLiLAH) consists of over 40 virtual tours of historic landscapes around the globe. The American Society of Landscape Architects recently honored George with its Award of Excellence in the Communications category for his work on DiLiLAH. It is the highest level award that the society gives and is only presented when a project comes along that is “significantly impactful and warrants special recognition.”

The open-access library’s virtual landscape tours include immersive panoramas that showcase the unique beauty of gardens such as the Château de Villandry in France and the Villa Lante in Italy. The project began with George looking for a tool for students in his online class.

“Landscape architecture is such a visual field,” George said. “I thought that our students were going to struggle in an online course if all they do is read texts. They needed a different way to engage with the material.”

He started the project by spending a month camping across Europe in 2011. George visited more than a dozen gardens and urban landscapes in that time, spending long days taking photos that captured the details of the landscapes.

The students in the online class enjoyed using the tool so much that it was soon implemented into the face-to-face class curriculum. George said the library is expanding and can be used as an educational and documentation tool, as well as a way to experience the gardens for those who haven’t had the opportunity to visit them.

“When I saw the list of other award nominees in the category, I was really honored and flattered to see that DiLiLAH won against some really tough competition,” George said. “I think what sets DiLiLAH apart is the interactive component of the virtual tours. We are updating the tours so that they work in virtual reality as well as on a screen. Students can feel like they are really exploring a garden.”

Since its creation, DiLiLAH has been accessed by over 175,000 visitors from 102 countries. Educators at other universities are using DiLiLAH to improve classroom experiences for their students and as a recruiting tool to introduce primary and secondary school students to the field of landscape architecture.

“Dr. George has created one of the most unique and accessible tools for students, scholars and the public view significant gardens and related designs,” said Sean Michael, head of USU’s Department of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning. “DiLiLAH is an innovative mash-up of his research into virtual environments and his expertise
in landscape architectural history. We have benefitted from this resource as students enrolled throughout Utah are given access to significant landscapes that otherwise would remain caught in static 2-dimensional images.

In total, the virtual tours of DiLiLAH are made from over 32,000 individual photos. Thousands of hours of labor have gone into the capture, creation and maintenance of the virtual tours and the DiLiLAH website.

To explore the digital library, visit dililah.org.

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