

INTERVIEW

Environmental Stewardship Team: Irma Garcia, Jill Sourial, Kat Superfisky

Organizations Interviewed:

1. [Arizmendi Association](#)

Madeleine Van Engel

E: MADDYVAN@GMAIL.COM | M: 510.764.3169

1. [Root Volume](#) (A worker-owned landscape design/build)

Maria Williford

E: MARIA@ROOTVOLUME.COM | P: 510.764.3169 | Oakland, CA

- “Where Regenerative Systems Meet the Built Environment”
- We are a landscape design|build focused on connecting the indoors and outdoors to restore our relationship to nature. We create healing environments by implementing beautiful living systems that get richer over time. As a worker-owned cooperative, and proud member of the **Arizmendi Association**, we are part of a restorative movement building towards ecological prosperity, social equity and dignified economic opportunities in our community.
- We value curiosity, craftsmanship and kinship, and our work is rooted in the Permaculture ethics of caring for the earth, caring for the people and the fair distribution of resources. We consider ourselves lifetime students of this interconnected world and enjoy collaborating to discover more regenerative ways of living.
- 5 employees in the organization
- Services:
 - Site Analysis and Masterplans
 - Resilient and Contemplative Spaces
 - ADU Site Planning and Gardens
 - Indoor Gardens
 - Furniture and Artistic Elements
 - Consulting and Project Management

Arizmendi Q+A:

- **BACKGROUND:**
 - A conglomerate of different cooperative businesses
 - Looks like a franchise, but isn't
 - Mission is to create as many well-paying jobs as possible
 - Conglomerate approach is way to help incubate smaller/start-up co-ops
 - Offer support in various ways (HR, name recognition, etc.)
- **BUSINESS: How does the conglomerate of co-ops function?**
 - Every cooperative pays fees to be a part of the conglomerate
 - Each co-op is separately owned but get shared services
 - Every co-op has 2 members who sit on a board (“Policy Council”), which discusses issues that affect everyone
 - Meet approximately every-other-month
 - Visioning process (“What will we look like in the next three years?”)

- Future Goals:
 - Establish a “repair” cooperative, who can help fix things
 - Create Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) co-op in order to keep rents affordable

Root Volume (RV) Q+A:

- **BACKGROUND: How long have you been a co-op? How do you accept new members?**
 - Incorporated June 2017, started organizing with 3 people in December 2016. They are now 5 people.
 - There’s a candidacy process for new members which is 9 months.
 - There are 3 evaluations during the candidacy and then a membership test at the end. What does patronage mean? Finances and taxes can be confusing since it’s different for a co-op.
 - \$2500 buy in after 9 months or 900 hours. Then you get voted in as a member and have flexibility to pay the buy in and can be deducted from the paycheck. \$250 is initial capital contribution. Want it to be accessible to folks who are low income.
 - Arizmendi Policy Council meets every 2 months to make association wide decisions. They are looking at cross pollinating labor across the Association’s businesses. Recruitment has evolved, Root Volume prioritizes some experience as opposed to only local community outreach like the bakeries at Arizmendi.
 - Arizmendi offers trainings and orientations, conflict management and communication, that are required during candidacy.
 - RV describes themselves as a “self-help organization” that pays living wages, provides healthcare to employees after period, offers training, etc.

- **BUSINESS: Do you have an office where customers can come? Where do you keep your tools and equipment?**
 - Two separate spaces:
 - Office is run out of contractor’s house, which allows for 2 employees and files/desks/designs
 - Storage equipment space is in artist studio space

- **BUSINESS: Who are your customers? Do people choose you because of your values such as permaculture and worker ownership?**
 - They mostly come from referrals. Their customers often like a certain amount of hardscape in the projects.
 - They’ve done one public project in a commercial complex and it harder for the team who are used to working in private yards. Liability is different, vigilance of safety and equipment getting stolen.

- **BUSINESS: Are you cost competitive? How do you market your work?**
 - HOUZZ professional profile costs \$250/month for advertising and has idea books that customers can create like Pinterest. Yard signs work well and capture interest.

- **SERVICES: What about labor? Do you do it all yourselves or do you rely on any labor outside of the co-op (e.g. do you install irrigation)? Do you have criteria for your suppliers or subconsultants?**
 - The goal is to keep labor and patronage in the co-op but sometimes demolition or other work can be challenging. Looking for deconstruction services. They often sub out fence work. They focus on indoor/outdoor connections. Electrician, plumber
 - Intention is to work with people/organizations who share similar values to RV, but it's often difficult. Criteria for collaborators/subcontractors are organic. Recommend having 3-5 points of at least aspirational criteria.

- **MATERIALS: Where do you source your materials? Do you have a preference for native plants? Recycled materials?**
 - RV has favorite vendors and uses a truck to pick up/deliver materials
 - *Plants*: Devil Mountain and Bamboo Pipeline for plants--make sure nurseries offer contractor/wholesale prices
 - *Aggregates*: American Stone

- **LEGAL: Do you do permitting yourself or work with a contractor/landscape architect?**
 - RV employee (Dante) has a background in landscape architecture and contractor's license, so can submit some drawings
 - RV uses a landscape architecture "partner" to stamp certain drawings; interview criteria
 - Engineers are good friends to have, but it's unlikely they will want to stamp drawings that they don't produce.

- **MAINTENANCE: Do you do ongoing maintenance as a service?**
 - Maintenance is a difficult service to make money on, so taking this on is a challenge, but is something that clients are always asking for (especially the specialized niche of "ecological" design and maintenance).
 - RV subs out/refers maintenance to a team they know are skilled in ecological maintenance, but the company is smaller so unable to take on every project

- **WARRANTY: Do you offer a warranty?**
 - Plant warranty for 1 year
 - 30% plant die off is average for projects in industry, but RV is below that

- **TRAINING: We're interested in a job training/youth development component to our work and considering a hybrid model of co-op and nonprofit. Thoughts?**
 - RV works with the Community Council to provide training sessions on co-op model
 - RV right now does not focus on specialty training due to capacity, but does "train" their staff internally (e.g permaculture) so that they meet the RV standards and can perform the organization's projects/tasks. RV also partners with other organizations to offer additional training opportunities to employees.

- **Anything else you'd like to share that we haven't asked?**

Co-ops aren't for everyone! Not everyone has the sensibility to take initiative and not perform just as an employee. Invest in internal training and try to recruit with those skills in mind. Everyone is a leader in a co-op. Personnel handbook and bylaws. CA employment law, at will employees, process for grievances. Vote of confidence.