

Honorary Membership Nomination Narrative

Nominee: Connie Spellman, Director

Nominee's Address: Omaha by Design
c/o University of Nebraska at Omaha
6001 Dodge Street

City/State/Zip: Omaha, NE 68182-0402

Phone: 402-554-4012

Nominator: Steven N. Rodie, ASLA
Past Trustee – Great Plains Chapter

On behalf of the Great Plains Chapter, ASLA, I am pleased and honored to nominate Connie Spellman for Honorary Membership in ASLA. I have worked with Connie on a variety of projects over the past eight years in support of innovative planning and design strategies for Omaha. Connie directs Omaha by Design, an initiative of the Omaha Community Foundation founded in 2001 that engages the public and private sectors to synergistically improve the quality of the natural and built environments throughout the Omaha metro area. Projects and activities center on three components: *Green Omaha* (preserve and enhance the city's natural setting and public park system); *Civic Omaha* (define and improve the city's civic places and public image); and *Neighborhood Omaha* (preserve and enhance the diversity of the city's residential neighborhoods). Collectively, these components comprise the Urban Design Element of Omaha's master plan, which establishes the city's long-range policies, goals and standards as a guide for its physical development. The core philosophy of Omaha by Design is simple yet powerful: ***residents of a community should take an active role in its betterment, intellectually as well as physically.***

Frankly, in my twenty-three years as a landscape architect and professor working in three states and numerous municipalities, I have never seen anyone else in any capacity that can hold a candle to Connie's ability to build consensus and seek understanding among diverse audiences and the design professions. As Dr. Del Weber, the former Chancellor of the University of Nebraska at Omaha states, "**Connie is the 'iron fist in the velvet glove.' She has the uncommon ability to bring people together to give countless hours in volunteer tasks and to make them believe the task could not be accomplished without them....In truth, I know of no one who could have achieved what she has done in the last three years.**"

Products that have been produced through Connie's guidance and leadership have set high standards in Omaha, as illustrated by: a ***Green Streets Master Plan***, which identifies Omaha streets appropriate for greening projects, sets

planting standards for specific street types and outlines a maintenance plan for existing and future plantings (**Honor Award, Iowa and Great Plains Chapters, ASLA**); a ***Streetscape Design Handbook*** that specifies design and installation standards for streetscape elements within the public right-of-way in Omaha (**Merit Award, Great Plains Chapter, ASLA**); a completed innovative *Urban Design Element* for the Omaha City Plan; a newly-launched *Environmental Element* for the City Plan that will include goals and standards for the Natural Environment, Urban Form and Transportation, Building Construction, Resource Conservation and Community Health: and a variety of pilot projects that demonstrate the benefits and workability of implemented design standards.

Connie is a staunch advocate for our profession and automatically includes landscape architects on the various committees and working groups that support Omaha by Design projects. She has developed a thorough understanding of sustainability, natural processes and landscape aesthetics while acknowledging (and inviting to the table) members of the development community who will play a critical role in the successful implantation of creative planning and design standards. We are fortunate in Omaha to have excellent working relationships with Public Works staff when requests for innovative and “outside-the-box” requests for design parameters are brought to the table. But when Connie sets her mind to the “potential” implementation of a promising new or previously “unproven” design idea or product—it’s likely that the ensuing negotiation will go her way.

She has become a resident expert in her own right relative to streetscape design details, adapted tree species and the workings of city government – she is a very convincing advocate for quality design because she speaks the language and understands the politics of approval processes. One night a couple of years ago, Connie called an impromptu design charette on her dining room table, inviting Omaha by Design Technical Committee Members to brainstorm ideas to “influence” desired site and architectural design changes to the newest Wal-Mart in Omaha. As I watched the design process in action, architects, planners, landscape architects and engineers gathered around the table, changes were sketched, consensus was built...and many of the ideas were ultimately implemented in the design of a “better” Wal-Mart for Omaha.

Through Connie’s passion and leadership, Omaha has been acknowledged nationally as a model for what is possible in quality urban design planning and implementation. Jonathan Barnett, FAIA, FAICP, a consultant hired to assist with the Urban Design Element, stated: **“I have worked on master plans in many parts of the U.S. and have never met anyone else who has her capacity to bring people together in support of major public initiatives.” ...She is leading an effort that will transform the entire city of Omaha into a greener, more sustainable, and altogether more livable place.** I can’t think of a better tribute to what Connie Spellman is accomplishing – nor find a better description of what the profession of landscape architecture is all about.



January 26, 2009

ASLA Executive Committee
c/o Carolyn Mitchell, Coordinator, Honors and Awards
American Society of Landscape Architects
636 Eye Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001-3736

Re: Honorary Membership for Connie Spellman
Great Plains Chapter/ASLA Nomination

Philadelphia
Coral Gables
Dallas
Lake Placid
New York City
San Diego
San Francisco

Dear ASLA Executive Committee Members:

I am truly delighted to support the nomination of Connie Spellman for honorary membership in the American Society of Landscape Architects. I have had the privilege of working with Connie during the Omaha by Design process, first on the plan itself, which resulted in adding an Urban Design Element to Omaha's Master Plan and then on modifications to Omaha's development regulations in order to implement the master plan provisions. Both of these major changes were approved unanimously by the Omaha City Council, a tribute to Connie's extraordinary ability to marshal public support for a good cause. The entire public involvement and committee structure that supported these two initiatives was devised and implemented by Connie; the work I participated in would have gone nowhere without her.

Just as a small illustration: during the planning phase of Omaha by Design we identified the existing creek beds that run through the City as a significant environmental resource and a major part of the Green Omaha component of our plan. While our public discussions were taking place, the local power company announced plans to run a series of power pylons along one of the most important creeks. The whole creek preservation and restoration concept would have had no credibility if that had happened. The Power Company refused to change its plan, citing cost savings and saying it was their responsibility as a publicly regulated utility to seek the lowest cost option. No discussions about the value of natural resources had any effect. However, the right-of-way had to be approved by the County. In addition to organizing a public discussion in the local newspaper, Connie met with each of the County Commissioners. The Power Company then withdrew its proposal, Connie told me: "I had six out of seven; it would have been unanimous but one of them was out of town."

The Omaha by Design program laid out some 73 public actions that are necessary for implementation. One of the recent initiatives has been to add an Environmental



January 26, 2009

Page 2

Element to the Omaha Master Plan, which is currently in progress. Connie's organization, Omaha by Design, is well on the way to seeing the completion of all of the implementation measures.. Of course, the City and its Planning and Public Works Departments, are important players, as are private investors, and many other organizations. However, the behind the scenes organizer is Connie Spellman. I have worked on master plans in many parts of the U.S. and have never met anyone else who has her capacity to bring people together in support of major public initiatives. She does not seek a major public role for herself, but she is there, quietly, making reasonable suggestions, and keeping the bigger picture in her head the whole time. She is leading an effort that will transform the entire city of Omaha into a greener, more sustainable, and altogether more livable place.

By extending Honorary Membership to Connie Spellman you would be honoring an extraordinary individual whose working is making an impact of national importance.

I strongly support her nomination.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jonathan Barnett". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Jonathan Barnett, FAIA, FAICP



City of Omaha
Mike Fahey, Mayor

Office of the Mayor
1819 Farnam Street, Suite 300
Omaha, Nebraska 68183-0300
(402) 444-5000
FAX: (402) 444-6059

February 6, 2009

ASLA Executive Committee
c/o Carolyn Mitchell, Coordinator, Honors and Awards
American Society of Landscape Architects
636 Eye Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001-3736

Re: Honorary Membership – Connie Spellman
Great Plains Chapter/ASLA Nomination

Dear ASLA Executive Committee Members:

I write in support of Connie Spellman's nomination for honorary membership in the American Society of Landscape Architects. As mayor of Omaha, Nebraska, I have worked extensively with Connie and continue to be impressed by her dedication to improving the quality of urban design in our community.

Connie is the Director of Omaha By Design, an organization built on public-private partnerships and citizen input that is dedicated to adopting and implementing sound urban design and sustainability plans. Connie has contributed to the profession of landscape architecture by using citizen engagement and collaboration with policymakers to improve Omaha's urban design.


Under Connie's leadership, Omaha By Design worked with city officials, business leaders and neighborhoods to create the Urban Design Element of the City of Omaha's Master Plan. Developing the Urban Design Element was a cooperative effort to extend the benefits of quality urban design throughout Omaha through a focus on strict design standards, the use of open spaces and building stronger neighborhoods. After adoption by the Omaha City Council, the Urban Design Element standards for the community include: landscaping, the environment, streetscapes, public art, walkable communities and more.

Currently, Connie is building on the success of the Urban Design Element by working with the City of Omaha to create an Environmental Element for the City's Master Plan. Connie continues to create changes in Omaha that improve our quality of life and the urban design standards in our city. She is an outstanding leader of the collaborations that make our community stronger.

The creation of an urban design plan for a city of Omaha's size is a challenge, however Connie was able to bring together all stakeholders and garner consensus. Through Omaha By Design, she continues to implement Omaha's Urban Design Element and is dedicated to incorporating landscape architecture concepts. I am thankful for the work Connie Spellman has done for our city, and I am confident that she is very deserving of Honorary Membership in the American Society of Landscape Architects.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,


Mike Fahey, Mayor
City of Omaha



City of Omaha
Mike Fahey, Mayor

Planning Department

Omaha/Douglas Civic Center
1819 Farnam Street, Suite 1100
Omaha, Nebraska 68183
(402) 444-5150
Telefax (402) 444-6140

Steven N. Jensen, AICP, LA
Director

February 8, 2009

ASLA Executive Committee
c/o Carolyn Mitchell, Coordinator, Honors and Awards
American Society of Landscape Architects
636 Eye Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001-3736

Re: Honorary Membership – Connie Spellman
Great Plains Chapter/ASLA Nomination

Dear ASLA Executive Committee Members:

I am writing in support of an honorary membership in the American Society of Landscape Architects for Connie Spellman. I have known Connie in her capacity as the head of the Omaha By Design organization and its predecessor Lively Omaha for nearly ten years. As you might guess by its name, the Omaha By Design organization is dedicated to improving the quality of life in the City of Omaha through better urban design. As its president, Connie, has been a tireless advocate of this mission.

The original organization, Lively Omaha, was established as a branch of the Omaha Community Foundation with the goal of making Omaha a more enjoyable place to live. As its president, Connie soon realized that in order to create the kind of city the Community Foundation envisioned it was necessary to create a better physical environment within the city. As a result, under Connie's leadership, Lively Omaha embarked on a relationship with the Partners for Livable Places organization. (Now called Partners for Livable Communities.) The result was the creation of a team within Lively Omaha that works with neighborhood residents to conduct "place games" aimed at helping residents re-imagine their neighborhoods. The workshops continue today and are used by numerous neighborhoods each year as a means to improve their surroundings.

At about the same time as the creation of the Lively Omaha organization, the Omaha Planning Department embarked on an effort to create an Urban Design Element of the City's Master Plan. Although there was some interest in such an effort, money for the project was unavailable. However, soon after the effort was shelved Wal-Mart announced plans to develop roughly 40 acres of open space in the former "front lawn" of the Avaya corporation plant in Southwest Omaha. The community was concerned about the appearance of the project but soon found out the City had few regulations with which to control its design. It was at this point that Connie and the Lively Omaha organization approached the Planning Department about helping to create an urban design plan.

The Planning Department quickly accepted the offer of help and the Omaha By Design initiative was created. Connie and her governing board were able to garner financial support from several major private donors and the Mayor committed the resources of the Planning Department and other City departments to the effort through "in-kind" support. Noted urban designer Jonathan Barnett and the WRT design firm and Brian Blaesser with Robinson and Cole, were hired to assist in the development of the plan. The result was the creation of perhaps the first "comprehensive" urban design master plan in the nation for a city the size of Omaha. The plan identified goals and objectives and over 70 implementation strategies to carry out the plan.

Connie and her Lively Omaha organization immediately took on the task of following through on the implementation strategies. They changed their name to Omaha By Design and again partnered with the Planning, Public Works and Parks Departments and local consultants to create a Green Streets Master Plan and a Streetscape Handbook for Omaha. They also spearheaded a redesign of the Gene Leahy Mall in downtown Omaha and raised money for the development of a "neighborhood alliance" plan for the Benson / Ames neighborhoods in central Omaha. Today, only a few short years after the completion of the plan thanks to Connie's efforts roughly 75% of the plan's recommendations have either been accomplished or are in some stage of completion.

As impressive as these achievements are perhaps the biggest accomplishment stemming from the Omaha By Design effort was the creation of a comprehensive set of urban design regulations that were added to the City's zoning code. Here again Connie was able to solicit significant financial support from private donors, which was matched by the City through "in-kind" support to re-hire the original consultants. The task force that helped create the urban design plan was reassembled and after over two-years of difficult and sometimes contentious debate the regulations were approved unanimously by the City Council. Remarkably, the new regulations, which significantly increase regulation of the design of buildings, landscaping, signage and other critical elements of the urban environment, were adopted with the support of the development community.

Since that time Connie and the Omaha By Design organization have continued their efforts to improve the quality of life in Omaha. They have embarked on a project to improve an eroded creek bed and its surroundings to demonstrate ways to improve other creeks within the city. They have worked with the Planning Department to create new regulations to control the spread of digital billboards and have again joined the Planning Department in developing a new Environmental Element of the City's Master Plan.

This list of impressive accomplishments would not have been possible without the dedication, enthusiasm and drive of Connie Spellman. Her tireless efforts and the achievements I have listed will have a lasting positive impact on the appearance of the city, its environment and the quality of life enjoyed by its residents. I whole-heartedly endorse Connie Spellman for honorary membership in the American Society of Landscape Architects.

Sincerely,



Steven N. Jensen, LA, AICP
Planning Director
City of Omaha Planning Department

Del Weber
1307 North 97th Plaza
Omaha, NE 68114

Feb. 9, 2009

Honorary Membership Nomination
ASLA
636 Eye Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001-3736

To Whom It May Concern:

I hired Connie Spellman seven years ago to serve as the executive director of Lively Omaha, an initiative of the Omaha Community Foundation. The organization later morphed into Omaha by Design (ObD), which facilitates partnerships between the public and private sectors to execute projects that improve the quality of the natural and built environments throughout the metro area. From the start, Connie has been the driving force behind the organization and its evolution. Its achievements are many, among them – place building, streetscape design and advocacy, but the following two capture the essence of its work:

In 2004, ObD entered into a partnership with the City of Omaha to create an Urban Design Element for the city's master plan. We employed a consultant to assist in its development; created a steering committee of 22 developers, architects and city officials; and set out to create the Element. We told the consultant we wanted to develop a plan for the entire city and that the work had to be completed in one year. The consultant said that a plan for an entire city hadn't been done elsewhere and it was unlikely that the proposed project could be done in the proposed time frame. He hadn't met Connie Spellman! One year later, almost to the day, the plan was developed and passed unanimously by the Omaha City Council, all of it with widespread participation and consultation with Omaha's citizens.

In the next 18 months, ObD embarked on a project to put the recommendations into legal code. This was where the proverbial "rubber would meet the road." After all, it was one thing to outline intent and big vision, quite another to give them the force of law. Again, for this effort there was widespread citizen participation and a steering committee whose members gave countless hours to hammering out often contentious and controversial regulations. The effort ended, again, with the unanimous support of the Omaha City Council.

The lynchpin and the constant in the above efforts was Connie Spellman. Without her persistence and political savvy, neither effort would have been accomplished. Connie is the "iron fist in the velvet glove." When she sets her sight on a task, she gets it done. She has the uncommon ability to bring people together to give countless hours in volunteer tasks and to make them believe the task could not be accomplished without them. She is quick to give credit to others for their effort. Yet, all who work with her know Connie is the master planner and strategist behind the scenes.

In truth, I know of no one who could have achieved what she has done in the last three years. She is very worthy of ASLA Honorary Member status. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



Del Weber
Chancellor Emeritus, University of Nebraska at Omaha
Member, Omaha by Design Advisory Committee