

Executive Committee
Board of Trustees
American Society of Landscape Architects
636 Eye St. NW
Washington, DC 20001-3736

Re: Letter of Nomination: Michael Van Valkenburgh

REED | HILDERBRAND

Dear Executive Committee Members:

I am honored to present the nomination for Michael Van Valkenburgh, Principal of Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates and Charles Eliot Professor at Harvard, to receive the distinguished ASLA Design Medal. I have been a teaching colleague of Van Valkenburgh's for twenty-one years at Harvard and have known him personally for thirty years. I know the work and the firm from every possible angle. It is my distinct pleasure to outline a few of Van Valkenburgh's remarkable achievements and his enormous contributions to the discipline of landscape architecture.

I would like to begin by citing a few key remarks from letters written in support of this nomination. Another distinguished colleague at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, Carl Steinitz Hon. ASLA, mentions that while Van Valkenburgh's academic excellence is itself worthy of distinction, his accomplishments in winning and executing some of North America's "most prestigious commissions"—including Pennsylvania Avenue at the White House, Toronto's Lower Don waterfront, and Harvard Yard—are greater proof of his worthiness for this honor. UC Berkeley Professor Linda Jewell FASLA writes of the critical role his "commitment to social inclusiveness and daily life of users" brings to the field by example. Rich Haag FASLA observes that his "knowledge and understanding of the primacy of plants in landscape architecture design is unrivaled." Adrian Benepe, Hon. ASLA, Commissioner of Parks in New York City, speaks to the environmental agenda of Van Valkenburgh's "majestic vision" for Brooklyn Bridge Park, which recuperates the East River's "once-crumbling infrastructure to create saltwater marshes and bring people to the waterfront." And historian Ethan Carr from the University of Virginia recognizes Van Valkenburgh's practice as marked by an insistence on "making his firm a place where the most difficult, potentially contentious, and interesting issues of the American landscape are not only discussed, but are resolved in remarkable built work."

It may be clear from these esteemed writers, or from the intellectual depth of the publications that feature Van Valkenburgh or his works, that he stands out among the most notable of practitioners of his generation and beyond. In my view, Van Valkenburgh has helped catalyze significant changes in disciplinary practice through his work and has been influential, for more than thirty years, to generations of students, landscape architects, and others who practice in allied professional fields. I believe landscape architecture's current renaissance in North American cities and internationally—no one can deny this phenomenon—would not be the same without the legacy and influence of this teacher and practitioner. Van Valkenburgh has been a key voice in framing a vociferous multi-tiered argument for the intellectual, artistic, economic, and social capacity of landscape architecture to embody significant relevance to culture. Because he is tireless and insatiable—more than anyone I know—it is clear to me that he is not showing signs of wearying. The ASLA Design Medal would be an appropriate endorsement of his efficacy and his great work.

One measure of this combination of tirelessness ambition and remarkable success: the ASLA Professional Awards Program, perhaps our best vehicle for peer evaluation. Van Valkenburgh's firm has been honored 26 times since 1982 (in addition to many chapter awards in New York and Boston). That record—26 awards in 29 years— is amazing. Though I was unable to confirm it, few if any other firms have received that much recognition for design projects, research, and communications efforts from our own Society.

Van Valkenburgh stands alongside the many well-known North American landscape architects whose practices have been motivated by lifelong dedication to elevating the experience of material qualities of the landscape, and redefining what the landscape offers for human expression and for environmental rescue. The variety of his commissions, the scope of his practice, the urgent call of his artistry, and his enormous commitment to teaching place him among others of incredible achievement—I am thinking here of designers such as Warren Manning, Fletcher Steele, Frank Waugh, Jens Jensen, Dan Kiley, James Rose, Bob Royston, Emmet Wemple, Ed Bye, Jim Van Sweden, or Ed Blake. As far back as the early 1980s, Van Valkenburgh merged a farm-bred love of cultivation, ecology, and seasonality with an informed knowledge of professional culture and artistic practice. He was driven to get his thinking into print for broad consumption. I have always been convinced that he is driven by multiple objectives: his devotion to his clients' ambitions and his own potential legacy are important to him and never obscured; but the dedication to advancement of his chosen discipline is

inextricably part of every activity and each commitment. In the way he drew attention to his own creative activities and critical studies in the early years, he had the audacity and ambition to see himself operating in the tradition of Fletcher Steele or Garrett Eckbo—thought leaders of their time, developing arguments for the discipline to grab hold of and exploit, and using their commissions as a kind of demonstrable testing ground for ideas and elaborations. As a young teacher, Van Valkenburgh drew, he wrote, he curated exhibitions, published on historical figures, built gardens, promoted student work, and published the work of practitioners he admired alongside his own work. Remember: this was a time when we still had very few published works on landscape architecture's design history; other than self-authored books by Eckbo, Halprin, Rose, Lynch, and McHarg and a few others, we had no notable scholarly monographs on our major North American practitioners, even Kiley. *Landscape Architecture Magazine* itself published, in those days, very little reflection on the content of built works. Van Valkenburgh's aim was to help bring about a great change—he saw it coming and helped catalyze it. He helped restore legitimacy to the small project as a place of rigorous exploration—and paved the way for generations of successive professionals who have collectively renewed the field's commitment to the garden as a site of artistic expression, ethical action, and cultural relevance.

Somewhat single-handedly, while doing this, he tossed convention on its head in the teaching of plant life to young designers in graduate school. A few skeptics dismissed his off-beat approach to teaching plants; but he inspired students and made them think like painters, or writers, or mathematicians, or composers. Abstraction, poetics, artifice, iteration, modeling, and illustration ruled; through these techniques, he privileged microclimates, plant associations, color, seasonality, and horticultural exuberance as the essential characteristics of a medium of expression. The significance of this should not be underestimated: a field that could be described at that time as full of reticence—even denial—regarding the importance of plants and craft and detail awakened to powerful new knowledge of its very material manifestations. There were many reasons for this dramatic shift, but no practitioner made a greater impact in this smaller scale terrain at a time when worldwide economic growth opened up enormous potential for the garden as a luxury commodity—or more crucially as an irrepressible aspect of the human condition.

If these were the intellectual and educational roots of Van Valkenburgh's practice in the 1980s, fomented on small commissions, speculative works and academic pursuits, he was yet to be tested on complex and complicated design commissions. Fast forward to the early nineties: With Mill Race Park,

in Columbus, Indiana, Van Valkenburgh launched a new scale for his firm with a project that reconciled a contemporary design language and a robust recreation program with the realities of recurrent flood plain inundation. Around the same time, he was the only American designer invited to compete for the redesign of portions of the *Jardin des Tuileries* in Paris. As sole proprietor of a relatively small firm in those days, he went on to complete works in Paris, Ontario, Seoul, Texas, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Charleston, and elsewhere. One looks back to these projects for lessons that are always specific to the place and time and the impulse of the project itself—they are always different, one to the next. Van Valkenburgh's practice continued to evolve its ethos and to mount ever-greater ambitions. In the past decade, the firm has received notice for impressive commissions including the Harvard Yard Restoration, the Pennsylvania Avenue/White House project, the Alumnae Valley restoration at Wellesley College, and two of New York City's most ambitious landscape projects in decades: the West Side's Teardrop Park, with its massive rock sculpture that never fails to surprise or delight; and the Brooklyn Bridge Park, which profoundly alters New York's relationship to the East River and which helped motivate some of the recycling and reuse aims in the city's new long range plan for improved sustainability of its entire waterfront.

In the past year, Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates has captured two of the most noteworthy and beguiling commissions anywhere. The differences and distinctions between these two immense prospects are significant in demonstrating the range of capacities this firm now demonstrates. The Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, in St. Louis, Missouri, which was singled out from among the last decade's most compelling design team consortiums, revives a major national monument—the historic work of Eero Saarinen and Dan Kiley—and pushes the reach of the Gateway Arch clear across the Mississippi to East St. Louis. The project demonstrates landscape architecture's capacity—today I would even say its mandate—to take on the lead role in all aspects of a massive recovery project in the post-industrial city: the environmental, architectural, engineering, economic and commercial, programmatic, ecological, and conservation components that define today's urban culture. This project's complexity may be measured in cost alone—reports of a potential build-out estimated at half a billion dollars have made national press.

The second recent international competition, awarded in January 2011, was captured by MVVA with HNTB and a team of biologists: the ARC Wildlife Bridge near Denver, Colorado. The project produces a series of adapted ecologies for a wildlife crossing over the West Vail Pass along US I-70.

The report of the jury on the HNTB/MVVA selection states that they were looking for a team that would reconcile “ecological integration, transportation improvement...educational value...wildlife conservation, highway safety, and design culture.” The jury held forward the expectation that the team would be “capable of making a national or international argument on behalf of this type of landscape infrastructure.” The announcement by the jury noted that the selected proposal “is not only eminently possible; it has the capacity to transform what we think of as possible.” High aims pushed even higher.

The ASLA Design Medal, which is a great honor to bestow, recognizes designers who have produced a body of exceptional design work for a sustained period of at least ten years. With Michael Van Valkenburgh, “sustaining” doesn’t quite capture it. Instead we have an enterprising, unflagging, unstoppable artist/designer who has contributed enormously by building works that continue to bring eminence to his practice and to the field itself.

Thank you for allowing me to make these comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gary R. Hilderbrand". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Gary R. Hilderbrand FASLA FAAR
Principal

Adjunct Professor of Landscape Architecture
Harvard Graduate School of Design

MICHAEL R. VAN VALKENBURGH

Founding Principal

EDUCATION

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Master of Fine Arts in Landscape Architecture, 1977

Cornell University, College of Agriculture, Bachelor of Science, 1973

Boston Museum School, Photography, 1974-75

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

1982 to date Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, Inc.

1979-82 Carr, Lynch and Sandell, Inc., Cambridge, MA

1972-79 Work for firms in Cambridge and London

HONORS AND AWARDS

- 2008 Royal Architectural Institute of Canada Sustainable Design Award for the design of Lower Don Lands, Toronto, ON.
Analysis and Planning Award, American Society of Landscape Architects, for Port Lands Estuary: Reinventing the Don River as an Agent of Urbanism, Toronto, ON.
General Design and Planning Award, American Society of Landscape Architects, for the Boston Children's Museum, Boston, MA.
Residential Design Honor Award, American Society of Landscape Architects, for the "Passage to the Lake," Stoneham, ME.
- 2007 Tucker Design Award, Building Stone Institute, Bailey Plaza at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY
Design Honor Award, New York ASLA, ASLA Headquarters Green Roof, Washington, D.C.
Planning and Analysis Honor Award, New York ASLA, 2005 Brooklyn Bridge Park Master Plan, Brooklyn, NY
- 2006 General Design Award of Excellence, American Society of Landscape Architects, for "From Brownfield to Greenfield: A New Working Landscape for Wellesley College Wrenched from Its Toxic Past," Wellesley, MA.
General Design Award of Honor, American Society of Landscape Architects, for "Small is Beautiful," Millburn, NJ.
- 2005 Honor Award, American Society of Landscape Architects, Herman Miller Factory, Canton, GA.
- 2004 Design Merit Award, American Society of Landscape Architects, for "Feral Geometry: A Narrative of Modern Materials on the Bank of Turtle Creek," Dallas, TX.
- 2003 Vice President, Architectural League of New York.
- 2003-05 Director, Architectural League of New York.
- 2003-04 Juror, World Trade Center Memorial Competition.
National Design Award, Smithsonian Institution's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, for Environmental Design.
- 2002 Juror, World Trade Center Architect Selection.
Design Merit Award, American Society of Landscape Architects, for Allegheny Riverfront Parks, Pittsburgh, PA.
Design Merit Award, American Society of Landscape Architects, for Spider Island, Chicago Botanic Garden, Chicago, IL.
Planning and Analysis Honor Award, American Society of Landscape Architects, for Allegheny Riverfront Park Extensions East and West, Pittsburgh, PA.
Places Design Award, for Allegheny Riverfront Parks, Pittsburgh, PA.
- 1999 Planning and Analysis Merit Award, American Society of Landscape Architects, for Wellesley College Master Plan, Wellesley, MA.
- 1998 Campus Master Plan Executive Summary, Wellesley.
Merit Award, American Society of Landscape Architects, for Vera List Courtyard, New York City, NY.
- 1997 Citation, Progressive Architecture Awards, for Allegheny Riverfront Park, Pittsburgh, PA.
- 1995 Merit Award, Boston Society of Landscape Architects, for 50 Avenue Montaigne Garden, Paris, France.

- Michael Van Valkenburgh, Vitae
- 1994 Honor Award, National Trust for Historic Preservation, for the Harvard Yard Restoration, Cambridge, MA.
- 1993 Honor Award, Boston Society of Landscape Architects, for Mill Race Park, Columbus, IN, and for the Harvard Yard Master Plan, Cambridge, MA.
Planning and Urban Design Merit Award, American Society of Landscape Architects, for Harvard Yard Landscape Master Plan, Cambridge, MA.
- 1990 First Finalist, President's Competition, Restoration of le Jardin des Tuileries, Paris, France.
Design Merit Award, American Society of Landscape Architects, for Black Granite Garden, Los Angeles.
- 1989 A.M. (hon.), Harvard University.
Design Honor Award, American Society of Landscape Architects, for the Regis Gardens, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN with Barbara Stauffacher Solomon.

SELECTED REVIEWS OF WORK

- Hume, Christopher. "A Winning Vision for the Lower Don," *Toronto Star*, May 9, 2007.
- Rochon, Lisa. "Winning Design Returns Don River to Its Rightful Place in the City," *The Globe and Mail*, May 9, 2007.
- Hines, Susan. "Abstract Realism: At Teardrop Park in Battery Park City All the Park's a Playground." *Landscape Architecture*, February 2007 (cover story).
- Mays, Vernon. "Making Hydrology Visible." *Landscape Architecture*, January 2007: 24-31.
- Eisenman, Theodore. "Raising the Bar on Green Roof Design." *Landscape Architecture*, November 2006: 22-29.
- Freeman, Allen. "Old School, New Space." *Landscape Architecture*, October 2006: 42-51.
- "Small Is Beautiful." *International New Landscape*, October 2006: 14-18.
- Blum, Andrew. "The Active Edge." *Metropolis*, March 2006: 82-87.
- Collins, Glenn and David Dunlap. "The 9/11 Memorial: How Pluribus Became Unum." *The New York Times*, January 19, 2004.
- Raver, Ann. "Rusticating the City With Ice, Rock and Seed." *The New York Times*, October 16, 2003.
- Welsh, William E. "Mission Possible." *Landscape Architecture*, August 2000.
- Pearson, Clifford A. "Michael Van Valkenburgh Takes a Walk Over the Water's Edge in his Design for Pittsburgh's Allegheny Riverfront Park." *Architectural Record*, March 2000.
- Gillette, Jane. "Michael." *Landscape Architecture*, February 1998.
- Otis, Denise. "On the Cutting Edge." *Garden Design*, Feb./March 1997.
- Dean, Andrea Oppenheimer, "Turning Point." *Landscape Architecture*, February 1998.
- Gillette, Jane. "162 Birches." *Landscape Architecture*, October 1996.
- Beardsley, John. "Mill Race Park: Rescuing 'Death Valley'." *Landscape Architecture*, September 1993.
- Kahn, Eve. "Uncovering the Waterfront." *Wall Street Journal*, December 30, 1992.
- Holtz Kay, Jane. "Metal Machine Garden." *Landscape Architecture*, October 1992.
- Johnson, Jory. "Profile on Michael Van Valkenburgh." *Progressive Architecture*, July 1989.

ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

- 1993 to date Charles Eliot Professor of Landscape Architecture, Harvard Graduate School of Design.
- 1991-1996 Chairman, Department of Landscape Architecture, Harvard Graduate School of Design.
- 1979 to date Harvard Graduate School of Design, Department of Landscape Architecture: Professor with Tenure, Adjunct Professor, Director, Associate Professor, and Assistant Professor.

PROFESSIONAL REGISTRATION AS A LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

Council of Landscape Architecture Registration Board, No. 197; by examination, 1979.

Massachusetts, New York, Arizona, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin; Ontario, Canada



City of New York
Parks & Recreation

The Arsenal
Central Park
New York, New York 10021

Adrian Benepe
Commissioner

Dear Executive Committee:

I am honored to have the opportunity to recommend Michael Van Valkenburgh for the ASLA Design Medal.

Here at the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation, we work with a large number of landscape architects, including both our in-house designers and some of the world's leading design firms. Even in the competitive design environment of New York City, Michael Van Valkenburgh stands out, and we have therefore entrusted him with conceptualizing some of our most visible new open spaces in the city.

Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates' mastery of waterfront design dovetails with Mayor Bloomberg's pledge to reclaim our city's industrial waterfront and make it more sustainable. MVVA has created a majestic vision for Brooklyn Bridge Park which will interplay with the East River and the site's once-crumbling infrastructure to create saltwater marshes and bring people to the waterfront. He also has made the park both structurally and environmentally sustainable by using berms that will at once support the park and also create a program for stormwater collection that can be reused at the site. We have similarly entrusted him to redesign a segment of Hudson River Park on the west side of Manhattan. He has designed one of the most visible parts of the park, creating a slightly raised pier that will be able to host events and invite people to view the horizon in a new way.

We have also asked Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates to redesign one of our busiest public spaces. The north end of Union Square Park is distinguished from Brooklyn Bridge Park and Hudson River Park by its heavy pedestrian traffic and center-city location. Here, too, MVVA is sensitive to the park's history and the many communities who use it regularly. They have skillfully balanced the needs of new landscaping, playgrounds, and room for the city's largest farmer's market while still presenting a singular and cohesive vision for the park space.

We are proud to have Michael Van Valkenburgh as a partner and as a designer. He is a tremendously qualified candidate for this high honor. If you would like to discuss this further, please call me at (212) 360-1305. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Adrian Benepe



www.nyc.gov/parks

Executive Committee
American Society of Landscape Architects Board of Trustees
636 Eye Street, NW
Washington, DC 2001-3736

Dear Committee Members:

I am pleased and honored to support the nomination of Michael Van Valkenburgh for the ASLA Design Medal.

I have known Michael for twenty years, first as a teacher and then as a colleague. His delightful intellect and formidable design skills have made him a powerful influence on an entire generation of landscape architects, and I am one of them. In recent years I have had the great opportunity to work with him directly on several important projects that I believe have significantly affected the future of American public landscape design. I will direct my comments primarily to these projects, which I have first hand knowledge of, and often have written about. This is the aspect of Michael's work I know best, and I also believe that these public projects, above all and even more than the private landscapes for which he has been better known in the past, directly support and justify this important recognition by the ASLA executive committee.

Some time before I accepted a faculty position at the University of Massachusetts in 2001, Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates (MVVA) opened an office in New York where they were involved in several large and small projects, many of them public landscapes. As a park historian, former New Yorker, and longtime advocate for New York parks, I was asked to participate in numerous meetings, give my critique and ideas, and make presentations for MVVA and later for their clients. This association has been very productive and has continued. Over the last five years I have had numerous discussions with Michael and his staff and I have worked with them on the written descriptions of their public park projects in New York and elsewhere. This experience has been mutually influential in our thinking about public landscape design.

From my point of view, One of the notable and substantial accomplishments of MVVA has been the successful expansion of the firm's work from private landscapes into larger, public projects.

Architecture

Architectural History

Landscape Architecture

Urban and Environmental Planning

Over the last ten years, in particular, MVVA has done (and is doing) some of the most exciting and admirable public park design work anywhere. Two projects that I am most familiar with, Teardrop Park and the Brooklyn Bridge Park Master Plan, illustrate this success in the overall conceptualization, planning, and design of public landscapes. But there are many others, such as the Allegheny Riverfront Park, their Highline Competition entry (which should have won!), Segment 5 of the Hudson River Park, and Mill Race Park (Columbus, Indiana). These projects exemplify the willingness to approach each site and program with fresh, renewed intellectual energy and a certain fearlessness and flair in design response. These are among the most significant public landscape designs of the last ten years, in my opinion, combining social utility, integrity of purpose, and tremendous artistic expression. Never rote or merely “signature,” these projects are individually engaging and worthwhile instead.

To stroll through Teardrop Park in Lower Manhattan, for example, is to experience something that has become inexplicably rare in landscape architecture: landscape beauty. There is no other way to describe the compositions of calculated topography, garden borders, sweeping paths, and stunning rock work. The design required careful analysis of function and heavy landscape engineering; the result, however, is a poetic evocation and a reminder of the emotional power of landscapes, particularly for an urban population mostly deprived of such experience as part of daily life.

Michael insists that Teardrop was inspired by this essentially Olmstedian understanding of the role of public park landscapes in urban life. He does not mean a miniaturized Central Park; the idea would be ludicrous. But the design has been informed by a thoughtful research into Olmstedian theory and practice. This is a playground (although you will not find “play equipment”), a place to stroll, sit, and enjoy lunch. But the full program of use was sublimated in an artistic composition that consists of a series of emotional responses to created landscape scenes. This frank acknowledgement of the role—the necessity—of the experience of landscape beauty in urban parks makes Teardrop an important and profoundly instructive project. One need only think of the contrast of this landscape to the kind of structured, paved plazas and playgrounds that designers have typically produced over the last fifty years for this type of situation and program.

In another example, the master plan for Brooklyn Bridge Park culminated twenty years of community activism that began when the Port Authority commercial shipping facilities on the site ceased operation. The master plan describes a framework for the desired convergence of private and public interests through original design that responds to the site and situation. The views out over open water from the site, with Lower Manhattan in the distance, are spectacular. The separation of the site from adjacent neighborhoods, however, is just as imposing. The 1950s Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, cantilevered in stacked terraces along much of the site, creates a awesome wall of noise and traffic.

In MVVA's plan, Michael describes the fundamental elements of a great public park in terms of social diversity, programmatic flexibility, and psychological range. The formal means to achieve these ends have involved, above all, the creation of a new water's edge of tremendous variety in terms of structure, experience, and ecology. A tremendous recreational program, in other words, is accommodated by a site that has been expanded not by more landfill, but by a series of improvised, watery experiences along a mutable edge. Michael insisted that the riverfront should be returned to Brooklyn and become part of daily patterns of living for residents. But this is to be accomplished not by another massive, engineered extension of land—which would obliterate both ecology and history—but through various and specific design interventions, experiences, and ecological restorations.

Already known for design finesse and skill at the residential scale, over the last ten years Michael has insisted on making his firm a place where the most difficult, potentially contentious, and interesting issues of the American public landscape are not only discussed, but are resolved in remarkable built works, such as Teardrop and the Allegheny River parks, that now exist as evidence of the thought, analysis, and design skill that the firm has brought to bear.

In my opinion, Michael has created a series of public landscapes that make the pre-existing site a true collaborator in design. I realize this is something many landscape architects might say; but few actually accomplish the goal. Successful public landscapes—parks that have meaning, usefulness, and emotional effect—succeed because they transform sites without removing their humanity and associations. Brooklyn Bridge Park, in particular, has presented the enormous challenge of maintaining the unique and awesome character of the site, while making many millions of dollars of improvements for an extensive recreational program. In my opinion, the park will become the most important landscape of its type for this generation.

While there are obviously many other aspects of Michael's career that warrant this recognition, I have emphasized recent projects that I feel indicate an unwavering, continued record of major accomplishment in the field. As a park historian, I also fully appreciate the significance of what MVVA has done, in particular, in public landscape design. If Michael has been known as a garden designer, in the future he will be remembered more, in my opinion, for his parks.

I urge you to recognize the extraordinary, sustained, and successful contributions of Michael Van Valkenburgh by awarding him the ASLA Design Medal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ethan Carr". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "E" and a long, sweeping underline.

Ethan Carr, PhD, FASLA
Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture
University of Virginia School of Architecture

Board of Trustees
American Society of Landscape Architects
636 Eye Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001

For almost 3 decades, I have known Michael. When visiting Cambridge, he would invite me to visit his professional office for a rousing rap with his staff. Good memories. I have followed his career through the plethora of published articles, pictures, awards, etc. The sheer volume is impressive, but more to this submittal, this is about design, design quality. Anyone who reviews his projects will be struck by the consistency of good, really good, design. Michael's built work always honors the larger context and the specific site, and astutely "grounds" the program, finding form triumphs form-giving. All of his work (planning to detailing) carries a spirited MVV stamp. To his credit he has resisted the "come and go" over publicized design trends. Michael's knowledge and understanding of the primacy of plants in landscape architectural design is virtually unrivaled. Awards and publications should emphasize this characteristic to revivify interest in this unique "root" of our profession. Michael Van Valkenburgh's body of work portends the future of the past. History will prove that he is an important player in the evolution of landscape architecture.


Richard Haag

Landscape Architecture & Environmental Planning Architecture- City & Regional Planning

The Executive Committee and Board of Trustees
The American Society of Landscape Architects
636 Eye Street NW
Washington, DC 20001-3236

Dear Committee Members and Trustees:

It is my delight to lend my enthusiastic support to Michael Van Valkenburgh's nomination for the ASLA Design Medal. Michael's work first came to my attention in the mid 1980's through a CELA lecture and publication of several small gardens and un-built proposals. Even at that early point in his career, it was clear that he was an unusually talented designer who structured his design work around a deep understanding and passion for plants, an approach that, at the time, was not prevalent in high profile projects. As an architect-turned-landscape architect who relied heavily on structural interventions in my own design work, Michael's work opened my mind and my early practice to the rich possibilities plant expertise can bring to creative design solutions. In 1985, after becoming Michael's colleague at Harvard, I was able to see first hand the strong intellect, dogged determination and design creativity he brought to each project. Consequently, I have continued to follow the evolving sophistication of his design work.

To his credit, Michael has avoided the trend of most high-profile projects to focus only on photogenic and graphically engaging images rather than on the experience of occupying and moving through a landscape. Calling upon his fine graduate work in social based research and theory at the University of Illinois, he never loses sight of the needs and on-the-ground experiences of users. Those who do not know Michael are often unaware of the critical role his commitment to social inclusiveness and the daily life of users play in his designs. His work is grounded in his adherence to Olmsted's democratic ideal of bringing landscape experiences to all citizens. But Michael does not rely on Olmsted's mimicry of rural landscapes or attempt to hide that his urban projects have been human-constructed. Instead he digs into his farm-boy understanding of how the natural world works and reconstructs natural phenomena to focus our attention on its poetic potential, whether it is on the ASLA rooftop or a New York pier overlooking the Hudson River. With incredible skill he crafts where urban citizens walk and sit as well as new views, shadows, slopes and sunlight that highlight the seasonal, daily and hourly changes of nature's patterns.

Michael's comprehensive and open approach to design solutions does not exhibit a particular geometric bias or signature image. The result is that some schemes, such as Teardrop Park and the Wellesley campus, have a subtle formal organization while others explore new geometries.. But the success of Michael's projects is due as much to creative implementation as to spatial organization. His willingness to dig into the complexities of construction techniques and maintenance procedures and his experimentation with new materials distinguish his projects from the routine. During the ASLA I was one of a diverse group of practitioners who had the privilege of attending the ASLA's tour of Michael's New York projects. We became privy not only to the spatial richness of Teardrop Park, but to the inner workings of how Michael and his team utilized the knowledge of stone masons and an innovative maintenance staff to shape the park. At other projects as well, his careful research, material selection and the development of details underline the beauty of the natural systems he manipulates so cleverly, whether the hand-crafted concrete finish at Allegheny Riverfront Park or the fabricated metal stairs at the Pucker Garden.

But the genius of Michael's designs remains his careful understanding and creative manipulation of the core media of the landscape – soil, water and plants. Only the masterful Rich Haag can compete with Michael's skill and passion for designing with natural systems– whether his evocative combinations of flowering plants, ecological restoration techniques or ice walls. Landscape Architect practitioners, students and educators alike have benefited from his willingness to share what he has learned in his creation of beautiful landscapes. It therefore seems only appropriate that we, as a profession, return the favor by recognizing his wonderful work with the ASLA Design Medal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Linda Jewell". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end of the name.

Linda Jewell
Professor of Landscape Architecture

Harvard Design School



Board of Trustees
American Society of Landscape Architects
636 Eye Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001

RE: 2009 ASLA Design Medal

Dear Committee,

I am writing on behalf of Michael Van Valkenburgh, candidate for the ASLA Design Medal.

Michael has been my colleague at Harvard and a friend for thirty years. We have never worked together on a project, but we have had many discussions about his professional activities. We have never taught design together but we have had many discussions about design, including about his own work.

Michael is an outstanding teacher of design across a remarkably broad range of project types. He is an exceptional communicator in studio and on reviews. However, while a fine attribute, I expect that Michael's academic excellence is not a principal reason for awarding the ASLA Design MedalI wish it were.

I know Michael's personal contributions to his large and diverse practice quite well. Basically, he is the leader of his office for DESIGN --writ large--in all its aspects. His firm has won every major award offered for landscape architecture, and most of these several times. Michael regularly competes for America's most prestigious commissions and wins a large share. The diversity of these projects is astounding, including the White House area and the Brooklyn waterfront, the Don River in Canada and Harvard Yard. Perhaps most remarkable is that there is no characteristic style associated with Michael's office and his personal attitude towards design. An architectural analogy might be Aero Saarinen (MUV) vs. Richard Meier. Each of Michael's projects is thought through from the beginning for practical and expressive "fit". In my view, this is to be applauded.

Michael Van Valkenburgh is clearly one of America's most significant landscape architects, and at the very top level of the profession. He is fully worthy of the ASLA Design Medal.

Sincerely,

Carl Steinitz
Honorary Member, ASLA
Wiley Research Professor of Landscape Architecture and Planning
Harvard Graduate School of Design

Department of
Landscape Architecture
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Harvard University
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