

Virginia Anderson
ASLA LaGasse Medals, Non-Landscape Architect Category, 2004

Rodney L. Swink, FASLA
Chair, Honors and Awards Advisory Committee
c/o ASLA
636 Eye Street NW
Washington, DC 20001

March 16, 2004

Dear Mr. Swink,

I am writing to nominate a remarkable woman—Virginia Anderson, Director of Seattle Center—for the 2004 ASLA LaGasse Medals Award for the Non-Landscape Architect Category.

Perhaps the most telling commentary on Virginia is that she was given responsibility for the creation and stewardship of the most significant open space in the City of Seattle. This is a position that is appointed by the Mayor of Seattle; it is a highly visible, highly political position, and yet Virginia has notably held this position for 15 years, since 1988, through four different Mayoral administrations. She is one of the most trusted public servants in the Puget Sound region, an individual who is accepted across the board by both major political parties and the people who support and lead those efforts.

Virginia is more than just a steward of this great gathering place; she is a visionary for what is needed in the next 100 years. She has done an incredible job of preserving the best parts of this 1962 World's Fair site, and addressing those areas that have the greatest potential. She has led the growth of Seattle Center into a beautifully landscaped, cultural center that is now a major destination for 10 million people annually. Her vision for blending architecture, open space and people together in a safe, inviting setting is so appealing; other cities have shown great interest in wanting to learn how to replicate what Virginia has accomplished.

Seattle Center is located in the midst of bustling Seattle, a spacious 87-acre urban park that both responds to downtown's need for green space and serves the entire region as a cultural campus for the arts, sports and recreation. Free outdoor activities are available year-round. Visitors can defy gravity at the skateboard park; splash in the International Fountain; explore the botanical garden's native flora; attend outdoor Shakespeare performances at the Center's amphitheater stage; and reflect beside public art sculptures set amidst lush greenery. And yet, with the diversity of open space and attractions offered, it is not the Center's vision to be all things to all people. Rather, Seattle Center has a clear vision to be the place where *community* is defined - continually and eagerly - in creative ways.

As a developing city in the early 1900s, the earliest city fathers set aside portions of what is now Seattle Center for a civic auditorium, a sports arena and an athletic field. By the 1950s, city visionaries were calling for a World's Fair to put Seattle on the map—and they drew designs for a futuristic park featuring a monorail, Space Needle, science center, and arenas. They drew it so well, Seattle hosted the first ever World's Fair to run a profit.

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However, while tourists continued to visit, locals mostly ignored Seattle Center. The vast park was blocked on most sides by storage buildings, fences, turnstiles, and other barriers. Our largest urban setting was isolated from the daily rhythm of the city. Following a period of neglect and decline in the 1970s & '80s, Virginia was brought in to determine the campus' future given her previous experience as a private sector developer and real estate professional. She led more than 100 community meetings in two years and asked the people what they wanted. She has, to this day, a way of leading large, diverse groups of people, enabling them to see a shared goal and work together to build and fund important projects. She invites all people into the process with the belief that the outcome will be better because of their involvement. Her resulting master plan for redevelopment of Seattle Center (1991) was one in which residents felt huge ownership. It has since garnered praise from planning professionals and laypeople alike.

Virginia fostered the idea to take down the barriers, open up access, and invite people into a newly resurrected city open space with generous green spaces, walkways for strolling, and beautiful architecture, sculptures and fountains. She brought harmony to the chaos of architecture styles by establishing design guidelines for the campus and engaging designers who could work with the landscape instead of against it. A great example is the new Fisher Pavilion, a cultural pavilion nestled into a 22-foot grade that earth shelters the 21,000 square foot building on three sides, creating an on-grade roof plaza above, while opening vistas through the site to the historic and newly renovated International Fountain.

Today, Seattle Center is home to acclaimed ballet, opera and theatre companies (there are 8); 3 professional sports teams; 23 cultural festivals; 31 facilities; 5,300 free public performances; 3 nationally-celebrated music, children and science museums; a public high school; an amusement park; a skateboard park; the Space Needle; sports arenas; conference centers; a new performance hall; and 14 stages. An attraction in itself is the campus' 23 acres of green and open space that includes seven fountains, plus art and sculpture pieces.

Seattle Center calls itself the Nation's Best Gathering Place. Its vision is that it exists to delight and inspire the human spirit and bring us together as a rich and varied community.

Under Virginia's leadership, Seattle Center intentionally strives to merge beautiful, functional architecture with open space and constant free public programming, events and festivals. Virginia melded the historic quality of the site with the richness of the landscape and described a future that includes the user as the primary focus. Rather than discard the World's Fair design as antiquated, Virginia helped to inject a new appreciation for futuristic architecture as a populist form of design. As a result, visitors have been drawn to an energetic campus infused with exciting buildings, generous open space and thrilling programming. She has directed Seattle Center to become the place where things happen.

You can see the Center from every vantage point in Seattle. The Space Needle, at a height of 605 feet, functions as both the city's icon and the Center's totem pole, identifying the space from virtually anywhere in the city. Moreover, local visibility is enhanced through wide pedestrian paths and welcoming signs around the park's edges.

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The park's landscape design and entryways are explicitly intended to bring every visitor within reach of all of its attractions. The campus is the home base for the Monorail, directly linking downtown with the Center through mass transit and bringing 2.5 million people to and through the campus daily. Six all-day and after-hours parking lots accommodate single car and bus transportation. Bus stops pepper the edges of Seattle Center. Situated in the midst of a dense residential area, the Center's sprawling entrances, marked by open edges and multiple gateways, welcome joggers and daycare workers with children in tow, retirees and wandering neighbors, artists, and evening strollers. No vehicles are permitted on the grounds.

Welcoming a diverse population of 10 million visitors requires thoughtful design. Virginia has modeled the way from the very beginning. The park is well-lit, offers plentiful benches and plenty of open space for free-form recreation. Gracious street furniture, such as waste bins and recycling receptacles, help to keep the Center clean. Public restrooms are safe, clearly marked, and frequently serviced. The campus and its resident buildings are all wheelchair-accessible. Carefully placed baby-changing stations, telephones, TTY facilities, and cash machines help Seattle Center oblige the widest population. Covered open arcades and breezeways reflect the Northwest's way of life, where an outing in the park can happen during inclement weather.

Day or night, there is something for everyone at the Seattle Center. Senior Dances are held where seniors swing, tango, and foxtrot to a live orchestra before an audience of food court patrons and curious onlookers. On the Center's east side, teenagers test their limits at the skateboard park while on-lookers pause in wonderment. A public gallery features the changing exhibits of the developmentally challenged.

Daytime activities for families and seniors give way to evening attractions at the Center's multiple cultural facilities. Seattle Center is crucial to the entire Puget Sound region in supporting a wide breadth of performing arts establishments. It is the vibrancy of the physical grounds – the interesting design of the Center's green space – that links these facilities into a singular campus, a common experience among sports-goers and opera patrons.

Seattle Repertory Theatre, Intiman Theatre, Pacific Northwest Ballet, Seattle Opera, Experience Music Project, the Seattle Supersonics and Seattle Storm basketball teams – all of these nighttime performances ensure that the campus is populated from the dewy hour of morning Tai Chi to late-night post performance discussions at the Rep. The park offers distinct sources of enjoyment from daybreak till past sunset.

Virginia asked that Seattle Center be designed with the ease of visitors in mind and with attention to the environment. Signs and maps all prominently feature current happenings and point visitors to the key attractions. Design structures are successful in communicating what the Center stands for. Pint-sized chairs and tables convey to families that the Center House is kid-friendly. Playful tiles atop the Fisher Pavilion beckon couples to stand on the raised stage and admire the city views. Meandering paths draw guests into a peace garden of Northwest blossoms. A gently sloping edge invites children as well as persons with wheelchairs and strollers to play inside the mammoth International Fountain.

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Seattle Center's design and management fosters both spontaneous and organized socializing. Skateboarders congregate over swooping cement half pipes mesmerizing spectators. Street performers entertain ambling visitors. Joyful kids playing in the fountain delight onlookers with their laughter as they get caught in sprays of sudden rushing water.

Outdoor stages and free performances enhance the junction between different people from different walks of life. In a ticket-less free setting, people are more likely to intermingle and become exposed to a broad spectrum of viewpoints.

The only truly public space of its stature in the downtown area, Seattle Center was the focal point of the area's memorial service to Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 and is the place where annual walks culminate. More recently, the park's originally scheduled three-hour vigil immediately following the terrorist attacks of September 11th evolved into four days of silent observance. In that time, the International Fountain became a garden sprouting with flowers of sympathy from the hundreds of thousands of people who descended to the site. Nearby police cars and fireworks were deluged with handmade cards and American flags.

Besides its uncanny ability to inspire unprompted mingling, Seattle Center's buildings, open spaces and programming consciously aim to achieve community.

Meaningful connections among visitors are fundamental to Seattle Center. A sweeping landscape, striking architecture, accommodating street furniture, clear and multiple signs and maps, focused planning – these are manifestations of Seattle Center's unceasing goal to be the Nation's Best Gathering Place. And Virginia has been the visionary who has led that charge.

Virginia is doing for Seattle what others are trying to do in cities across America—she has built the bridges that allow us to come together as a community of people and given us a place to celebrate our newfound appreciation of each other in a safe, handsome, sizable location downtown. She understands politics, finance, the tenacious balance of public and private partnership projects, and community service—she is an outstanding servant leader.

At the start of each project, Virginia in her direction to the design team creates a series of design principles that speak to the need for excellence as a human environment. The principles must embrace the major tenets of the Master Plan by: (1) creating spaces that reinforce a unifying spirit of vitality, exuberance and spontaneity; (2) sensitively address historical and environmental features of the campus; and (3) serve as a public space embodying collaboration across disciplines, and excellence, durability and functionality of design.

Virginia took down buildings and created additional open space. The development of the Broad Street Green in the early 1990s was the first significant gesture to the public Seattle Center has made. It opened the edges, welcomed people in, and created an address for Seattle Center.

Always drawn to the intrigue of significant architecture, Virginia both encourages and allows a diverse kind of approach to capital improvements. A great example of that is EMP—the Experience Music Project, a Frank Gehry designed music museum that is the new defining structure along Broad Street. Its curving surfaces and brilliant materials attract thousands who


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thrill at the sight. Nearby, a lovely set of tall “Grass Blades” were just installed, an award-winning public art project that took the meaning of “fence” to a whole new realm. Virginia wanted something near EMP that would separate it graciously from an adjacent parking lot.

Illustrating the diverse architecture and landscape of Seattle Center, we go from habitable art such as EMP, to sophisticated facilities like the new performance venue, McCaw Hall. This sparkling \$127 million facility is the most recent example of public and private funds merging to create a venue the whole community could enjoy. Public art, a delightful promenade and fountain designed by Kathryn Gustafson, and a sweeping, accessible lobby welcome passersby and patrons alike.

Virginia looks to the next 20 years, at what needs to happen and doesn’t get lost in the latest trends of today. It is this gift that allows her to serve so well because what she drives us to create as a community, as a design team, is what *will* be valuable.—She is simply, a remarkable woman, who has stayed true to her vision to serve this community. I can’t think of a better candidate for this award than Virginia Anderson. Thank you for considering her for this great honor.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tom Berger', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Thomas L. Berger
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