

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS  
AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Department of Landscape Architecture

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March 1, 2007

Jot D. Carpenter Teaching Medal Committee  
American Society of Landscape Architects  
c/o Carolyn Mitchell  
636 Eye Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20001

Dear Committee Members:

It is a great pleasure and honor to nominate Professor Terence G. Harkness for the 2007 Jot D. Carpenter Teaching Award. As head of the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Illinois over the past five years, I have daily opportunities to see Professor Harkness “in action” – in his studios, in others’ design juries, in student gatherings and department meetings. In all of these contexts, landscape architecture education and more specifically student learning in design is his deepest passion. This letter describes Terry Harkness’ contributions to landscape architecture education over the past quarter-century under the three broad headings of 1) Distinctive Features of Terry Harkness’ Pedagogy; 2) Walking his Talk; and 3) The Bottom Line: What Students Learn.

***1. Distinctive Features of Harkness’ Design Pedagogy.*** Like Jot Carpenter at OSU, and Stan White and Chuck Harris before him here at Illinois, Terry Harkness’ greatest intellectual passion is teaching landscape architectural design. Like Carpenter, he can hardly contain himself physically or intellectually when exploring design ideas, especially planting design, in the studio. He moves seamlessly from the lucid presentation of a complex design issue to the class as a whole, to respectful questioning in a jury, to the active listening in one-on-one desk critiques that bring out the best in young designers. Key components of Harkness’ philosophy of landscape architecture education include:

- *Intensive Preparation of Each Studio Project.* Harkness prepares his studio projects at least one semester, sometimes a full year, before teaching them. He believes that he needs to know the project, problem, site, clients, users, and some of the possible solutions at a personal level before posing them to students. He invests this time continuously as he does not repeat projects from year to year: they are always fresh. This commitment yields student work that shares his informed and inspired approach.
- *Concurrent Pursuit of Several Projects in a Studio.* Harkness believes that students learn more when the class pursues two or more projects concurrently. He has found that all students tend to show more commitment to their work when several projects are underway, especially if they can choose an option, and they learn a wider range of design lessons by indirectly observing other projects while working on their own. They engage in greater collaboration and less competitive behavior.
- *Comprehending the Regional Sources of Design.* Harkness credits his Ryerson Traveling Fellowship to Japan in 1968 with teaching him that he could learn from global precedents while developing a profoundly regional practice in the Midwestern U.S. He has incorporated this

regional principle in his planting design studios by starting with natural vegetation transects across the length and breadth of the vegetation assemblages in Illinois, so that students develop an understanding of vegetation while they begin to think about planting. He does this in ways that complement the botanist's ideas about vegetation, e.g., by having students select an individual plant in a natural ecosystem and revisit it in every season of the year, documenting its changing relationships with surrounding plants. He situates planting design within a broad landscape architectural context, which he calls "Plants in Design" rather than planting design. I assign all entering BLA and MLA students Terry's beautifully illustrated essay on "East Central Illinois Garden: A Regional Garden," and students report that it opens their eyes, minds, and hearts to design in our locale and, by extension, any locale.

- *Inspire creativity from conceptual design to bid documents.* Finally, Terry takes his studio classes from initial site and program exploration through schematic design, design development, construction documents, specifications, and cost estimates. He challenges them to be as imaginative about technical specifications and costs as they are about their overall design ideas, and to understand these elements as inextricably linked in landscape architectural practice.

## **2. Walking his Talk.**

- *Time on Task.* Harkness is in his studio and available to students every day. He expects students to spend the time needed to do outstanding work, and he is always there to help them. At the same time, he does not crowd them, generate anxiety, or encourage unhealthy overnight binge design behavior. One student reports, "he makes it a point to get to every student; he keeps us accountable and keeps track of all of us." When he is not in the studio, he works in his department office with the door wide open.
- *Great Expectations.* Terry states that he likes to treat students like he did the entry level designers who worked for him at HOK, that is, with a combination of inspired design, high standards, clear expectations, and the sense that they would have the support needed to achieve those goals. He does not shy away from frank criticism, but he delivers it with the joint aim of the student, professor, school, and profession of achieving excellence in design.
- *Involving Students in Practice.* Finally, Terry walks his talk by involving students in projects that he is currently working on in his practice or that Illinois firms are working on in their offices. Although students work on different aspects of the project than the firms, they have a keen sense that these are "live projects" in which their proposals can make a difference. This commitment requires a high level of trust among students, professor, and firms – and building that trust, which lies at the heart of good landscape architectural practice, is a key component of the Harkness learning experience.

## **3. The Bottom Line: What Landscape Architecture Students Learn in a Harkness Studio**

- *Award-Winning Work.* The teaching principles and practices described above bear fruit in students' work. His students win ASLA design awards, ASLA student awards, and competitions. Here is an example. In 2003, I served on a Graham Foundation international design competition jury that called for visionary proposals for the Chicago lakefront. Of 100+ entries, one of Terry's MLA teams won a merit award. A prominent juror who equated vision with fantasy and who will remain anonymous stated – "this is fine work; it's main weakness is that it actually looks buildable."
- *BLA Studios and MLA Theses.* Terry has a remarkable ability to inspire both BLA and MLA students. He reaches BLA students primarily through his yearlong Plants in Design studio that gives them the fundamental design skills and confidence to enter practice. And he has a

marvelous ability to work with MLA students on design theses that range from Chicago to Shanghai. In each case, he inculcates a strong sense of design process and excellence.

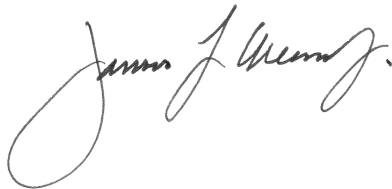
- *Harkness' Alternative to Student Course Evaluations.* As department head, I receive copies of the standard faculty course evaluations. Not surprisingly, Terry designed his own survey instrument several years ago, and I administer it. It asks students to answer 7 or 8 open-ended questions that range from – “To what extent has this course enabled you to apply concepts of biogeography and natural vegetation to your work as a designer?” and “When you take *LA 453 Cultural Precedents in Planting* next semester, how will you take the initiative to get more out of the course next semester?” “If Professor Harkness teaches the course next year how can he improve it, and his instruction of it?” and finally – “Based on all of the above, should Professor Harkness be retained as the instructor for this course next year?” To which the students’ answers are a resounding “Yes!” citing many of the points made earlier in this letter.

### ***Summary***

These notes only begin to sketch out Terry’s many contributions to excellence in landscape architecture education. His scores of MLA advisees and roughly one thousand BLA planting design students have helped shape and reshape the profession over the past quarter-century. As alumni, they report back on what they have learned with and from Terry with that wonderful mix of serious reflection, personal admiration, and humorous appreciation that students of Terry’s generation convey about their studies with Stan White at Illinois and what I recall from my studies with faculty like “Doc” Reich at LSU.

On behalf of the entire Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and our extended family of practitioners and scholars, it is an honor to nominate Professor Terence G. Harkness for the 2007 Jot D. Carpenter Teaching Medal.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James L. Wescoat, Jr.", with a large, stylized initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

James L. Wescoat, Jr. ASLA  
Professor and Head