



City of New York  
Parks & Recreation

The Arsenal  
Central Park  
New York, New York 10021

Adrian Benepe  
Commissioner

February 22, 2006

ASLA Medal Nominations  
636 Eye Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20001-3736

To Whom It May Concern:

It is my pleasure to enthusiastically support the nomination of Michael Van Valkenburgh for the American Society of Landscape Architects Medal. As the Commissioner of Parks & Recreation for the City of New York, I have first hand knowledge of all of New York's public spaces, and the lasting and significant contributions Michael has made to New York City's public spaces. I believe no living landscape architect has demonstrated the power of the profession of landscape architecture as fully as Michael.

Michael is reshaping and re-envisioning some of New York's most important parks. At Union Square, he is reconfiguring one of the City's most beloved and heavily used squares. The challenge of meeting the demands of the legendary Greenmarket, a burgeoning child population and the thousands of daily park users who dine, stroll and exercise their first amendment rights in this National Historic Landmark site is considerable. Michael has maintained his vision and commitment to design excellence throughout the journey. Here our chosen solution includes sinking the playground to form a walled garden to extend the play season and to be a good neighbor to the adjacent historic pavilion restored and modified as a seasonal cafe. The design includes imaginative play experiences thoughtfully designed to provide social opportunities for the children and their parents.

His work at Brooklyn Bridge Park has captured everyone's attention, where Michael is developing the first great new New York City Park of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It will be the largest park constructed in New York since the depression. His dynamic design respects the historic waterfront while stretching our concept of active and passive park paradigms. Brooklyn Bridge will be a place to kayak, sunbathe, eat, exercise and soak in one of the world's greatest views. I cannot talk about this work without commenting on his community design process, which engages the public using large-scale study models. This park model is a 30-foot-long road show. The model is handled, manipulated, and viewed from the model "eye height" by community members. This helps them understand scale, enclosure, views, and sequence. It helps people

understand, and consequently fully appreciate, the plan as a park, rather than a graphic. The new 80-acre park will stretch one mile along the Brooklyn shoreline, between the elevated Brooklyn-Queens expressway and obsolete shipping piers. His design has addressed the extreme noise of the highway and winter winds through the use of an almost heroic, constructed topography to create noise and wind shadows. We look forward to development of the park design this year, and the completion of this park in 2012.

As a park designer outside the realm of city property, we have admired the example of Teardrop Park and Michael's many other submissions and built works in other cities. His Teardrop Park in Battery Park City is one of the most dramatic and engaging public spaces created during my tenure as Commissioner. His work here, with artist Ann Hamilton and regional stonemasons, was truly collaborative. Their muscular ridge of stone arcs over the park is alive with plantings, dripping water and, in the winter, cascades of ice. Visitors appreciate the "tear" of lawn, raised twenty feet to catch a sliver of light between densely packed apartments. It was popular from the first day it opened.

We see Michael as one of the strongest and most dynamic landscape designers of our generation, and we strongly support his nomination for this prestigious award.

Please contact me at (212) 360-1305 if I can provide additional support for Michael.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Adrian Benepe". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Adrian" and last name "Benepe" clearly distinguishable.

Adrian Benepe



UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS  
AMHERST

109 Hills North  
University of Massachusetts  
111 Infirmary Way, Ofc 1  
Amherst, MA 01003-9328

Landscape Architecture  
and Regional Planning

voice: 413.545.2255  
fax: 413.545.1772

February 27, 2006

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 almost 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 the last five years, however, I have had increased opportunities to work with him directly on a number of important projects that I believe have significantly affected the future of American public landscape design. I will direct my comments, therefore, to these more recent experiences, which I believe more directly support and justify this important recognition by the ASLA executive committee.

Some time before I moved from Denver to accept 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 extensive 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.

One of the notable and substantial accomplishments of MVVA, in my opinion, has been the successful expansion of the firm's work from private landscapes into larger, public projects. 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 and their Highline Competition entry. 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.

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, rather watery experiences along a mutable, intricate 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.

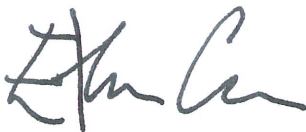
Already known for design finesse and skill at the residential scale, over the last ten years Michael has insisted on making his firm a place where the most difficult, potentially contentious, and interesting issues of the American public landscape are not only discussed, but are resolved in remarkable 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 over the last ten years 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 development 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', with a stylized, cursive script.

Ethan Carr

February 27, 2006

ASLA Design Medal Nominations  
c/o Carolyn Mitchell  
ASLA Headquarters  
636 Eye Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20001-3736

Dear Members of the Selection Committee:

Michael Van Valkenburgh takes more conceptual risks in one project than most landscape architects do in a lifetime. River walk plantings are selected for their ability not only to withstand "the disaster" of ice flows and flooding but for their ability to regenerate through such disturbance. Small urban spaces are disrupted by the vertical heaving of massive stone outcrops and, paradoxically, made to feel experientially larger. For the amazing landscape forms, spaces and experiences that result from these conceptual risks, I admire him more than any other landscape architect of his generation. He doesn't rely on a "signature" set of forms and spaces. Rather, on each project he finds new ways to coax and exploit the potentials of the landscape medium—earth, rock, plants, water and ice, atmospheric effects—the way a painter inventively uses pigment on a canvas. Michael's empathy for the landscape as an aesthetic medium with particular material properties and experiential possibilities is the basis for his reputation as reflective and critical practitioner. He offers the profession a model of a designer who designs with, and of, the land, not simply on it. I enthusiastically support his nomination for the ASLA Design Medal.

Respectfully,

Elizabeth K. Meyer, FASLA  
Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture  
Director, Graduate Program in Landscape Architecture  
Department of Architecture and Landscape Architecture  
University of Virginia School of Architecture  
Campbell Hall  
Box 400122  
Charlottesville, VA 22904-4122

tel 434.924.6960  
fax 434.982.2798  
email [bmeyer@virginia.edu](mailto:bmeyer@virginia.edu)





# *City of Charleston*

*Joseph P. Riley, Jr.*  
*Mayor*

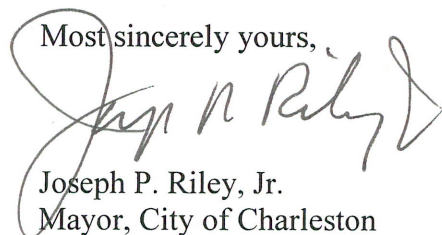
February 27, 2006

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

Dear Members of the Executive Committee:

I am very pleased to submit this letter in support of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) Medal being awarded to Michael Van Valkenburgh. I have had the opportunity to study Michael's work around the country both in publications as well as seeing them first hand. It is an extraordinary body of work that merits the receipt of the ASLA Medal. However, more important than all of that to me is the opportunity I had to watch his work in the redesign and refurbishment of our beautiful Marion Square. Because of Michael's artistry, a rather undistinguished and relatively unused greenspace in the middle of town has been transformed into a beautiful urban garden now so wonderfully filled with life and activity. It has caused a remarkable revitalization of the commercial district surrounding it. Michael respected the land, understood how those who had used it before had used it and developed his plan based on that understanding and its unrealized potential. It is a jewel and Michael Van Valkenburgh made it so.

Most sincerely yours,



Joseph P. Riley, Jr.  
Mayor, City of Charleston

JPR,jr/cb



*P.O. Box 652, Charleston, South Carolina 29402*  
*843-577-6970 Fax 843-720-3827*

**suzanne turner**

630 louisiana avenue  
baton rouge, louisiana 70802

**consultant for historic landscapes**

February 28, 2006

ASLA Board of Trustees  
ASLA Design Medal Review  
American Society of Landscape Architects  
636 Eye Street, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20001

Dear Colleagues,

I am writing in strong support of the nomination of Michael Van Valkenburgh for the 2006 ASLA Design Medal. Michael is the consummate landscape architect—a designer who begins with the landscape and its condition, natural and cultural. Michael's solid grounding in and love of horticulture has meant that his built work celebrates the essential quality of the medium of landscape design with an artistry and mastery unrivaled in contemporary practice. Michael's knowledge of the history of landscape architecture and of design in general means that his work is developed within the framework of an intellectual tradition, and not as a personal, artistic statement. Michael's projects are responsive to the specific conditions of their geographic situations, their social and political contexts, the mystery of seasonal change, and the universality of the human condition and its response to the quality of wonder in a built landscape. Without question, the body of work that Michael Van Valkenburgh has designed over the course of his career to-date makes him deserving of the ASLA Design Medal.

One does not become a great designer overnight and without years of hard work. And while Michael was building his repertoire of experiments upon which to base his life's work, working with ice and studying the works of early pioneers in landscape design, he shared his findings with the rest of us, particularly through his groundbreaking exhibit and catalog *Built Landscapes*. This was the first time that widespread attention had been paid to the work of the living legends of modern landscape architecture; one has only to reflect on the recent MOMA exhibit and book projects of the past ten years to see what followed Michael's lead.

In awarding this medal, I think it is important that the person be as outstanding as the work, and stand as a model for the generation of young designers who will look to the *person* and the work for direction because of the eminence of this award. And it is for this next generation of designers that I make my case to you to select Michael for this award. The profession needs to re-evaluate the role of design in practice. It needs to realize that design is not simply form-giving as an exercise separate from engineering and sustainable practices. And design is not something that only some of us do. We need to be reminded that all built work has to have intellectual underpinnings that are developed from the particular conditions of the site, its contextual circumstances, and universal archetypes. Michael's personal qualities and his way of working demonstrate these issues well, and have much to teach today's students of landscape architecture.

A few anecdotal observations on the person: When I was a young teacher and Michael didn't know me from Adam, he stopped me at a CELA conference to discuss a paper I'd given, because he was interested in the topic and my approach. That meant a lot to me. Later, he came to LSU to teach for a week. His generous work as a studio critic (almost non-stop because that is how Dr. Reich did things) was insightful, sensitive, and energizing for the students.

225-343-6158phone

225-346-0813fax

turner@lsu.edu



In recent years, I've had the opportunity to collaborate with Michael on a couple of professional projects. He deals amazingly well with difficult and controlling clients, and is masterful in the art of compromise. He thrives on collaboration, and the give-and-take of collective creativity. In the process of working with him, I have watched him interact with the young people who work in his firm, and I have talked with them about their experiences. Each of them has the experience of frequent one-on-one work sessions with Michael. They are given a great deal of responsibility and have confidence in their abilities to manage that responsibility because of their relationship with Michael. He is a magnificent mentor, a gentle taskmaster, a probing critic, and a supportive teacher. Michael Van Valkenburgh is a person in love with landscape architecture, willing to go out of his way to help those who share that passion. He is driven to design and build landscapes of high integrity that speak to their place and time, and that offer people the chance to experience the power of landscape in a personal way. I believe that there can be no one more deserving of the ASLA Design Medal than Michael Van Valkenburgh.

Sincerely,

Suzanne Turner, FASLA  
Professor emerita, Louisiana State University