



## ASLA Medal Nominations

c/o Honors and Awards  
636 Eye Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20001-3736

### Re: Emerging Professionals Medal – Letter of Nomination for Charles Kene Okigbo

Dear Nomination and Selection Committee:

Charles Kene Okigbo was the highlight of the ASLA Board of Trustees (BOT) annual meeting at the 2019 ASLA Conference on Landscape Architecture in San Diego. As a recently elected Vice President of Professional Practice, I was ready to get to work. The business meeting agenda was fully packed as anticipated. We were inundated with reports, operating plans, strategies and discussions over the 2 days of engagement. Fortunately, we had the opportunity to hear from speakers other than ASLA Leadership, Trustees and Staff. Kene as we all know him, served as the National Associate Representative that year, a non-voting member of the ASLA Board of Trustees. He attended the meeting to represent the voices of emerging professional and provide a brief report. In review of the agenda, I noted that we had met in passing at previous conferences, but we did not know each other very well. However, it was his speech at the meeting in San Diego that made me realize that a star was born in our Society.

Kene impressed the audience with a candid state of affairs related to the needs of emerging professionals. His leadership was magnificent, and he supported the National Student Representative, Robynne Heymans as well. The demonstration of comradery among the young designers was captivating. They both received standing ovations after the reports. Kene has been an emerging leader for a while. His involvement in everything ASLA demonstrates that he understands the value of the discipline. Since that meeting, I began to pay more attention to Kene as an individual and someone I have come to admire tremendously. Kene is a leader among his peers because his example is so infectious. Every time we meet at a conference, he is always surrounded by Landscape Architects passionately discussing the profession and looking towards the future. In a Landscape Architecture Foundation (LAF) Perspectives interview from 2020 during the height of the Pandemic, Kene eloquently expresses his fears and hopes for emerging professionals in Landscape Architecture that serves as inspiration for this letter.

I am honored to write this nomination as a recognition of support for Kene from myself and many collaborators as well as admirers. Kene Okigbo is very deserving of the 2022 ASLA Emerging Professionals Medal due to his active sense of listening, keen leadership ability, unwavering dedication to ASLA and his solid contributions the profession.

Kene is inspired by Hrishikesh Hirway an American musician with The One AM Radio music group. Hirway also produces film, podcasts and host television shows. So, you may be asking why a Landscape Architect would gravitate to someone like Hrishikesh. Well maybe the answer can be found in the realization that Landscape Architects relate to people that embrace the good in humanity. In a recent Ted Talk, Hrishikesh, describes utilizing his music listening brain to find the layers in conversations. He simply noted that now he listens to people with 4 premises. They include being open to new ideas, stop multi-tasking, letting the other person know you're engaged and do all this without taking your focus of them and transferring the focus to you. This ah ha moment was discovered due to one of Kene's favorite podcasts, Song Exploder created and hosted by Hirway. The podcast has brought a deeper understanding of all types of music and the layers that can be discovered in life when you listen with intent. It seems that Hrishikesh Hirway not only inspired Kene but solidified his purpose as a person of African descent that is passionate about the environment.

Kene and I share a common West African heritage. He is from Nigeria and I am from Liberia. Kene immigrated to the Midwest from Kenya and my family settled in the South from Liberia. Kene attended high school and University in Fargo, North Dakota. He graduated from North Dakota State University (NDSU), earning his Bachelor of Landscape Architecture and Bachelor of Science in Environmental Design. He considers design of the public realm an "awesome responsibility"

and values the lessons shared by his industry peers. Kene is interested in how form and function impact the ways we connect to nature and our built environment. He imagines new mediums through which innovative voices in landscape architecture can be amplified and is fascinated by emerging project typologies that can offer solutions to pervasive societal issues. Now you can understand why listening is so important to Kene.

Kene utilizes his active listening abilities in the 2020 LAF interview by passionately sharing his feelings about the discipline and expressing the unique characteristics of Landscape Architects.

*LAF: “What drew you to landscape architecture?”*

*Kene Okigbo: “I loved the idea of design for community. I still do. I think there were two pivotal moments that sold me on pursuing this career. They both occurred during my freshman year. The first was during a lecture led by the upperclassmen where they shared their advice and experiences from the last 5 years. I remember not thinking of myself as a creative individual. I recognized that I thought and approached problem-solving a bit differently than most of my friends and family, but I wouldn’t have called it creativity. I asked if creativity could be learned. They said it could, meaning that the program would introduce me to the design process. That sold it for me!”*

*“The second moment occurred later in the year. We were given our first site design project and it would be a nearby plaza. The task was simply to envision the space differently by addressing some of the existing site conflicts. I took the opportunity to walk the site and found a man who knew the area well. We started talking and he told me all the secrets I would have never uncovered on my own. Learning those secrets is fun for me. Hearing what people care about is fun for me. The challenge of taking those disparate thoughts and putting them into a concise solution is incredibly frustrating... but even with that, it’s still fun! And on top of all of that, I get to work with people who think very differently than I do but have the same goals of improving space for the communities and clients that we’re serving!”*

*“What resonates with me is that landscape architects never claim to know all the answers. What we bring to the table is hearing the voices of our clients and collaborators so that the final product provides value to the community. At its heart, landscape architecture is service-based leadership.”*

Kene is a natural leader. He leads from a place of understanding which is grounded in listening. Kene is a forward-thinking leader constantly experimenting and opening opportunities for anyone to share ideas. It is his ability to make everyone feel welcome to create together that is so magical. His leadership ability was honed at NDSU working closely with the local Professional and Student Chapter. Kene has also served on ASLA National committees including the Government Affairs Committee, the Climate Action Committee, the LAM Editorial Advisory Committee, Great Plains Chapter Emerging Professionals Committee Chair and as Chair of the Associate Advisory committee. Kene is also a Branding and Marketing Committee Member for the TedxOmaha where he volunteers his time curating videos and marketing campaigns. He was an active ASLA Diversity Summit participant, has volunteered as Mentor for the ACE Mentor Program of America and, most recently, served as moderator for ASLA’s inaugural PreK-12 Virtual Summit, Dream Big with Design (and then, later, the Dream Big session held at the 2021 annual conference). He has also received several awards for his efforts including the ASLA 2020 Outstanding Service Award. ASLA’s annual award honors member volunteers who are making notable contributions to or on behalf of the Society at the national level are selected for this honor. Recipients are nominated by members of the Executive Committee, committee chairs, PPN chairs and ASLA national staff. This accolade demonstrates his leadership and commitment to the Society.

In the 2020 LAF interview, Kene expresses the need for more emerging professionals to transform the status quo with care and understanding.

*LAF: “What challenge would you give emerging leaders?”*

*Kene Okigbo: “I want emerging leaders to be bold and impatient, but I think they’re already doing that. I’ve been inspired by emerging leaders who are advocates for systemic reform in their local communities and on the nation’s stage. Robynne Heymans constantly encourages her peers to participate in Austin, Texas’ democratic process. ASLA Adapt’s ability to mobilize and hold their predecessors accountable for inaction, wrong action, and placation is literally awe-inspiring to me. Maggie Aravana has such a charming tenacity that you don’t even realize when you switched from disagreeing with her to arguing on her behalf. I’m floored by the passionate people who are poised to lead this profession.*

*“If I had to choose one piece of advice, I would say you have to understand the systems you hope to advance/dismantle. Engage in local government. Engage in federal government. Join an ASLA committee. Become a board member of your local not-for-profit. Each one of these organizations has a system for collecting ideas and then implementing them. Infiltrate that system and embed your agenda. If the system is broken, you’re more prepared to substantively change it by engaging. If you take this advice, please don’t do it alone. I’ll paraphrase a quote from one of my favorite shows, The West Wing. “If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go with many. We have to go far, quickly.” There is so much for us to grow, change, dismantle, and rebuild. Remember to ask for help when it isn’t offered and to take it whenever it is.”*

Landscape Architects that have been teaching or practicing for years need to listen to emerging voices. We have so much to learn at every stage in our careers and mentorship can present itself in many forms. Kene boldly stated some of these sentiments in our BOT meeting back in 2019 and it is clear to me that he is certainly not the only emerging professional that has these feelings. The reason that grass roots student organizations like ASLA Adapt exists is because young people in our discipline care. It takes a lot of courage to challenge the people you look to for guidance, but this is what makes us all stronger.

ASLA is better because of people like Kene. He is diligent in his service to the Society and genuinely volunteers his time when needed. Kene has been a member since 2010 and continues to be very active ASLA member. His dedication is worthy of emulation and he sets a wonderful example for all emerging professionals to step up and take charge. I remember my good friend Dennis Nola, former VP of Membership, describing people like Kene as “Super Members” in the Society. He was right. Some members sit back on the sidelines and only show up for continuing education, conference EXPO’s and events. That is just fine, but we must acknowledge the members that go farther and give of their valuable time to support the Society. I resonate with this personally because I feel it is the right thing to do. It is not about the recognition. It is about moving the organization to the next level in any way you can contribute.

In the LAF interview, Kene discusses the profession from the lens of a young concerned ASLA member wondering what is next. His words are memorable and still resonate today as we are still experiencing a devastating Pandemic in transition to a potential Epidemic situation.

*LAF: “What challenges is landscape architecture allowing you to address right now?”*

*Kene Okigbo: “Right now, we’re in the middle of an unprecedented pandemic. As a designer, I’m proud to have contributed to projects which created space for the public to engage with urban nature. Through landscape architecture I am able to help people who I have never met and may never meet, to exercise, earn grass stains, climb trees, build callouses, and watch clouds float by – all at a socially responsible six-foot physical distance from others doing the same. When I place trees in a parking lot, they are akin to moving the pieces of a chessboard against the urban heat island effect. When I advocate for higher water retention on-site, I’m advocating for less strain on municipal systems. When I specify a bench with no center armrests, I am embedding the intent that this space is welcoming to the person with nowhere else to go. Seemingly inconsequential decisions in the world of landscape architecture often have massive implications when you look at the experience of the end-use.”*

*“Designing the public realm is an awesome responsibility. In doing so, I think we begin to frame societal change. A challenge I have yet to tackle is the one of unintentionally aiding gentrification. I will optimistically proceed until we find a solution, but I cannot conform to the teachings of “just green enough.” It feels like a defeatist mentality with racist undertones. Do disadvantaged communities deserve anything less than our full-throated support? I’ll admit that I haven’t worked on many projects that touch this realm, but the subject matter and context hit close to home.”*

A talented designer, Kene Okigbo, ASLA is a contributing member of the RDG Planning & Design’s landscape architecture studio in Omaha, Nebraska. Kene has been involved with projects in various market sectors including parks and recreation, universities, sports facilities, and urban design. He is truly passionate about creating environments that positively impact the community and is inspired by the rejuvenation of existing spaces to better serve their people. Kene’s goal in every project is to communicate the needs of a community through Landscape Architecture and compelling design. Kene’s professional experiences began with positions at NDSU including Campus Guide and Resident Assistant. As the Campus Guide, he led groups of incoming freshmen at NDSU through the orientation experience. Kene took advantage of several practical opportunities through internships before joining RDG.

Kene is quoted that *“Designing the public realm is a mind-blowing prospect. Every day we shape the physical fabric of society. Our ideas influence how people think, move, and feel. Weaving that fabric in a positive way, with peers who share that sentiment is exciting!”* In my opinion, Landscape Architects have the most responsibility in shaping the world. It is our understanding of natural systems and humanity that fortify the knowledge necessary to care for the planet. I consider the public realm “Democratic Ground” that we share with all of our differences as well as our similarities. Kene’s point of view as a designer is critical. As a young person of color that happens to be a designer, he has a perspective we all need. Kene considers designing for the public realm critical to our survival and values the lessons being shared by his peers in the profession.

Kene can translate this unique perspective of the spaces between the buildings and natural landscapes by providing access for all people. Kene continues to drive designs that positively impacts communities in Omaha by curating just and equitable spaces that resonate with humanity. After his recognition of ASLA 2020 Outstanding Service Award, RDG Partner, Cary Thomsen, PLA, ASLA stated that *“Kene is a well-respected individual at RDG and within ASLA and the many other community organizations in which he’s involved. This recognition is a public proclamation of something everyone who works with Kene already knows: his volunteerism is substantial and extremely generous.”*

It is true. When you know Kene, you understand the power of service. As a designer, he exemplifies what it means to interweave the needs of the people and the planet in service of humanity. LAF asked Kene about current drivers in the profession of Landscape Architecture.

*LAF: “What is driving you professionally right now?”*

*Kene Okigbo: “Ever since entering the world of landscape architecture I’ve been interested in design for different cultures. I’m a Nigerian who spent some of my formative years in Kenya before immigrating to the Midwest. The way people make space their own is fascinating. I’m interested in what people eat, where they play, and with whom. I want to incorporate that into my work more strongly. Recently I’ve been exploring the concept of Afrofuturism and how that world can intersect with landscape architecture. I don’t have the answer yet, but I feel like if these two subjects find a way to jibe, it’s not just a single-site solution, but a precedent for society.”*

*“Designers and educators that I respect and admire like Breeze Outlaw, Camille Applewhite, Kofi Boone, Diana Fernandez, Ujijji Davis, and Andrew Sargent are taking this idea and probing the way I think about space and the people who imbue it with life. Rather than what is driving me, these people and many more like them are pushing me to ask deeper questions. They’re driving me to be more confident in my inquisitiveness.”*

Once you consider the possibilities presented by the talented people in and around our discipline, it gets very exciting. Sometimes I wonder where we are in the world? How did we manage to come so far? But I also ask myself where do we go from here? It is so hard to watch all the bad news on TV or listen to tragic stories on NPR. We have too many outlets to give us negative energy. So, it makes you struggle with how we will manage all the anxiety in the world. The negative effects of Climate Change, Social Justice Challenges, Public Health Emergencies and Environmental Degradation are a call to action for Landscape Architects. It seems scary. Then, you meet someone like Kene. His spirit is calming and hopeful. Finally, LAF asked Kene what’s next?

*LAF: “Where do you think the profession needs to go from here?”*

*Kene Okigbo: “If you will allow me to be facetious for a moment, I think we should be thinking about moonscaping and terraforming. What does the frontier after the next frontier look like?”*

*“In all seriousness, I think the profession needs to look more closely at the ramifications of the decisions we make. There should be a larger expectation that after construction, a review of design decisions be conducted on every project. The findings from these reviews should be freely exchanged among all firms and practitioners, preferably, on a no-cost public database.”*

*“I also think the profession needs to be more ubiquitous. This happens when we contribute our perspectives on mixed media along a broad spectrum of platforms. I love that Mike Todoran of the Landscape Architecture Podcast is advocating for more podcasts about landscape architecture and I truly appreciate how much effort the team behind Landscape Architecture Magazine puts into each issue, but I still think we need a few more James Wonders and Maggie Clarkes. Lastly, I would love to see a series of compelling landscape architecture*

*design briefs. The stories behind the projects are so interesting! I want to know more about how and why projects exist, instead of the typical “what we did.” Docuseries like Abstract are brilliant and captivating tools to share the perspective of designers. Kate Orff, Kona Gray, and Diane Jones Allen would be perfect muses for an episode of a similar series. Compellingly sharing our message, to a diverse populous, is what we need.”*

*LAF's Perspectives interview series showcases landscape architects from diverse backgrounds discussing how they came to the profession and where they see it heading. Any opinions expressed in this interview belong solely to the author. Their inclusion in this article does not reflect endorsement by LAF.*

Although some of his thoughts may seem provocative, they are necessary for us to look forward. Asking questions is a good thing. This is something Kene has noted in our conversations. He loves being inquisitive by writing, sketching ideas and reflecting on stories. I am so grateful to know Kene and I consider him a friend as well as a colleague. His determination to transform the world through Landscape Architecture is wonderful. He has accomplished so much as an emerging professional and there is so much more he wants to do. I have no doubt that Kene will aspire to lead the Society one day and we would all be so lucky to have him continue his support of ASLA.

In summary, I am so humbled to with the responsibility to share what I have come to know about Kene. He is certainly a strong leader and wonderful representative of the profession. I believe he embodies the character signified by the creating of this award. Please feel free to contact me to discuss this nomination or provide any further documentation of Kene's leadership and exceptional contribution to the profession in consideration of this honor.

Best personal regards,



Kona Gray, FASLA  
*Principal*

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## **Kene Okigbo Letter of Support – ASLA Emerging Professional Award**

**03-01-2022**

Dear ASLA Board of Trustees,

I am writing with the utmost confidence to recommend Kene Okigbo for the ASLA Emerging Professional Award. I have been Kene's direct supervisor for the past 4 years and can vouch for his professional dedication as well as his role as an immensely valuable member in the Omaha community.

Kene has been involved with projects in the markets of parks and recreation, universities, sports facilities, early learning environments, and urban design. Kene is passionate about creating a product that impacts the community and is fascinated by how rejuvenating existing spaces can create vibrant new environments which more appropriately serve the community. Kene's goal in every project is to communicate the identity of a community through a compelling design.

Kene has been involved in such projects as the City of Omaha Parklet Design Guidelines, the University of Nebraska East Campus Union plaza project, the Bluestem Middle school project in Omaha and the Williams Hall renovation project in Omaha, just to name a few.

Kene has also played a key role in the Omaha Beltline trail project. He has served as our main client contact, planned and orchestrated our public engagement process for the project and is currently working on design implementation for the project. Kene leads our Diversity Equity and Inclusion initiative at RDG. He also coordinates many other office events that positively impact the culture of RDG.

In addition to his work at RDG, he is also involved with several major community initiatives. These include Omaha by Design, the Omaha Summer Arts Festival, Habitat for Humanity, and numerous other volunteer efforts, including his advising of many landscape architecture students hoping to enter the profession.

Kene is well known in the world of ASLA both locally and Nationally. As Kene has grown in his professional career, he has become increasingly involved in ASLA's diversity efforts, participating in Diversity Summits and helping guide strategic Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion communications and initiatives. Kene has also served as a member of the Public Relations and Communications Advisory Committee and the Honors & Awards Committee, where he helped create the Emerging Professionals Medal and advocated for the selection of a diverse awards jury. In 2018, Kene was appointed to the Associate Advisory Committee where he curated and disseminated ASLA messaging to associate members. In 2019 he was elected Committee Chair, serving as the National Associate Representative on the Board of Trustees. Today, Kene devotes his time and perspective to the Landscape Architecture Magazine Editorial Advisory Committee, the Climate Action Committee, and the Government Affairs Committee. He is a member of the Black Landscape Architects Network, for which he moderated the first in a series of panels aimed at elevating the work of Black designers. He is a mentor to both college and high school students, helping foster the next generation of landscape architects. He was the recipient of the 2020 ASLA Outstanding Service Award and Omaha's 2021 Young Urbanist Award. The thread that connects all of Kene's pursuits is his belief that landscape architecture, when coupled with devoted practitioners, can and should change the world.



For these reasons, and so many more, I strongly support selecting Kene for the ASLA Emerging Professional Award. He is truly a one-of-a-kind individual and I have no doubt he will continue to make positive contributions to ASLA, his community, his workplace, the practice of landscape architecture, and the world. If you have any further questions about Kene's qualifications, please don't hesitate to let me know.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cary W. Thomsen." The signature is written in a cursive style with a period at the end.

Cary Thomsen PLA, ASLA



Via email: [honorsawards@asla.org](mailto:honorsawards@asla.org)

February 28, 2022

Ms. Carolyn Mitchell  
American Society of Landscape Architects  
636 Eye Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20001

**Re: ASLA Emerging Professional Medal Nomination**

To: ASLA Board of Trustees

I am writing in support of the nomination of Kene Okigbo, ASLA, for the Emerging Professional Award In recognition of his exciting, young career and potential for being a future agent of change and creativity. I have known Kene since he was an active contributor to our Chapter as a student at North Dakota State University and have enjoyed a front row seat to his development as a young landscape architect.

Kene's impact on our Chapter cannot be understated. His positive attitude and willingness to participate has strengthened the interaction between members of our three-state Chapter. Kene has successfully encouraged students to join the profession and carried that through with continual support for young professionals. He is also a vocal and visible member of our Chapter in the community. Kene brings his understanding of community places and spaces with him anytime he interacts with the public on the organizations he serves. Kene's advancement of the profession crosses the boundary of the Nebraska/Dakotas Chapter ASLA as his volunteerism extends all the way to the national level, participating in committees and leading panel discussions throughout the time I have known him.

I enthusiastically support the nomination and hope that you will consider Kene Okigbo, ASLA, for this well-deserved award.

Sincerely,



Zack Fergus, PLA  
Chapter President  
Nebraska/Dakotas Chapter ASLA