

INTRODUCTION OF FRITZ STEINER, CELA 2025 LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD HONOREE

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ABSTRACT

This article is adapted from the introductory remarks delivered by Professor Kenneth R. Brooks, FASLA, FCELA, PLA, at the 2025 CELA Conference to honor Dr. Frederick R. “Fritz” Steiner with the Lifetime Achievement Award. Through personal anecdotes and shared history, Brooks traces Steiner’s foundational role in evolving ‘environmental planning’ into a transdisciplinary ecological model. The narrative highlights Steiner’s unique leadership—merging community organizing with visionary stewardship—at the intersection of natural systems and human design. (Editor’s Introduction serving as Abstract)

Keywords

Frederick R. Steiner, Ecological Planning, CELA Lifetime Achievement Award, Transdisciplinary Design, Environmental Stewardship

Good morning. My name is Ken Brooks. I attended my first CELA conference in 1977 and I served as your President two decades ago. I’m here today to introduce the 2025 CELA Lifetime Achievement Award Honoree, Dr. Frederick R. “Fritz” Steiner.

I’m not going to read off his impressive list of accomplishments, achievements, credentials and accolades that you can read in the program literature. I want to share a part of his origin story.

We both arrived at Washington State University in the Palouse hills of eastern Washington in August 1977. Bringing Fritz to WSU (or WAZZU as local fans called it), was part of a unique and forward-looking venture on the part of the University. They decided to create a professional graduate program in regional planning, but not to make it a separate academic unit on campus. Instead, it would be created by facilitating a collaboration of contributing disciplines from across the university. Programs in the colleges of Arts & Sciences, of Engineering (with its Departments of Architecture, and Hydrology) and the College of Agriculture (with its programs in Forestry, Range Management, Soils, and Landscape Architecture) all assign faculty, administrative and operational resources to create this Master of Regional Planning program with a strong human ecological outlook.

Fritz, with his professional experience as a Community Organizer and his education in both Design and Planning provided the perfect perspective to provide not only linkage but also leadership connecting landscape architecture to this joint and diverse venture of regional planning. (This was a transdisciplinary enterprise way before “Trans” was even a trigger word to some people.)

Fritz and I were products of the 1960s, an era where we experienced vigorous and raucous student and public protests to the injustice of war, the Cuyahoga River of his native Ohio catching on fire, and the illegal and immoral actions of politicians in the highest office in the land. We were also inspired by the growing public awareness and the call for public conservation and stewardship that was inspired by such works as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and Ian McHarg’s *Design with Nature* and the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act. This really was an era of positive environmentalism, and it inspired a number of people of our generation to become landscape architects and environmental planners. Fritz helped us to see that although the concept of “environmental planning” was popular, it implied a more static description of our settings and surroundings, while the concept “ecological planning” really challenges us to consider the dynamic interactive and reciprocal relationships of all parts of our natural and human environments as we engage planning and design.

So, we arrived in Pullman at the same time, with complementary backgrounds and a shared responsibility to grow and elevate the landscape architecture and regional planning. We got assigned to a shared faculty office and we find ourselves living in the same apartment complex with our apartments across the courtyard from each other. We assist each other with our courses, we walk to and from campus with each other most days, we travel together, we're in each other's weddings, and we each celebrate the birth of each other's daughters.

We shared an experience with Weed that was a bad trip. (No, "Weed" was not a horticultural product, but a small town in the Siskiyou Mountains in northern California.) One December, as the University went into the Christmas break, Fritz and I were driving down from Pullman to the San Francisco Bay area where we each had family to visit during the holidays. We jumped into Fritz's little VW Rabbit and headed off on this 17-hour drive. By early in the evening, we pulled into the little town of Weed, in the mountains of northern California to get a bite to eat before our last big push to get to the Bay Area by midnight. We went into a small café on main street and ordered a beer and our dinner. Our dinner was slow coming, so we got another beer. By the time we finished our dinner, we had lost our momentum and decided that the responsible thing to do would be to spend a night in a motel and get to the Bay Area by noon the next day. That night, there was an epic snowstorm and, in the morning, it took considerable skill and caution to get back onto the Interstate and head south. Although the road had not been officially closed at this point, driving was treacherous, and cars crept along in single file in the center of the two lanes. Every so often, someone in a four-wheel drive and having more testosterone than good sense would try to pass the column of slow-moving vehicles causing skidding, spinouts, and panic. At one point our caravan approached an ice-covered bridge spanning a chasm over a river. The bridge was curved and banked with a superelevation designed to accommodate vehicles going 80 MPH in clear conditions. There was a semitrailer truck jackknifed and stopped in the middle of the bridge that left barely 10-15 feet of passage between the truck and the railing and there wasn't any way that our column of vehicles would be able to achieve the momentum necessary to hold a high position next to the upper rail and pass the truck without incident. The parade of cars was stopped. Fritz jumped out and created a spontaneous on-the-spot community organizing public engagement venture right there. He told me (with my background growing up in Colorado snow) to move into the driver's seat of the little rabbit and protect our vehicle's place in line. Then he called people out of the cars and created teams to push each of the cars, one by one, over the bridge, past the truck and parked on the other side and then, in the spirit of community effort, to go back and help get the next cars across. Our little parade managed to get past that roadblock and back in motion down towards the next major town of Redding, CA. That 71-mile trip between Weed and Redding had taken us 10 hours, but we didn't end up stopped or sheltering along the road as many others did that day.

Fritz and I took another trip together, early in our time at WAZZU... the university sent us to Washington, DC, on a prospecting trip to become familiar with many of the federal agencies and their programs that we might tap into with our landscape architecture and regional planning programs. We found some agencies, like the Soil Conservation Service (now the NRCS) of the USDA to be extremely helpful, professional, and engaging, while the newly formed Environmental Protection Agency was still somewhat chaotic as it tried to establish itself in creating and delivering its mission.

One of our experiences on that trip occurred one evening as we were returning to our hotel after dinner in Georgetown. In that same hotel, there was a conference being held related to the interests of Southern Power Industries (think TVA and rural electrification). As we headed to our room, we passed a hospitality suite where a sign on an easel at the door said "Welcome! Howard Industries Welcomes You". So, we stepped in to join the party, which was winding down. There was a self-service bar set up on a side table and about a half-dozen older gentlemen sitting in leather wing-back chairs, sipping on cocktails and chatting. Someone politely jumped up and welcomed us to have a cocktail and sit down with the group. We introduced ourselves, "Hi, I'm Fritz, I'm Ken" (no last names). They asked us "Where y'all from?" and we kind of hemmed and hawed and one of the gentlemen said, "They're from eastern Washington state." Now we're a bit shocked. And the next question was "Whatcha all do?" We pointed to the fellow who said we were from Washington and said, ask him? He said, "They're environmentalists!" These were the days that the little fish, the snail darter derailed federal funding for building the Tellico Dam. Being labeled an environmentalist in this group was not a positive thing. We thanked the gentlemen for their hospitality and

excused ourselves. A couple of months later, Fritz found an article in a national publication on the topic of covert intelligence services within US corporations with Howard Industries listed as one of the prime examples. We were in DC in the interests of conservation and had been checked out.

That trip helped Fritz to become the Principal Investigator on a significant Environmental Education grant, the largest grant not focused on an agricultural commodity at that time in the WSU College of Agriculture. That grant led to the development of an ecological planning demonstration grant to protect prime agricultural farmlands in Whitman County. That county has about twice the land area of the state of Rhode Island. The project engaged numerous students, faculty, and community constituents. It led to the production of a book, the enactment of new local policies and regulations, a film, and a national conference focused on Farm Land Preservation.

Fritz brought this same sense of vision, ecological advocacy, and creative community problem-solving into the applied community service projects and into the leadership of his academic units that he has been a part of. If I were going to be caught in the middle of a snowstorm or in the middle of a constitutional crisis, I would want Fritz out front, calling people out of our cars and encouraging the communities to push our way through the challenges in front of us.