

## CELA 2025 LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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### ABSTRACT

Adapted from his keynote address at the 2025 CELA Conference, this piece commemorates Dr. Frederick Steiner's Lifetime Achievement Award. Amidst global climate and social upheaval, Steiner's reflections offer a vital anchor for both academic and professional practice. Rather than a simple retrospective, Steiner challenges the discipline to reclaim its fundamental "Why." He connects the mandate of landscape architecture to the constitutional protection of public health and safety, advocating for an art form rooted in the "subversive science" of ecology. He calls on practitioners to act as "world doctors"—healing environmental degradation through a synthesis of design, science, and a rigorous land ethic. (Editor's Introduction serving as Abstract)

### Keywords

Ecological Planning, CELA Lifetime Achievement, Landscape Architecture Theory, Land Ethic, Public Health and Safety, Transdisciplinary Design, Climate Adaptation

I am honored and humbled by this recognition. It is extremely special to be introduced by Ken Brooks because it was he who first introduced me to CELA. Back in the late 1970s when we shared an office in the Palouse at Washington State University, Ken urged me to attend a CELA conference. I did and found an academic home and an identity.

The late 1970s were an ambitious time when CELA was advancing research in the discipline, such as founding *Landscape Journal*, and where I found educators like me without a degree in landscape architecture: architects, planners, historians, geographers, horticulturalists, ecologists, and an industrial designer. Largely as a result of CELA, I became a landscape architecture educator, both a teacher and scholar of the discipline.

My CELA mentors included Arnie Alanen, Jot Carpenter, Julius Fabos, Catherine Howett, Cam Man, Lynn Miller, Darrell Morrison, Bob Riley, Sally Schumann, Carl Steinitz, Sue Weideman, and Erv Zube. A clutch of old timers were always present – Charles Fountain, Hubert Owens, and Robert Reich. My fellow (mostly) assistant professor cohort included Jack Ahern, Ken Brooks, Bruce Ferguson, Mark Francis, Meir Gross, Randy Hester, Perry Howard, Maggie McAvin, Beth Meyer, Forster Ndubisi, Art Rice, John Stilgoe, Ron Stoltz, Anne Spirn, Bob Thayer, Roger Trowbridge, Susan Turner, and Michael Van Valkenburgh. There were others, slightly older associate professors, and a steady stream of young assistant professors who joined us. In many ways, Bob Riley was our heart and soul. His contributions are wonderfully captured by Brenda J. Brown, in her 2023 book *Landscape Fascinations and Provocations: Reading Robert B. Riley*, available from the Louisiana State University Press.

Now, I could continue down this memory lane which is truly fun for me and perhaps mildly entertaining for you but in the time I have left, I think it is more important to ask: Why? Why is there a field of landscape architecture? Or environmental planning? What value do we add? What relevance is our discipline?

My current view is colored by two factors. First, I'm in the midst of a significant building project. Second, after having no major health issues practically my whole life, I've experienced some challenges recently. The choreography of surgery, like that of building construction, is a marvel to witness.

Making buildings, making landscapes are challenging endeavors. My building project involves preserving a (somewhat) historic building, paying for it, staying on budget, and engaging in the ill-named "value

engineering.” I’ve learned much about mass timber versus steel, the timing of concrete pours, and bricks. We are working with terrific architects – Kieran Timberlake - and so I trust they can make a building that stands up. We need to meet building codes, zoning regulations, and local and state historic preservation requirements – all made possible by the police powers granted local and state governments by the Constitution.

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court laid out the “conspicuous” examples of police powers as “public safety, public health, morality, peace and quiet, law and order...”

Health and safety are first on this list and at the forefront of constructing a building. I trust the floor we are standing and seated on now. Health has been on my mind as I interacted with medical specialists. Once inside the health care system, the science and the art of the medical professions are a marvel and, thanks to Penn Med, my health has been restored. As medical professionals are well-aware: science is not static, science evolves.

Two scientists on the Penn faculty, Katalin Karikó and Drew Weissman, did pioneering work on messenger RNA that unlocked understandings that enabled the creation of the lifesaving COVID-19 vaccines. They were an unlikely pairing that was born from a discussion over a Xerox machine. The medical profession does a wonderful job translating science into practice. From my experience of having a doctor hover over my right eye with her scalpel, I’m reminded that medicine is also an art. It is an art grounded in evidence, best practices, and experience. Our health care system is imperfect but always seeking improvement.

Landscape architecture is an art that also should be informed by science, specifically, the science of ecology, the “subversive science,” as Paul Sears called it. Ecology has evolved from ideas about steady states and balance to those about dynamics and flux.

The same police powers that enable building codes and zoning regulations, provide the basis for the licensure of landscape architects in the United States. To practice landscape architecture, one must protect public health and safety certainly, peace and quiet hopefully, morality maybe, and at least obey the law. At Penn, where I have spent a big chunk of my life, the university motto links law to morality: in Latin “*Leges sine moribus vanae*” which translates “Laws without morals are useless.”

I will return to morals in a moment, but in these days when we are being governed by anti-science incompetents, I believe it is especially important to double down on public health and safety.

We know where it is safe to build and where it is not: build in this flood plain or coastal area and you may die; in this place your house or business may burn or be carried down a hillside by a mudslide, or in an earthquake zone, stuff can fall on you and break your limbs.

Mapping such places is powerful. We design and we plan based on the best available information, but science changes that; climate change and how we map floods, hurricane surges, wildfire, and mudslides drastically so – right now. The September 2024 North Carolina floods resulting from Hurricane Helene and the January 2025 Los Angeles wildfires illustrate the dangers to public health and safety of living in the wrong place. In both cases, places once viewed as safe are now at risk. In the rush to rebuild in LA, environmental and other regulations are being sidelined. This is akin to someone who just received a lung transplant making a beeline to buy a carton of cigarettes. Meanwhile, on a more positive note, Kentucky has successfully and sensitively moved communities impacted by 2022 flooding to higher ground and the New York Times even acknowledged the landscape architect for the design.

We in the academy have many benefits – one of which is we can take on projects of our choosing for the public good – I’d argue we are required to do so. We can make powerful maps and compelling designs. We can visualize safe and healthy futures and morally just and beautiful ones too.

Aldo Leopold was well known for his land ethic. He wrote about land aesthetics too, for instance, observing that every farm was a portrait of the farmer themselves. All landscapes are portraits of the cultures that created them – the moral and ethical fiber of their creators. One of our challenges, again observed by Leopold, is once we begin thinking ecologically, we see the wounds of the world.

Following the example of medical doctors, we should be world doctors healing the injuries on our planet. My friend and colleague Richard Weller, a prolific writer, designer, and artist, took up this prospect and proposed a world park linking biodiversity hotspots from continent to continent.

We're living at a time when the political winds might discourage us from taking up such a bold idea. But there's so much work to do. Let's not hold back!

With my remaining time, let me offer some advice.

First, embrace where you are. I've never met a landscape I didn't like. In every new place, I run through the layer-cake in my head. What's the climate here, the rocks, how does water flow, what are the soils, are there any new plants or animals to learn, how have people settled here? The Palouse is quite different than my southern Ohio origins and the City of Brotherly Love, as is the Hill Country and the Sonoran Desert.

Pullman, Washington was an unlikely place for me to begin my academic career. WSU was moving its undergraduate landscape architecture degree towards accreditation, and they wanted someone from Penn: And I was the only one to apply. Ken [Brooks] joined at the same time from Utah State. The three existing faculty were from Wisconsin, Harvard, and RISD. Normally, five white men are not viewed as diverse, but we represented different landscape architecture schools of thought. It is healthy for a smallish field like landscape architecture to draw on faculty from a variety of institutions and perspectives. We should embrace diversity in many forms. Nature has shown us the ultimate virtue in diversity. Diverse ecosystems are the healthiest.

At WSU, I threw myself into local issues with gusto – farmland preservation, soil conservation, and small-town identity and survival. My local work connected me to state, national, and international activities in the same areas, including many through CELA. Recently, a student asked if I knew anything about the American Farmland Trust and I recalled having a part in its beginning through a conference I organized at WSU in Pullman.

Take advantage of all the programs your university has to offer. WSU sent Ken [Brooks] and me to Washington D.C. This resulted in a grant from the Office of Environmental Education (such an agency existed then) as well as connecting me to a network within the U.S. Department of Agriculture. By the way, what was then called the Soil Conservation Service employed landscape architects back in the day. They helped farmers paint portraits of themselves grounded in the conservation of rich soils.

Also take advantage of opportunities to live abroad, such as Fulbrights and the Rome Prize. And take advantage of unusual teaching assignments too.

When I returned from a Fulbright in Holland, I inherited the History of Landscape Architecture course at WSU. Tom Nelson, who had been teaching it, decided to return to practice, here in Portland actually. My qualifications were that I had lived in Europe and had slides.

I fell in love with landscape architecture history and have written and taught about it ever since. With Ken [Brooks], I studied the often-overlooked contribution of the land-grant schools to landscape architecture education. I have also explored the contributions of the Olmsteds to land-grant universities and campus planning more broadly.

Someone once said that jazz and landscape architecture are the only truly original American arts. Maybe that's true, certainly both have European precedents but emerged distinctly here in this native land of hope. See Robert Smithson's observations about Olmsted as a "sylvan artist," for example.

Since I started out at WSU, whenever I teach studio, I tackle real issues faced by actual communities. Outside the studio, I have become involved in the places we studied from the Pacific Northwest to the Front Range and the Sonoran Desert and to Central Texas and the Mid-Atlantic and abroad in The Netherlands, Italy, and China.

Landscape architects and planners usually arrive as outsiders – and an outsider with power can be truly dangerous to a community. To play a positive role, I've learned it is necessary to be present, vulnerable,

and humble. Furthermore, we need to listen and to be receptive to what we hear. This works in the communities we serve as well as in studios and classrooms and in faculty meetings.

Thank you to you all, to my students and colleagues, and to my dear family – Anna, Andrew, and Halina, who is here today.

*(Frederick “Fritz” Steiner, FASLA, FAAR, RAAR, SITES AP is dean and Paley Professor at the University of Pennsylvania Stuart Weitzman School of Design, and faculty co-director of The Ian L. McHarg Center for Urbanism and Ecology.*

*Previously, he served as dean of the School of Architecture and Henry M. Rockwell Chair in Architecture at The University of Texas at Austin for 15 years. He has taught at Penn and the following institutions: Arizona State University, Washington State University, the University of Colorado at Denver. He was a visiting professor of landscape architecture at Tsinghua University in Beijing, China. Dean Steiner was a Fulbright-Hays scholar at Wageningen University, The Netherlands and a Rome Prize Fellow in Historic Preservation at the American Academy in Rome. During 2013-2014, he was the William A. Bernoudy Architect in Residence at the American Academy in Rome. He is a Fellow of both the American Society of Landscape Architects and the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture, and a Scholar at the Penn Institute for Urban Research. Steiner helped establish the Sustainable SITES Initiative, the first program of its kind to offer a systematic, comprehensive rating system designed to define sustainable land development and management and holds the SITES Professional (SITES AP) credential. In 2019, he co-founded The Ian L. McHarg Center for Urbanism and Ecology with Richard Weller, Professor Emeritus of Landscape Architecture.*

*Steiner has written, edited, or co-edited 22 books, including Megaregions and America’s Future (2022), with Robert Yaro and Ming Zhang; Design with Nature Now (2019), co-edited with Richard Weller, Karen M’Closkey, and Billy Fleming; and Making Plans: How to Engage with Landscape, Design, and the Urban Environment (2018); and Nature and Cities (2016), co-edited with George Thompson and Armando Carbonell.*

*Steiner was a presidential appointee to the national board of the American Institute of Architects and was on the Urban Committee of the National Park System Advisory Board. Previously he served as president of the Hill Country Conservancy (an Austin land trust) as well as in various capacities on the boards of Envision Central Texas and the Landscape Architecture Foundation. He worked on the Austin Comprehensive Plan (Imagine Austin) and on the campus plan for The University of Texas at Austin.*

*Steiner earned a Master of Community Planning and a BS in Design from the University of Cincinnati, and his PhD and MA in city and regional planning and a Master of Regional Planning from the University of Pennsylvania. He received an honorary MPhil in Human Ecology from the College of the Atlantic, and in 2023, the University of Cincinnati honored him with the UC College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning Outstanding Alumni Award.)*