

Thomas Homer Johnson

February 18, 1940 — October 6, 1994

Professor Thomas Johnson was born in Geneva, Illinois. He recalled, in a recent career statement, the foundations of his future in landscape architecture. He remembered fondly childhood experiences learning tree identification at the Morton Arboretum, “keeping bird migration records, being fascinated by films like *The Vanishing Prairie*, and identifying with the buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright” that he discovered in his native state of Illinois and nearby Wisconsin. From these beginnings grew a heartfelt desire to integrate people, art, design and the natural world. Embarking on a path to become a landscape architect led him first to the University of Illinois. There he studied under his mentor, Stanley White, graduating first in his class with a Bachelor in Landscape Architecture degree. The recipient of the Edward L. Ryerson Travelling Fellowship, he then travelled to Europe to explore the Italian villa gardens and European cities and towns.

Returning to the United States, Professor Johnson entered Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design where he studied under Hideo Sasaki, graduating with a Master of Landscape Architecture degree in 1966. He spent until 1974 actively engaged in professional practice, from which he developed a firm grounding in design as an applied art.

It was practicing as a design associate in the office of his Harvard teacher, Hideo Sasaki, which Professor Johnson often recalled as a significant influence on his emergence as a designer. While at the firm of Sasaki, Dawson, De May Associates from 1966-70, he was a team member on many projects including the first place award-winning St. Louis Missouri Mall Competition. His design for the State University of New York at Buffalo is featured in Geoffrey and Susan Jellicoe’s *The Landscapes of Man* (1975), and is recognized as a significant modern landscape work.

From 1970-74, Professor Johnson was co-principal of his own firm, Lawrence & Johnson Associates of Barnstable, Massachusetts. The firm’s projects included large-scale housing developments, residences, and communities. Often cited among his accomplishments was the establishment of The Old Kings Highway Regional Historic District Commission, an agency which preserved traditional visual patterns in the public landscape of Cape Cod.

Professor Johnson joined the Cornell Landscape Architecture Program faculty in 1974 where he was a devoted teacher to both graduate and undergraduate students. His twenty years of instruction helped to train students who

went on to become Rome Prize winners, Presidential scholars, university professors, and design practitioners in internationally known landscape architecture firms.

Notable among his numerous extension and community service activities were his design seminars, workshop series, and accompanying publications that he developed to address local applications of the New York State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQR), a project funded by a Cornell University Rockefeller Foundation Grant (1977).

Professor Johnson was active in campus committees: chair of the Landscape Architecture Program Internship Committee and member of both the Campus Planning and the Agriculture College Land Use Committees. In addition to his teaching, research, and extension work, he also maintained a consulting practice, engaging in projects on the Cornell University campus and in the Ithaca area (Cornell Business and Technology Park, 1988).

Design Theory and Education were the focus of Professor Johnson's teaching and research during his years at Cornell. Motivated by the belief that the landscape architectural profession lacked an educational text on design theory, he endeavored to develop basic two- and three-dimensional design teaching techniques. Using the classroom as his research lab, Professor Johnson originated a landscape architectural design language theory accompanied by a "building blocks" design learning sequence in which elements, syntax, references, and procedures for classical, naturalistic, modern, and post-modern design approaches were articulated. His design languages theory became the principal subject of papers given at professional conferences and a manuscript he was preparing at the time of his death entitled: *From Basic Design to Design Languages, Design Theory in Landscape Architecture*. "Classicism, naturalism, the fried egg, the inverted sweatshirt, the nine-square," were the words and concepts he championed and which continue to resonate in the minds and memories of students who benefited from his inspired teaching.

Professor Johnson was the leader of several award-winning Cornell student design studio teams. With his students, he was awarded first prize in the Genesee River Design Competition (Rochester, New York, 1978), a Merit Award in the Jacobs Pillow National Design Competition (National Endowment for the Arts, 1984), and exhibition selection in both the Sesquicentennial Park National Design Competition (Houston, Texas, 1986) and the Minnesota State Capital National Design Competition (St. Paul, Minnesota, 1987).

Professor Johnson is remembered for his open-mindedness, his imagination, his compassionate heart and his generosity. Those qualities made him both a devoted teacher and a guiding spirit in Cornell's landscape architecture program. Because he appreciated and cultivated individuality, he was able to guide and motivate students, drawing

forth while instilling a passion for the creative effort. Those very qualities led to Professor Johnson's selection as an outstanding teacher by Cornell's Merrill Presidential Scholar Program in 1986.

Many will, for years to come, recall Professor Johnson's animated and inspirational "criticisms" delivered during the final design critiques (held at semester end when students typically present their work to a faculty jury). Professor Johnson would rise out of his chair and as though he were cutting right through the layers of ideas imbedded on the student's drawings, he could "see" with laser precision, so clearly what a design was trying to do and where it could take the next step. He always stood, faced the students and faculty and, with a knowing grin, gesturing hands and flowing thoughts, would have us all (students and faculty alike) under his spell for a moment. Usually he would finish with encouraging words saying "and if you just do this, and this, and then this, ah-ha, you'll have it!" All of us gained and learned from Professor Johnson's critiques, lucid remarks, and lively demonstrations. Design was truly part of his being and nature, and the legacy of his teaching will continue to endure in the eyes and hands of the hundreds of students and colleagues to whom he made a real difference.

Professor Johnson is survived by his wife, Helen Elizabeth Hunsberger Johnson; his two sons, Travis Muirhead Johnson and Jay Benjamin Johnson; his sister, Jane Johnson Sims of Wayne, Michigan; as well as five sisters and brothers-in-law and their families.

Marvin Adleman, Peter Trowbridge, Paula Horrigan