



## Arthur Ovaska

March 6, 1951 – March 26, 2018

Arthur Ovaska, an Associate Professor in the Department of Architecture, died at the age of 67 on March 26, 2018 at his home in Ithaca, New York after a long struggle with cancer. He is survived by his wife, Sherri, his two sons, Eric and Alan, and his daughter, Wynter.

Originally hailing from the coast of Massachusetts's Cape Cod Bay, Arthur began his study of Architecture at Cornell as an undergraduate student in 1968, graduating with a B.Arch. in 1974. Two years later he went on to his Master of Architecture degree, with Oswald Mathias Ungers and Colin Rowe as his initial advisors. From 1974 to 1978, he collaborated with Ungers in Ithaca and in Cologne, Germany, on a number of international architectural competitions, as well as on three landmark Cornell Summer programs: "The Urban Block" in Ithaca, and both "The Urban Villa" and "The Urban Garden" in Berlin. He was a major contributor to *The City in the City: Berlin, A Green Archipelago*, a 1977 manifesto by O.M.Ungers and Rem Koolhaas.

In 1978, he co-founded the office Kollhoff & Ovaska with Hans Kollhoff, who had also been engaged with Cornell's graduate program and a collaborator on "The City in the City" project. Their office produced significant designs for Berlin's International Building Exposition 1979-1984/87, including the original master plan as well as several constructions including the Lindenstrasse Apartments and the Museum Gardens (near the Berlin/Jewish Museum) and the Luisenplatz Development (near the Charlottenburg Castle), to name a few. He then returned to Cornell from Berlin, accepting a tenure track position and developing a number of independent competitions as well as projects in collaboration with other faculty members.

In other words, Arthur was highly regarded as an architect of notable talent, well versed in the professional aspect of architecture as well as gifted within an artistic realm. He

excelled in covering the field from the largest scales of urban and landscape design to the meticulous development of small details. He had a special fondness for trees as formal elements and for researching town greens, a passion that he and his wife Sherri shared.

But Arthur was a rare breed. Despite his accomplished professional resume, his ultimate passion was for teaching. He was known to be a strong advocate for the students. He embraced difference with unsurpassed generosity and enthusiasm: students were celebrated for their individuality. He was always able to uncover architecture in the most obscure and unexpected places. His technique of teaching never involved overwhelming students with his extensive knowledge, experience, and passion in architecture, but instead listening to the individual student's concerns and questions so as to eventually find a resolution together, inevitably enabling the growth of the student's individuality and insight into an expansive concept of the profession of architecture. Students' comments characterize his capacity and impact as a teacher: "Arthur Ovaska is one of the most thoughtful and dedicated design professors at Cornell. His enthusiasm for Architecture is contagious. Years later I can still hear his voice encouraging us to really LOOK at the world around us." Or, "Thank you for instilling in me a passion for design by spurring me to recognize and question my physical environment, whether it is a landscape, a structure, or an urban place."

During his 31-year tenure at the Department of Architecture, Arthur occupied a number of academic and administrative positions. He served as a faculty advisor to the Cornell Chapter of the National Organization of Minority Architecture Students. At one time, or another, he was associate chair and coordinator of graduate programs in architectural and urban design. As administrative head and director of undergraduate programs he found a way to accommodate thirty-six students from Tulane University, evacuated by Hurricane Katrina. He was actively involved in architectural juries and often lectured both nationally and internationally at universities that included Syracuse University, Oxford University, Technical University Berlin, Tunghai University in Taiwan, and the University of Puerto Rico. He was also a guest professor of architecture and urban research at the Academy of Fine Arts in Nuremberg, Germany.

Arthur Ovaska was a modest person who rarely spoke about himself. Still, we all knew him as a thoughtful, warmhearted, sensitive soul whose roots were firmly grounded in New England soil: practical, straightforward, unsentimental, with a dry wit, and ready to face whatever storm was gathering on the horizon. Everyone was taken with Arthur's calm and dignified anticipation of the end of his life. This is how he approached everything—his practice, his teaching, and his engagement with his colleagues—without fuss, always to the point, and never without humor. And being much more than just a clearheaded New Englander, having lived and practiced architecture in Germany before returning to the United States, Arthur Ovaska was very much like Mark Twain's Yankee in the court of King Arthur: he always saw things from many perspectives and with scrupulous logic. He often spoke of looking forward to retiring to his mother's house on Cape Cod.

Unfortunately, his illness did not allow this. Countless times over the years, Arthur would go to restaurants specifically chosen for their selection of raw oysters. He loved oysters, since they returned him to his roots.

And Arthur had courage. In facing death with his characteristic resolve, he reminds us of Ishmael, Herman Melville's narrator in *Moby Dick*. On the eve of his great Nantucket ocean voyage, Ishmael visits a chapel where seafaring men have found their rest. As he considers that he may face the same fate, he cheers up at the prospect of encountering Eternity. Melville writes:

“Methinks we have hugely mistaken this matter of Life and Death. Methinks that what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance. Methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters observing the sun through the water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air. Methinks my body is but the lees of my better being. In fact take my body who will, take it I say, it is not me.”

Godspeed, friend. What you have left behind cannot be erased.

*Written by Werner Goehner, Andrea Simitch, Val Warke and Jerry Wells*