The Allegheny Riverfront Park of Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, conceived from the outset with artists Ann Hamilton and Michael Mercil and international engineering firm Arup, proves that a collaborative model of action can work for the making of a public urban landscape. The willingness and skill required to promote shared design responsibility are rare commodities, however, and in Pittsburgh they have resulted in a work of unusual originality and uncommon success. Indeed, while the park exhibits several ingredients that would appear to be attributable to the artists or the engineers or the landscape architects, the project team reports an intense and overlapping collaborative spirit that enables each to claim more than the usual intellectual purchase on both the parts and the whole.

My interest here is in the two-way street of Michael Van Valkenburgh’s artist/designer ethos. An artist in his own right, he nonetheless seeks the artistic input of others. He has demonstrated a readiness to collaborate with colleagues and artists in ways that increase the potency of meaning and experience in projects. Among the characteristics that contribute to this collaborative disposition: a confident self-reliance that arises from a deep and practiced love of landscape architecture, and a sensibility rooted in the close study of artists whose own production is shaped by investigation, experimentation, and the careful development of personal conviction within the core of a project’s ideas.

Those who have heard Van Valkenburgh talk about his work know of his fondly stated devotion to plant life. Yet while it may seem obvious that a landscape architect professes a love of his medium, the sustained intensity displayed here is far from the usual. Moreover, by the example of his incessant drive toward a more creative application of both conventional horticultural technique and experimental trial and error, Van Valkenburgh has, for over two decades, helped the field return its focus to plants, soil, and climatic effects as an ever-growing source of expressive...
potential. Rather like the heroic Dan Kiley of a previous generation—whose personal knowledge (and love) of plants has rarely been discussed but was abundantly clear to those who worked with him—Van Valkenburgh turned his affinity for the hedgerows and orchards and groves of agricultural landscapes into an obsession with planted forms and their possibilities for shaping spatial experience. A passion rooted in childhood evolved into a broad, investigative practice. In this case, it also evolved into innovative ways of teaching design with plants to students—and to other teachers and practitioners astute enough to pay attention.

Again, this was far from the usual. Here it is worth recalling the observation made by the iconoclastic James Rose in 1938 that for most landscape architects, knowledge of plants was “a matter of indifference” often dissociated from design. As a reaction to the conventional stance of his Harvard teachers, Rose claimed that landscape design was locked in a kind of esoteric spatial, formal vocabulary—largely inherited from architects—and sadly bereft of the rich material qualities that plants offered.

Few heard Rose’s call, and the long period between the late 1930s and the 1980s did little to change this, especially as landscape professionals pursued the challenges of suburbanization and the environmental movement. But by the late 1980s, Van Valkenburgh’s recurring fascinations with color, light, reflection, wetness, frost, growth and habit, and sequential seasonal change would have pleased James Rose and Constantin Brancusi alike. Projects such as Radcliff, Ice Walls, and the Walker Art Museum demonstrated his firm’s experiments with water flows, ice accumulation, weathered copper, mirrors, plastics, and hydroponic plant growth, and revealed an appetite for process as a defining aspect of artistic production.

Van Valkenburgh’s devotion to the medium extends beyond the material explorations in his landscape works: as a curator, he developed two notable exhibitions based on the work of his modernist predecessors and several of his