

Winter 2005

## Vern Ohlman Honored, delivered in Winter 2005

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### ScholarWorks Citation

Lubbers, Arend D., "Vern Ohlman Honored, delivered in Winter 2005" (2005). *Presidential Speeches*. 264.  
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## VERN OHLMAN HONORED

WINTER 2005

When universities define themselves, attention focuses on academic programs and the achievements of faculty, students and alumni. Even success in athletics is prominent. Yet the first and often lasting impression of a university is architectural. The special beauty of the campus or the lack of it is visual and immediate. The architecture reveals the history and self-image of the university. Of all who contribute to the making of a university, the architects who design its use of space are usually the best recognized. Today's lecture and Saturday's commencement, when Vern Ohlman speaks and is recognized, Grand Valley identifies itself as a university that understands the importance of architectural design and does so by honoring the architect who for more than 30 years merged his creativity with the vision of the university.

The second confrontation I had with local legislators shortly after coming to Grand Valley was over architects. The college was architecturally distinguished from the beginning with buildings designed by southeastern Michigan's leading architects. Our legislators thought west Michigan architects should have a chance. One of the next projects was a student center, now the Kirkhof Center, and the job went to Wold, Bowers and Covert, a Grand Rapids firm. The design was unique and captivating, and I learned that a young architect at the firm, Vern Ohlman, was its creator. Vern is west Michigan born, nurtured, educated and employed. Wyoming, Ferris State and Grand Rapids are the venues of his life education and employment, though his designs can be found in London, Toronto, Honolulu, and throughout the United States. Throughout Michigan, and particularly west Michigan, his buildings and those of his partners sprout like flowers of the field, but something special exists between Vern and Grand Valley. Here, after leading a group of architects into the partnership which is Design +, he and his ~~name~~ <sup>name</sup> MUSE formed those elusive conditions that call forth the best of genius. Padnos, Loosemore and Henry Halls, the Calder Art Center, the DeVos Center and the Cook-DeVos Health Sciences Center, along with many other spaces on campus, give us more than good spaces to work; they give us spaces that at varied times and conditions provide us a sense of well being, even inspiration.

Vern Ohlman absorbed the hopes and ideas that comprised the vision for Grand Valley for the past thirty years. He used his art, his engineering and his personal skills to create buildings that not only accommodate the vision but are a part of it. And he stayed within budget. Goethe wrote, "Architecture is frozen music. Vern has given us a symphony." When we enter our campus the magnificent arch on M45 belongs to his imagination, and as James Ferguson said, "An arch never sleeps."