

## DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

**REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR  
ROBERT F. YOUNG JR.**

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Assistant Professor Robert F. Young, School of Architecture, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.



Alan W. Friedman, Secretary  
General Faculty and Faculty Council  
The University of Texas at Austin  
Arthur J. Thaman and Wilhelmina Doré Thaman Professor of English and Comparative Literature

**IN MEMORIAM  
ROBERT F. YOUNG JR.**

Dr. Robert Fredrick Young Jr. passed away unexpectedly at the age of fifty-nine on January 6, 2018, in Austin, Texas. He was born on June 25, 1959, in Niagara Falls, New York, and became a Professor in the Graduate Program in Community and Regional Planning in the School of Architecture at The University of Texas at Austin in 2012. Robert had a remarkable career that spanned public service, academia, and innovative private business ventures, all of which embodied his passion for creating sustainable cities.

Robert was a graduate of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, many times over. He received dual undergraduate degrees in Government and English (1982), a master's degree in City and Regional Planning (1995), and a Ph.D. in Natural Resources (2007). Upon completing his master's degree, Robert became Director of Planning for the City of Philadelphia's Office of Recycling. He then left the public sector and branched out into organic matter composting, founding and running American Soil Inc., a large-scale private composting firm (1990-96). Rob's logic, in part, for creating the new firm was simply: "I didn't know what to do after college, but then I realized making soil doesn't hurt anyone or anything." Following that experience, Rob was asked by New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman to serve as her statewide Director of Sustainability, the first such position in the US (1997-2000). It was this experience of helping the state and its communities define what sustainability meant through on-the-ground activities that led Rob to return to Cornell for his doctorate. Rob's dissertation was entitled "Crossing Boundaries in Urban Ecology: Pathways to Sustainable Cities."

After completing his doctorate, Rob joined the faculty at the University of Oregon at Eugene, Oregon. While there, Rob invented and nurtured a service learning program that he would eventually bring with him to UT Austin five years later—the "Sustainable Cities Initiative." Under that program, university faculty and their students across multiple colleges and schools at the University of Oregon focused for an entire year on helping a single city promote sustainability goals through applied research and student projects. The program was described by *The New York Times* and *Fortune Magazine* respectively as "perhaps the most comprehensive effort by a U.S. university to infuse sustainability into its curricula and community outreach" and as "addressing and catalyzing change across all issues that impinge upon sustainability." Rob brought this idea to UT Austin under the new imprimatur of "The Texas City Lab." In its first two years, it partnered with the cities of Leander and Pflugerville, offering students service-learning opportunities and bridging barriers to interdisciplinary inquiry across the UT Austin campus. Over 150 graduate and undergraduate students in classes in four colleges and schools contributed research to help the Leander and Pflugerville define a more sustainable trajectory for growth and development.

When Rob joined UT Austin as an Assistant Professor of Community and Regional Planning, he focused his research and teaching in four key areas: green infrastructure systems (open space and urban forestry), urban ecology, sustainable community development, and environmental history. A rising star in the field of environmental planning, he received tenure (posthumously) in the spring of 2018. In his years as an Assistant Professor, Rob published sixteen peer-reviewed articles (many in top rank, mainstream journals of urban planning), two book chapters, and six book reviews, and he had two books under contract. In his scholarship,

Rob was a pioneer and a leading voice in what could be described as the translation and interdisciplinary integration of urban ecology into environmental planning and policy. His influential position in the urban ecology discourse extended into a broad critical assessment of various “green infrastructure” plans and projects. He also argued vigorously for the value of appropriating historical lessons and outcomes ranging from the work of Patrick Geddes to the environmental movements of the 1970s to adaptive systems and practices from older cultures into current planning and policy discussions.

Over Rob’s six years at UT Austin, he created and taught five courses in the School of Architecture: Sustainability History and Practice, Green Cities (graduate and undergraduate), Bioregional Planning, Resource Management/Recycling, and Foundations of Planning (also known as Planning History and Theory). Rob’s electives served as important anchors for our environmental planning and sustainability-oriented students in both the Community and Regional Planning and the Sustainable Design graduate programs. Several of Rob’s courses involved group projects with client communities or firms that allowed students to gain real-world planning experiences. His course evaluations signaled that our master’s students appreciated the passion and discipline he brought to his teaching. He was demanding of himself and of our students as future planners responsible for helping communities make good choices in defining and pursuing a sustainable future.

Near and dear to Rob’s heart was his annual undergraduate signature course in Green Cities, which he began teaching while at Cornell and continued at Oregon and UT Austin. Over the years, this course helped many students discover the field of environmental planning and continue their studies in graduate programs. The UT Undergraduate Studies Program (UGS) reported that Rob’s signature class “had an incredible impact on many UT undergraduates. He was one of our heroes here in UGS.”

Rob’s contributions to research and teaching were numerous and important, but what will be most missed by his peers in the School in Architecture is Rob Young the poet, the comedian, the kindly listener, and the passionate environmentalist. Rob was both a collegial and a critical presence in faculty meetings and projects, never afraid to ask tough questions and to demand the best of himself and his colleagues, but he often tempered tough questions with wry humor. His creative, impromptu poems at orientation and at our spring open house will be especially missed.

Our loss as a School is nothing compared to the loss to his family. Rob Young was a caring, nurturing and committed husband and father. Every evening, Rob would plan how to spend one-on-one time with each of his three children the next day, through tea parties, writing projects, playing catch, recreating military campaigns in scale, bike rides and much more. Rob is survived by his wife and UT Austin faculty member Dr. Katherine Lieberknecht; his daughters Lucie and Rowan; his son August; his father Robert F. Young Sr.; his sister Dobbie Ann (Steven) Burgio; and a loving extended family of Lieberknechts.

We honor Rob’s passion and commitment by asking the same critical questions about our world that he would demand of us each and every day.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Associate Dean of Architecture Robert Paterson (Chair), and Associate Professors Elizabeth Mueller and Michael Oden.

Distributed to the Dean of the School of Architecture on September 21, 2018, and posted under “Memorial Resolutions” at <https://wikis.utexas.edu/display/facultycouncil/Wiki+Home>.