



## **A CHARETTE WITH A CAUSE**

Interview with Dr. Stephen Pessiki, Professor and Department Chair  
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### **What exactly is a charette?**

The French word *charette* means “wagon” or “cart.” In 19<sup>th</sup>-century Paris, students at the École des Beaux Arts would often travel in carts from their studios to school while rushing to complete their design assignments. The mode of transportation eventually came to represent any intense design exercise with a tight deadline.

Today, the architectural term *charette* describes a creative brainstorming session used by professionals to solve a design problem within a limited timeframe. Our centennial charette will challenge participants to design the 21<sup>st</sup>-century incarnation of the original Fritz Engineering Laboratory.

### **Why hold a charette at the Fritz Engineering Laboratory Centennial?**

We wanted to do something out of the ordinary, something beyond the usual activities one expects to find at anniversary events. We wanted an activity that would bring together our alumni and current students in a way that actively engages them in the celebration of Fritz Lab. We also wanted to give our alumni a chance to relive some of the experiences that they had when they were students here. The charette format lends itself well to all those intentions.

### **Is there a purpose to the charettes beyond the intellectual exercise?**

Our hope is that what we learn from the charettes will help shape plans for the department’s future home. Right now, the Imbt Laboratory on the Mountaintop Campus —where the ATLSS Labs are — houses our structural engineering faculty. Very soon, Lehigh will complete construction of the new STEPS building, and the rest of our faculty will reside there. Fritz Lab will still be home base for the department headquarters, the chairperson’s office, the associate chair’s office, and the staff. Most importantly, it will remain the intellectual home of the department, the facility with which civil engineering students continue to identify.

These “wide open spaces,” if you will, present all kinds of exciting possibilities for 13 East Packer Avenue. So it’s important for us right now get a plan in place that captures what this building could become. That’s where the charettes come in. After all, who knows Fritz Lab better than the bright and creative people who learned their profession here? We expect the charettes to yield many good ideas drawn from their decades of collective experience.

In short, the charette is no made-up, contrived activity. The work we do that Friday evening will have important, potentially lasting, value for the next 100 years.

### **What resources will charette participants have to accomplish their work?**

In terms of human resources, we’re working to attract professionals with design expertise to facilitate small groups of students and alumni. We’ve been talking to alumni and friends of Lehigh and members of the department of art and architecture, all of whom are excited about the potential the charette format offers.

Of course, there's the practical toolbox: many tables, drawings of the floor plans of the building, a supply of transparent, onionskin paper you can layer over a drawing to do markups — that fundamental gear people need to think through their “blue-sky” ideas.

Then there's the significant advantage of actually doing that blue-sky-thinking within Fritz Lab itself. Not only will our designers have a set of 2-D drawings at hand, they'll also have the actual 3-D volume of the building within which to walk around and visualize what the building's possibilities are. They'll experience directly the layout of the structure, the access points, the surrounding street and parking lot — all the important physical elements that inform how we may be able to reconfigure this building.

Our goal is to create an environment that's flexible, yet focused enough to take full advantage of the time that we have with the people who are participating. We're preparing to keep the lights on well into the night if the creative process warrants it. We'll bring pizza in to fortify the team as needed.

### **Why should people take part in the charettes?**

In a word: Continuity. To help preserve for future civil engineering students the center of gravity that is Fritz Lab, the place that has housed our department for a century and launched thousands of careers.

Having been at the university almost 20 years now, I think I see pretty clearly the opportunities and challenges facing this department. We've witnessed tremendous events that have greatly benefited civil and environmental engineering at Lehigh, such as creation of the Mountaintop Campus, home to our ATLSS Laboratory and one of the largest structural research facilities in North America. The strength of its reputation, coupled with a world-renowned faculty, attracts students here from all over the globe. In turn, we fully expect that the STEPS building, with its brand-new spaces, state-of-the-art equipment and world-class faculty, will create unprecedented opportunities to pursue research and education through our department.

Yet for all the rich resources coming our way, the fact remains that the department of civil and environmental engineering will soon decentralize. And just like a successful company that's operating in multiple places, we have to redesign our business model to work within a new architecture. The charettes are the first step in the remodeling process. I believe that our past students share with us, and share with the students of the future, the responsibility of preserving a place that civil engineering students can call their own. It's what John Fritz would've wanted and what John Fritz would've done.

There's also strength in numbers. The charettes will provide the kind of perspective that no one person can come up with sitting alone in a vacuum. The group dynamic, the alumni collaborating across the generations, will generate ideas that we simply couldn't produce any other way. It's truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to tap all this talent in that setting, at that time, in that venerable building, and pull together our institutional memory to propel Fritz Lab forward.

We have high hopes — for a great turnout, lots of participation, fun, and the kind of excitement that carries on well beyond the design charettes. We hope there will be friendships renewed, and new friendships established across the generations. Most of all, we hope to inspire our alumni to strengthen its commitment to Fritz Lab and actively engage in its future.