Design education provides few opportunities to learn what for many students will be a constant of professional practice: negotiating the give-and-take of collaboration over the lifetime of a project, which can take decades of experience to master. What’s more, a high-stakes student competition like the Department of Energy’s Solar Decathlon, where square footage, time, and resources are tightly constrained, makes no provision for putting landscape on equal footing with architecture, despite a purported sustainability agenda. So it seems apt that Harvest Home, an entry in the 2013 decathlon, won the 2014 ASLA Student Award of Excellence in Student Collaboration. It offers an example of how collaboration works, not only in terms of team dynamics but also in the reciprocity of the design.

“More than [any] other project, landscape and architecture were clearly working together,” noted the awards jury, who commended the students for producing such a well-balanced residential design. The Harvest Home team was made up of students from three schools in the Washington, D.C., area, with the landscape and engineering teams coming from George Washington University (GWU), the architecture team from the Catholic University of America, and a film student from...
American University. Two graduate students in GWU’s Sustainable Landscape Design program, Janet Conroy, Affiliate ASLA, and Julie Melear, Affiliate ASLA, were the design leads, with Mary Sper, Affiliate ASLA, and Andrew Haskell, Affiliate ASLA, from the graduate urban planning program, rounding out the landscape team. In all, 120 students and faculty worked on the design and building of Harvest Home.

Harvest Home was conceived as a zero-energy house that would “harvest” solar, water, and wind energy, but the imagined client was not your typical green-savvy homeowner. The project was designed specifically as housing for military veterans suffering from physical and mental trauma and emphasized healing, accessibility, and adaptation. The house was designed to be Americans with Disabilities Act compliant, with many small, thoughtful gestures of scale and detailing necessary for a person who uses a wheelchair. The design balances indoor and outdoor spaces, synthesizing them through material and plant uses to create a calm, healing palette. Colors and textures were researched for their restorative qualities, and water and plants were subtly employed for their auditory, tactile, and aesthetic...
Edible plants were grown in small, portable recycled containers with affordability and ease of use in mind. Biomedical sensors collect wellness data from the veteran unobtrusively. A cistern stored the water collected on site, which was part of the graywater system used for the plantings and the harvest table, a key feature made of reclaimed wood with a central runnel. “They took advantage of every opportunity that was afforded to do different kinds of landscape components,” one juror said admiringly.

The design team worked closely with the architecture and the engineering students, but the recognition of the importance of the landscape to the mission was a slow process over the project’s design and construction. Melear, who has since graduated and is working as a designer for Earlyspace, a sustainable landscape design firm in the Washington, D.C., area, described the architecture students’ original concept for the house as a few planters here and there. “They really had no context for landscape,” Melear says. By the time the construction happened, however, “They were all in.” There was no magic moment when the light bulb came on, but rather a gradual dawning realization over time. She thinks the landscape team’s commitment to be part of the conversation early and often was key. “Being at the table every single time—that dirty work of sitting through an engineering lecture for an hour, which had nothing to do with me, but at that table, something might come up that you have to be there for.”

Winning over the architects and engineers was an ongoing part of the design process. “It’s almost as though they were as much our client as our client,” says Sper. Once the landscape design had been accepted and the final designs completed, the house was built on site in Washington, D.C., before being disassembled, packed up, and shipped to the West Coast for the competition. Melear and the other team members credit
their GWU faculty advisers, Adele Ashkar, ASLA; Joan Honeyman, ASLA; and Lauren Wheeler, Affiliate ASLA, with helping to hold the line when landscape elements began to look expendable in light of budget constraints during the build. Sper, who now works as a landscape designer for Natural Resources Design, Lauren Wheeler’s firm, says it was amazing to see the team transform as little bits of the house came together. The landscape design wrapped around the building and functioned as outdoor rooms, doubling the usable space for their client. Haskell, who was most involved with the project during the build phase, attributes the success of the collaboration to the shared mission: “I think we were so attached to the narrative of healing the wounded warrior that it drove all of the task energy and decisions on what to do, because every aspect, whether indoors or out, was related to that.”

Once the house arrived at the Solar Decathlon site, an inhospitable military landing strip in Irvine, California, the background of the coastal native scrub and hills reinforced the importance of plantings for water conservation and habitat. “So much went into selecting the plants,” Sper says, but they were the element over...
which the design team had the least control. The plants were grown by local nurseries and weren’t seen by the designers until they arrived in California for the 10-day build. Melear estimates they had about 48 hours to build and install the landscape, so the team relied heavily on the network of native growers to deliver show-ready plants.

Despite the fact that there was no category for landscape, the Harvest Home scored well at the decathlon. At the end of the competition, the house was donated to Wounded Warrior Homes, a San Diego-based nonprofit that builds transitional housing for single, post-9/11 combat veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury. Though the group was not part of the design process, Mia Roseberry, of Wounded Warrior Homes, says they wouldn’t change a thing—the students did all the necessary research to incorporate appropriate design responses into the house. The staff of Wounded Warrior Homes visited during the D.C. build, and they brought some of the veterans to the decathlon to tour the home. “They love it,” Roseberry says.

Fourteen months later, Roseberry says Wounded Warrior Homes is ready to have its first veteran move in, and he is part of the large volunteer team that is reconstructing Harvest Home on the organization’s site. When he moves in this spring, the house will have new cladding and decking in observance of fire code restrictions, but part of the oak siding will be reinstalled in the entryway with the names of the students, faculty, donors, and volunteers engraved into the wood’s surface. Roseberry says the idea for this reuse and tribute came, fittingly, from the veteran who will be the home’s first occupant. They are hoping to have a grand opening for the public in the spring. “There’s beauty, use, sustainable practice, and a sense of joy in the design and the results,” said one ASLA Student Award juror. Another added: “You can imagine living there.”