

The Minnesota Women in Architecture FAIA Legacy Project

Alicia Belton Oral History Interview

Introduction

Legacy Project

The Minnesota Women in Architecture FAIA Legacy Project, is a joint effort of the Minnesota Architectural Foundation (MAF) and the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Women in Architecture Committee. In 2018, the Legacy Project began to amplify the achievements of our female fellows by documenting the stories of the women architects in Minnesota recognized with the AIA's highest membership honor, Fellowship (FAIA).

August 19, 2022

The project's primary goals are: 1) to increase the visibility of women architects to break down stereotypes that may be instrumental in the formation of unconscious bias about the women in the profession and 2) to increase the visibility of women architects to encourage more women to seek a career in architecture and to stay productive in the profession despite adversity.

Funding from the Minnesota Historical Society supported the first eleven interviews and oral histories; with this template, the project will continue to grow.

Alicia Belton



Elevated to Fellow in 2022, Alicia Belton is a citizen architect and servant leader whose civic activism and humanitarian works builds social equity, expands the diversity of voices in architecture and public art, and enriches human potential locally and abroad.

Interview

Alicia Belton, Interviewee

Kimberly Long Loken, Interviewer

August 19, 2022

Kimberly Long Loken: **KL**

Alicia Belton: **AB**

Track 1

00:00

KL Today is the 19 August 2022. And this is Kimberly Logan AIA. Interviewing Alicia Belton, FAIA for our women in architecture series. Alicia, can you please, for the record, state your name and your place and year of birth?

AB Sure. My name is Alicia Belton and I was born in Texas and 1968.

KL All right, so you are recently elevated to FAIA and you founded your own company, Urban Design Perspectives. We're going to talk a lot about that, but first, let's start with some larger context. How did you find architecture? Or how did it find you?

AB Sure, that's a great question. I think I found architecture, quite honestly, through TV and looking at *The Brady Bunch*. To be quite honest, I think a lot of architects have found Mike Brady as an inspiration. And unfortunately, there were no women at that time. But looking at the home they were in, looking at the models he would build, I think that was something that really spoke to me. So that's TV land in real world. I think growing up, hanging out with my grandfather, my grandfather was a handyman, and I say that very loosely. He was actually a master plumber and a master electrician. And I would follow him around a lot, doing odd jobs at homes and at shopping centers. He used to, in the mornings, go to the shopping center in a small town that I was born in and collect and clean. And I would pick up junk. You know, one man's trash is another man's treasure, or one woman's trash is another woman's treasure. And we would bring it back to the house and I would repurpose it. I would build things, I would create things. I remember one summer shipping container crates, we'd bring them back to the house and I would string them together and make a little playhouse.

So I think him just watching how he built things was really inspiring to me as well. And I didn't know the architects personally, but the crafting, the designing, the creating, I used to doodle a lot and draw, very drawn to those kinds of artsy craftsy kinds of things.

- KL** Yeah. And you were telling me earlier that your grandmother you spent a lot of time with in the summer as well, so that there was a bit of an educational shape to your summer. So is this the same grandmother?
- AB** So this is my grandfather's wife, obviously, and she was a school teacher, and she was actually growing up in this small town. She was actually the first African American teacher in the Catholic school system. And she was actually the first person in our family to go to college. So she knew what it was going to take for us to get ahead. And education was very important. It was important to my parents as well. But we spent the summers with them and we would have math lessons and reading lessons much to my chagrin, did not want to do that. But she also didn't like us watching TV. She'd always make us go outside and play. She would make sure that if we had an interest in something that we'd have those kinds of lessons. Anything from swimming to drawing to she liked to garden. So I love gardening now. One of our jobs was to pull weeds, but also I think there was a reward in that because we also got to see her make lots of things fresh, homemade. She was actually a home economics major, so we always had homemade ice cream, homemade preserves and cakes from scratch. So I remember, like, licking the bowl.
- KL** So, maybe we could infer a real appreciation of process.
- AB** Oh Absolutely.
- KL** And like the arc of, like, idea to completion as being something that you were living a lot with them and maybe priming you for how big and time-consuming architecture can be.
- AB** Absolutely, absolutely. Very much appreciated. And I would say this, we didn't have a lot, and so we had to make, you know what I mean? We had to do things on our own. We had to figure out how to make things from scratch. And so that's how I was brought up. It's just like, you just do it. You figure out how to do it. There was no YouTube. You just figured it out and yeah, I really appreciate that. I do.
- KL** So you went to college at University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign. How did you make that leap, that decision to studying architecture? Formalizing the word and the path?
- AB** Yes, sure. So I liked art, and my father was like, you need to find something else that's going to pay to be a starving artist. And so I actually took drafting classes in high school, at the high school I went to. By this time, we had moved to the north suburbs of Chicago and I was in a program in a high school that had a technical track. And so I took drawing classes, drafting classes. And I had a teacher who was like, you know what? You're kind of good at this. So actually a teacher inspired me to look at architecture schools. And so I looked at Champaign Urbana School and saw that they had a dual masters program, actually in architecture and business. So I knew that I always wanted to have my own

practice and it was a good fit. Good fit in terms of proximity to not being too far from home. They also had to study abroad program.

KL Yes. You've spent a year in France.

6:19

AB I did spend a year in France. My walk every day to school was the chateau in Versailles. And the architecture school was actually part of the architecture school system in France. And so our classes were actually in the stables of the chateau. It's pretty cool. The only downfall was that we didn't have to speak French. I knew enough French to get by. So, like, conversational French, going to the grocery store, going to the post office of the bank. But our classmates were all American. We didn't have a whole lot of interaction with the French students other than at lunchtime, so we weren't really forced to practice French every day. But it was a great experience. We got to do sketch trips. So we had four sketch trips in that school year, and each of those sketch trips were either two or four weeks. And, you know, you think backpacking through Europe and Africa, you know, seeing buildings, seeing the buildings that you were studying about, meeting people, the culture, the food. That year was the year that I really, I would say, grew up, because I'd never been away from home that far for so long.

And again, we didn't have a lot of money. And so my parents were like, you're staying. You may not come home for Thanksgiving or Christmas. And some of my classmates had their families come over during that time. So it was a hard year, but it was a year of growth, of finding myself. To this day. I love journaling. I think that's when I started really just building the habit of writing things down and processing and drawing as I see things so developmentally, emotionally. Yeah, it was a good year for me. It was a good year.

KL So you traveled extensively in Europe and Africa, then? Which countries? I know it's always hard to rattle off the long list from memory, but the ones that really stuck.

8:18

AB Yeah. Well, I will say this. Paris and Vienna are my favorite cities, like in the world. I spent lots of time in Paris. Like, on the weekends, we were actually just watching a movie, and they were filming, like, right in front of Notre Dame. I was like, oh, yeah, the Pompidou Center is right around the corner. My favorite Greek place is right around the corner in the French Quarter. But France and Spain, England, Hungary, Yugoslavia. When it was around Germany, we were in Morocco and Portugal. Did I get everything? Close enough. Close enough.

KL All right, so after graduating and I'm really impressed that you were locked into this, like, six-year dual degree from the get-go.

AB Yeah, it was just like, chop chop chop. Again, it was a financial reason, too. There was no five-year dawdling here. Right.

KL And to pick up those business administration chops, this is something that's come up in a lot of the other interviews, is a lack of preparedness for business.

AB Absolutely.

KL So you went on, did you work for 3M straight out of college? You had a good chunk of early career at 3M. Was that your first?

AB That was my first full time job. I had internships between summers, but that was my first job coming to Minnesota, and I had a five-year plan. I was going back to Chicago. Year five is when I met my husband, and I've been here 30 years, couldn't ever tell me that. Yeah.

10:02

KL So that was on where the real estate and project management side of things, right?

AB So my first job was actually as a project manager, and it allowed me to get a lot of early project experience in my career starting out. I think when you think about internship experiences, you're drawing, you are kind of doing the things that are important, but not necessarily the things that you've learned in school. And I think being in a corporation, they looked at my experience, educational experience, differently. They allowed me to do things. So I was writing project proposals. I was writing funding for those project proposals. My clients were internal business units that they had a real problem that our department had to solve. I was in charge of staffing for those projects. So the architects and interior designers and the engineers that were on the team, I was managing those teams as well as at the time, 3M had an internal construction department. And so I really saw the project from beginning to end. And I think most firms are not training their staff that way. Maybe they're doing that now, but back then they were not.

KL Right.

AB So, a lot of good management experience early in my career.

KL Right. Well, in most architecture firms, many are sole proprietors, but most are small. And even the ones that we perceive to be big that might have 200 employees are still technically small businesses. But you're working for a Fortune 500 company. I would just think that level of standardization and protocol and operations, is a really robust first experience in one's career.

AB Absolutely. A lot of procedures are already defined. Legal teams right there, if you need them, products that 3M makes that were preferred. So you think about specifications. You think about I'm trying to think even just like the marketing. So outside of the real estate, how a company thinks about marketing and finance, you know, those were really good things to hear, especially because the business units weren't those were the business units. They were the marketing department. They were the finance department. You're doing the boardroom for the lawyers that are on staff. And I think the other key thing that I learned was diversity was important then, and so supplier diversity was important. And so, you know, you were looking at those things defined from a corporate standpoint and really emphasizing how important it is to have those different perspectives on teams. And we weren't talking about that 30 years ago in the field of architecture. So I think when I left corporate, that was kind of a shock to me, because 3M was really its own protected kind of entity, if you will. They have buildings all over the world. They've got, you know, huge campus in St. Paul. So at the time, there are about 50 architects that were on staff. So you're learning you've got your own little team of specialists who were spec writers, who were architects that had been on staff for 30, 40 years. I was the youngest one in my department, so I, you know, I was kind of like and they're like, okay, this is new kid on the block who's coming in from grad school talking about using, like, project management software. Nobody was doing that.

KL Oh, wow. Yes. This is early, mid nineties

AB ninety-two

KL yeah.

AB Microsoft project. Gantt Charts. Nobody was doing that. Here I am. They're like, okay, that's real cute.

KL How do you live life without Gantt Charts?

AB I know. I know. I know.

KL So the next things I want to talk about often intertwined, so I'll ask both questions so we can get to them in any order. So people and events that shaped often one's early career, but certainly through the arc of your career, your mid-career now and then also expected and unexpected challenges.

AB I was a member of the oldest African American church in Minnesota. Well, I should not. I don't know. Minnesota. St. Paul Pilgrim Baptist Church. And there was deacon on the board there who was an architect. He's actually a fellow. His name is Robert Morgan and he mentored me. He was one of my first mentors here in town. And he actually used to grade the architecture licensing exams.

KL Wow.

AB And at the time, the design portion was only offered twice a year. And it was 12 hours and you were locked in a room. And I had failed it two times and I was getting ready and I had passed every other section but this, this tricky design section. Right. He spent hours with me grading my practice exams. He was like, no, this is, this so schooling me, right? Yeah. So the third time was a charm. And that was good because I had already left my job at 3M. It was kind of like, okay, I'm quitting. I'm going to take that leap of faith that you're talking about, like, events. The reason I left 3M, great experience, have nothing but positive things to say about the supervisor I had and the support that they gave me during the early development of my career. But it wasn't really what I wanted to do in terms of, like I really wanted to work with community development organizations and nonprofit organizations. That's what I really wanted to do. But the corporate was great training. Right. So I took a buyout package, and I remember going to my supervisor's office and they were really trying to get people who had been there a long time to leave. And so when I came in, he was like, I'm not accepting it. I was like, you have to accept it. I was like, I have to do this because I see the pattern here. The pattern is that people stay and you get too comfortable. You know what I mean? You got your 401K and you're seeing all the stuff coming in. And at that time, I wasn't married. I didn't have any children. If I don't do this now, I'm never going to do it. I can always get another job. So I left. So that was a very defining event for me. It's just like I said, I want to do it, so let's go do it. Right? So that was 96. That was 96.

AB And I was taking the exam that December of 96 as well. So I had a whole lot riding on this one test, so yeah. And I actually started my first practice before I left as well. I had a business partner. So you talk about, like, people and events defining you. My first business actually failed. I did everything people tell you not to do. Don't go into business with a friend. We lived together. We had bought a house together. We were, like, really intertwined. Right. But we had never worked together. We had never worked together. And so we had a very different idea about just expectation, project expectation, client relation. And the blessing in this is that it did fail. We're friends now, but that took a minute, and I wouldn't change it. I mean, it was a very difficult period, but it really helped me to say, do you want to do this? I'm like, yeah, I want to do this. I do.

18:00

KL And without spending too much time on that was a smaller part of your arc. But what was the focus of that practice as far as clients?

AB Yeah, it was a community development organization, so it was like nonprofit work. And I quickly realized there's a reason it's not profit work. And so I actually pivoted as well. So as much as I was trying to get away from, like, corporate work and workplace, I kind of did a circle back, and it was just like, you know what? You know this you're kind of good at this. Let's do this while we're building this. So kind of dual track, just what I do. Now I've got

the clients who are I want to say they know how to buy architecture services. So you're not always having to explain what I do and why I do versus some organizations who are, you know, you're basically telling them how you work with architects which are kind of the onesie projects but they're really usually the passion project, you know what I mean? Versus, okay, here's your continuous client that's always going to come back, and you don't have to prove your worth.

KL Right. So the big takeaway in that as you started Urban Design Perspective was to, like, blend the practice with these two models

AB yes, yes.

KL Who what was your first client project with UDP?

AB Oh, my goodness. You know what? That's a good question. I don't remember who my first project was. Oh, gosh, that's a good question.

KL Maybe let's talk about, like, an early representative project. Where things really started clicking.

AB Yeah. I can give you one. Club 3 Degrees. Club 3 Degrees was part of a church, Living Word Christian Center. It was their outreach ministry to youth, and it was a Christian nightclub. And so my mother would always say, well, is it a nightclub or is it a church? I'm like, mom, it's both.

KL But it looks like a nightclub.

20:08

AB It does look like a nightclub. Very intentionally. Very intentionally. Because if you're trying to reach people where they are, right. You come and let them come as they are. And so the only part of a nightclub that it wasn't was that it didn't serve alcohol, obviously, to minors, but they had band competitions there. One of the opening nights, Kirk Franklin was there. So I got to meet Kirk Franklin, which was kind of cool. He's a huge gospel artist. And at the time, there was no club like that around, and it was in a building that was part of a building that had been historically significant. And so we had to go through that process of, okay, we're only modifying a few things on the outside for mechanical reasons, creating openings for additional ductwork, if you will. But inside, we basically blew out a floor to create this wide-open kind of balcony space looking over, and it was a lot of fun. Yeah, that was probably my first significant project on my own as Urban Design Perspective.

KL All right, so let's talk through some more projects and roles, formative projects and roles, favorite projects and roles. And I think we'll naturally loop in a few more people and events and challenges along the way. So architecture and public art both. And your focus on

workplace, churches, and housing, how much is it that you have always been drawn to those sectors as opposed to the community engagement just leads you to those sectors, curious about how those are shaping each other.

AB Sure. I think the community engagement piece is important because that's when you're really listening, and that's what we're supposed to be doing. We're supposed to be listening first, design next. And I think so often we just jump to the design, trying to solve without doing that really important step of really understanding the context, really understanding back to process again. Right. Really understanding the “why” behind. What is the impetus for this project? I think the community engagement, for me, is a chance to really meet people and just hear why is it that they think they need this much space or this type of space or how these spaces work together. I like that part of a project. I like being with people and meeting people and just hearing their stories, really, because it translates into what that space looks like. And if you don't do that really important listening piece of it, I think you missed the mark.

KL Right. So another one of your notable projects is the UROC Center. And I only have UROC in my notes. I'm going to ask you to explain the acronym. but I know the O is Outreach. So when we're talking about listening, outreach goes right with that. But the full name is a little longer than those four letters.

AB Yes. So it's a building that's part of the University of Minnesota. It stands for the Urban Research and Outreach Engagement Center. And at the time, there wasn't anything like that where the university could bring their resources to another community.

KL Right, Because this isn't a strip mall, off campus.

AB Off campus strip mall, absolutely. That had been underutilized, had been vacated, had been the home of some shopping grocery store and a prominent restaurant, but to totally just fell in disrepair. And the university saw it as an opportunity to be intentional about engaging with the North Side. And it's actually renamed for the project sponsor at the time, Robert Jones, who is now the Chancellor of the University of Illinois. But it was kind of his baby and his idea to make sure that here's a community that has often been left outside of the conversation about what happens there, here's an opportunity to have them be at the forefront to highlight the wonderful things that are happening there, to create a place to gather. At the time, there were no conference rooms big enough for people to actually meet. And so that was another kind of idea behind the project. How can we bring resources like a computer lab, a business incubator? How can we bring WIC clinic services but also bring staff there who can work with community hand in hand? There's a very open lobby space that was designed specifically to host gallery openings for art exhibits, for receptions.

AB There's a teaching kitchen there so U of M extension programs can talk about gardening and healthy diets with community, there's a meditation room there. We used to jokingly refer to the meditation room kind of time out box. But to have people come to work as they are and they need a place to pray, there's a place for them to pray. So that project was fun because we had a really diverse team on the university side from the different departments that were coming in. The university was very intentional from the beginning of the project to say, hey, we are going to make sure that the people who are working on this project are reflective of this community. So we did that. We had a very but this is also the way I practice too. So this was not something that I was just like, oh, let's go out here and find this many women or this many people of color. This is how I practiced. Anyway, very intentional about the construction company that was selected to make sure that they followed those same kind of objectives. And I think when you have those perspectives that people have seen now, you get a richer product. Right.

KL So was your grandmother still alive when you were working on them?

AB No, unfortunately not, because this oh, it.

KL Because this, oh it seems like such an embodiment of her home ec, plus what that really is in the 21st century.

AB Yes. No, unfortunately, my grandmother died when I was in my mid 20s, so yeah.

KL Lovely continuity and spirit.

AB Yeah, yeah.

KL Let's talk about some of your public art projects. Like, how are your large format through these superpowers manifesting in the art sphere opposed to the architecture sphere.

AB So I am not an artist, so I don't have any public art projects in that realm.

KL Have you been involved in supporting or coordinating public art within your projects? Perhaps. Maybe that's the breadcrumb I found, but if it's an erroneous, tangent we can..

AB Yeah. So I will say this. So for UROC, we did involve an artist. Yeah. Seitu Jones. And so he was instrumental in helping us think about the art gallery and how can we use the form of architecture to create this gallery space. He also created some graphic visuals for the doors because it's a very transparent opening and people were basically running into the doors. It's not funny, but, you know, anyway, he created some cultural quilts that represented the different communities in the North Side that were placed as visual on those doors so people wouldn't run into the doors. Aside from that, I'm wondering if that might have come from my write up for my application. Okay. I know where you're going. So the public

art piece is actually working in a service capacity on the Capital Area Architectural Planning Board.

KL Right.

AB Okay. I was like, Let me back up.

KL Yes. I did want to switch to roles as well as projects so that's a perfect transition.

29:25

AB Okay, perfect. Okay. So I was appointed on this committee by Governor Dayton. I think this is year five for me on the board. And so 2020 was pivotal for lots of reasons. And the Columbus statue came down, and surprisingly, there was not a process to remove public art from the Capitol. So the lieutenant governor spearheaded a whole process to develop how does art get removed? Art that's offensive, art that is no longer relevant, art that has become old or whatever. And so this was a two year task force that I was a part of and really trying to reach all throughout the state of different communities to make sure that their voices were heard. And so we coordinated several community engagement meetings to make sure that we're hearing from the people. What is it about the experience that the capital is pleasurable is not so pleasurable? What would you see different? And what we heard in a lot of my groups was, we don't see anybody that looks like us there. It feels cold. It feels really hierarchical. There's no place for gathering if you're in opposition to whatever's happening. So my role there was really to be a part of that task force to do community engagement work to help understand what should public art be about and how should it be reflective of the diverse rich community that we have in Minnesota.

So that was our charge from the Lieutenant Governor and we did lots of outreach and actually now, after all of the process had to be kind of developed and capturing all the engagement you're talking about, like all this write up, somebody had to write up all these many engagement meetings. They've developed the legal speak on the process and it's being voted on actually this year. So it's been really interesting work to kind of come see it full circle.

KL Right. And this comes coincidentally on the heels of the Capital Restoration, which was a major architectural and engineering undertaking as well, where there were a lot of discussions around what are original to the building would be kept and why, or how it would be contextualized if it was kept. You do a lot of adaptive reuse in your work as well.

AB Yes. Yes. Yes.

KL So I'm curious as you approach questions around what to keep, what to change, what to bring new, what are the things that you ask and consider of yourself and as you're listening?

AB Oh, sure, that's a great question. What's untouchable? That's probably my first question. What can we not lose because it has some sentimental value, because it has some historical value, has some structural issues that just cannot be moved. So those are the things that I think about first and then we layer in. Are there building codes? Are their historic reasons? Layer that into those conversations and then we go from there and then we can talk about what is it that you're trying to do. So I think those are very complicated and often sometimes competing challenges to deal with, I think, right now. So we're working on a building, the Colosseum building that was at the heart of the riot in 2020 right down the street from the police precinct and it suffered some damage. But we are restoring this 100 year plus old building and we're having these same conversations. What can we do? What can't we do? We were able to get it registered on the National Historic Registry. And so that comes with a whole list of things you can and cannot do and balancing that with scope and budget and aesthetic. So I think in adaptive reuse all those things are super important.

But really, what are the untouchables for a number of reasons? And then how do you layer in, you know, the policy and code things and then integrate the programming? Programming things?

KL Yeah. Would you say that adaptive reuse is part and parcel of the communities and the clients and the projects that you're working on, or is adaptive reuse more, I guess, which came first in your practice? Were you really attracted to adaptive reuse? And it tends to dovetail with continuing to sustain a community.

AB Sure. You know. What? I cannot say that I honestly thought about going into adaptive reuse. I think it just happened because of the way I think about things. Like, I'm always thinking about like, how am I being a good steward of my clients resources? And if it's not broken, if it's still good, it's good for a number of reasons because it's good financially for your budget, but also for the environment. And I think as we are again, 30 years ago, we weren't talking about this in architecture school. It was an add on service. Right. And I think the longer I practice it's just like, you know what? That makes good sense. I mean, yes, if there's lead in there, yes, if there's asbestos, we got to get rid of that. But structurally it still works. It still makes sense. So I think I've kind of fallen into adaptive reuse and really come to really love it. Really.

KL Yeah. I'm glad you brought up that you weren't formally taught it or with emphasis in architecture school because I was going to ask and I would like casually anecdotally assert that that probably was the case in the 90s. That wasn't a concept we were being introduced to or challenged to do in our projects academically. But I have to think that spending a year in France reusing layers and layers of adaptive reuse. Yes, you were in this very singular, globally historic complex. But you're also seeing a lot of everyday adaptive reuse because you're in a place with a very long, permanent built history.

AB That's a great observation, but you know what? I think when I came back from Europe, it was like everything is a cereal box in the United States. Very rectilinear. It's like that too. But there's such ornate detail in the facades and the structures. I think yeah, I think that probably had something to do with it too. If I'm reflecting on my time there, being attracted to old things yeah. Literally fell into it.

KL I like this what is untouchable question, though, because it does really distill, like when you don't have the formalities of a national registry property, but this building matters to the people using it to the owner. I almost wonder if although it might not have had that phrasing, but if that idea of continuity of held resources is maybe something that might have come more from like the business side of like having like the portfolio. What's the value in the portfolio?

AB Sure. Well, I think, as you say, that I'm thinking back to like 3M because we were held accountable if our projects went over budget, you know what I mean? And so it's like, oh, okay, well, we're not going to do this. Even though everything was internal in our business unit, we didn't make money for the company. Right. We were spending. Yeah, right. And so I think that mindset of always trying to save has been baked into me professionally. But personally, that's just how I am, too. Okay. I've had the same purse for, like, ten years. It's still good.

KL But you are very giving of your time. So let's talk about your service roles. Let's talk about the heavy on the citizen piece of being a citizen architect. And I love I wish we could show this in our audio format. In your FAIA packet, you have a bar chart of your service to organizations over the course of 20 years, and also, like, major life milestones indicated there as well. So we can see the arc of service responsibilities that you're taking on. So there are so many through the Belt and Family Foundation. You're doing infrastructure work in Sierra Leone. Kenya. India. You're doing work with your church. You're doing work with Stem camp. You're doing work with cultural competency in schools. And you're a founding officer of our local NOMA chapter. So that's a lot of things to talk about, but just to give it the umbrella of your service, maybe let's start with NOMA.

AB Sure.

KL And getting a chapter going here. Did you have a chapter in college? What was your introduction to NOMA?

39:35

AB So we started our chapter in Champagne because there wasn't a chapter, and I can honestly say I was not a part of AIAS because I did not feel welcomed. I didn't. And so we had a group in my graduating class. There were four black women, and we watched out for each other because nobody else was watching out for us. And I remember this is in those press

type days, press on your boards, and we would help each other finish our projects. And I remember people saying, well, why would you help her? Why are you trying to help her? Why not? And so that's that community, right. Looking out for each other. So we decided that we wanted to start a student chapter of NOMA. And the administration, we kind of had to sell it a little bit, but they were like, okay. So they sent us to a conference. This is kind of another full circle story. So we went to, it was Detroit as our first NOMA conference. And that was the first time I had actually met some black architects. I am in graduate school. Never met. Oh, yeah, that is true. I had a black professor, but he was not registered. He was taught design in Champagne. So that was kind of like, wow, you talk about events like, I'm seeing people that look like me, that do what I want to do. And when I got my my fellow medal this year at our luncheon, one of the architects I met 30 years ago was there.

KL Wow.

AB And have a picture with him. I was like, do you remember me? He's like, of course I remember you. But it was one of those, like, wow. You just don't know when seeing something that you want to do, what kind of impact that has on your life because you have that visual marker to work towards. Right. We started the chapter, and that chapter has gone on to become one of the, I guess, most awarded chapters in NOMA. We needed it for the community. We needed it for just that support system because architecture school is hard. And I think before NOMA, we had a black I think it was called, like, Black Architecture Student Association, something like that. And the older students would keep, like, old exams notes and kind of pass it on to the next class that was coming in. I remember I had an architecture friend, and he helped me put my ruler on my board.

KL your Mayline.

AB Yes, I'm dating myself, but I've already done that. So I gave away my 1968 year. But I mean, they really helped us, right? Nobody else was helping us. Nobody else was telling us how to. This is where you should go get your supplies. This professor should be doing this. And it was good, that community piece. And I would still say that's really one of the things that NOMA does for professionals now creates that network, creates that support system and that's really important, especially when there was not a place for people to go.

KL All right, so in addition to being active in our local professional chapter here, of course, you are not just active in AIA Minnesota. Like, you're our current president.

AB Just for a couple of months.

KL What committee work drew you in to AIA Minnesota, and gave you this path and then what's kind of your agenda as well as your responsibility as president this year?

AB Yeah, so I will actually credit my husband. My husband, when I left 3M, he's like, you need to get out in the community and figure out what's going on if you're going to start this practice. Right. I was like, you know what? That's probably a good idea. So I joined AIA. After I left 3M, I joined AIA and I got involved right away. They were starting AIA Small Firms committee. And so I volunteered to be chairs because they were asking to be chaired. Now, mind you, I had not done this a long time, but I volunteered into other individuals volunteered. And so we were actually the first committee that had to have tried chairs. And it was a committee focused on small firm practice practices that were 20 people or less. And again, that idea of creating community because small practice, I mean, you're basically doing everything. And I went from a corporation where I had, like, if I had a problem with my computer, I could call somebody. If I ran out of paper, I could just go to the.. And now I'm doing.

KL All that stuff, accounting and legal.

AB Exactly. All that stuff. Right. And so I went from that to like, oh my gosh, what in the world am I doing? Right? So again, that network of people who have had that same lived experience, who know what it means to run a small practice. And we created a community. And some of those people that I started in this community still friends with to this day, one of them, we are working together. We've been working together for over 20 years. So that was really a great place to get plugged in the AIA to find out what AIA's resources were. I worked on the AIA Convention Planning Committee, and that's where I learned how staff worked behind the scenes. We have a tremendous staff that does a lot for our members and just to kind of see the inner workings up close. Beverly was executive director at the time, and so I really got to know her. And then Su actually Blumentals. She called me one day. She said, hey, we have a spot open on the Minnesota Architectural Foundation. Would you do it? And I said, Well, I got to get off of AIA small firms. And so I did that. My husband and I have this kind of two board maximum because all this, this takes away from family time, right? And so I was like, okay, I'm getting off that, and I will join the foundation. So at the time, they were looking for help with the Wigington Foundation I'm sorry, the Wigington Committee. And Clint Hewitt, he had chaired that committee, getting it started. And so I took over that committee, which was a part of the foundation, and then became secretary and then treasurer and then president. So I just say yes to a lot of stuff. I don't always have it all figured out, but it sounds interesting. And I think if I look back on it, you learn a lot about, like, your leadership capability and style. Again, working with people. I'd like to work with people, and I learn from people. And I don't pretend to know that I have all the answers. I don't. But I think when you are collaborating with people and working with people and alongside people, you pick up some things.

KL So you've said yes to a lot of stuff, but you've also said you got to mind that division between work and service and family. But you've chosen to create some initiatives as well. And you just mentioned your family. So let's talk about the Belton Family Foundation.

AB Sure. So our foundation focuses on I need my cheat sheet. Even though we did this. Okay, so transforming communities.

KL Like how did it start, like a coffee conversation one day around the house?

AB Yeah. Okay. I would say this. We have always just given to the places that we've been involved in, be it church, and that's probably the first place that we give of our time to right and resources to arts organizations, we give to the places that we're involved in. Right. And so we're like, wow, you know what? We've got, like, all these organizations that we support. Maybe we should start to think about getting a little more focused right, let's get a little more focused about how we want to give and what's the impact of our giving and can we move things along? Initiatives, programs. So, yeah, that's how that conversation got started. And my husband is an idea guy, and so I often say we work really well together, but we need to work apart too. So the foundation is kind of our place where we work together every year. We've got a team that works with us to help us think about how the giving happens and helped us obviously set up the structure of the foundation. But really, it's around things that we're passionate about. We're passionate about transforming communities, we're passionate about the arts, passionate about helping build people up.

AB And I would say both of us had pretty similar upbringings just in terms of the values that our parents instilled in us around community and giving and serving. I would say that both of us come from very humble beginnings. My mother grew up in Thailand and she grew up without running water. My husband's mother was a child of the depression. So those influences obviously carry on to how they parented us and the things that they taught us and the things that they taught us to value. So super aware of the things that I have are not just solely mine and have been given to me, have been entrusted to me, and very aware of that. And nobody gets here by themselves, and so we've been blessed to be able to give to others. And so that is what our family mission is about. When we got married, our minister sat us down and one of our assignments was actually to write a family mission statement. And we did that. And that was in our wedding program. And we have it in the hallway in our house and we revisit it every day. Not every day.

AB I'm sorry, every anniversary, not every day. We walk past it every day. It is in a physical place. But when the kids came along, we were like, okay, how do we simplify this to help them understand what is our family about? Right? So it is be for God, be you, be unique and be your best. And we just call it just be. And so my daughter drew like, little b. So to help them understand, this is what we're about, this is what we do, and this is why we do. And so the foundation is just an outpouring of that a very structured way. And we talked to some other families who had foundations to help us think about like, well, why do you do this? And how do you do this? And it's just grown through the years and we will continue and it will be the children's. And we've told them this. They're kind of like, yeah, okay, but when we sit down every year to do our giving, we say, what are things that you're interested

in. So we're going to make a gift in your name to this organization. Right now they're very focused on the planet, actually the planet and animals. And I think that's pretty cool.

51:22

KL And to underscore that, Alicia's daughter is a few feet away from us right now.

AB Yes.

KL Absorbing this fascinating conversation, but also just really echoing this idea of your family getting things done together.

AB Absolutely. And just plugging in where we are. So, I mean, you think about the school and our church and what we do professionally. That's just what we do.

KL Right. So complementary skills, interests, hobbies, certainly all of your service work embodies those complementary interests. But hobbies, I know your entire family is musical.

AB Yes. So I'll say this, I was forced to learn how to play piano. My dad and my aunt. I had piano lessons up until I was like twelve years old and then switched to clarinet. And then you get to high school, I was like, I think I want to do something else. I switched to dance team after that, so I got off of that so I could do something else. But my husband plays the bass and actually when he retired, he started taking jazz piano lessons, so he's doing that. And then my daughter, she's still finding herself over here. She started off with piano and then violin, and now she's doing clarinet. And then my son actually started on the piano and now is a jazz saxophonist. So yeah, music is really important to us. Love music and dinner time. We play music every night.

KL As in you're listening to music or after dinner you're sitting down and playing together.

AB No, we're not doing all that. That would be something. No, at dinner time there's music playing and then after dinner is usually when they practice.

KL Yeah, yeah. Who DJs? Do I'll take turns.

AB You know, my husband does, actually. When I met him, he's got this humongous album, like he's like vinyl, he's really into music, so we got a place to store all his vinyl. And if you think about vices, his vice is music. So there's probably a CD come in the house from Amazon every week, all genres.

KL Do you occasionally play together?

AB Actually I play when the kids are practicing, like if there's a duet, like a piano accompaniment, but not often. I would say that it's not a hobby for me anymore. I can do it, but I think I can help them. That's probably the bigger capacity, how I help. And so when they're stuck with something, I can read the music and just say this is that. I would surprise that the most times I play the round Christmas time, because I like Christmas music, but a little busy these days, so maybe when I retire I'll take up piano lessons again. But not right now.

KL All right, so I want to come back to your current role as president of AIA, Minnesota, and blend it with this question about, well, two-part question. What direction do you see the field of architecture heading in collectively? But what change do you hope to see in the profession and how are those things maybe somewhat distilled through your current role?

[00:55:04.050]

AB I think we are heading in a really exciting direction, especially with our strategic priorities around equity and the environment. And I think we have opportunity to influence a lot of things with this new inflation reduction act that just came out this legislative. This is huge for us as a profession. And I think this is our moment. This is our moment. And I know there's a segment of our profession that doesn't see this as a high priority, but we're hoping that's going to change. And I think I'm really excited about the younger generations that's coming through architecture school now because they know, they know it's important to create inclusive project teams. They know it's important to listen first as you're doing this community engagement kind of work. And they know that the planet is in trouble, right? They know this. My daughter knows this, and she's not in architecture school. So I'm excited because we're going to see that bubble grow up and things are going to be very important in terms of where are materials coming from. Are we saving trees, are we preserving water? That's just going to be part of a natural conversation versus, oh, by the way, have you thought about this?

AB That's just going to be part of our daily language. And I think we're creating tools for architects to get caught up, but for those who were not schooled in that vein, I think we are developing. We've got all these certification programs, right? So you're actually going back and unlearning, if you will, because this is a better way to do it. And I think we're headed in the right direction. I do. I think for me in my role, we are working on our strategic plan for Minnesota right now to align with national's strategic priorities. We've done a lot of polling to our membership throughout the state and got a lot of data, got a lot of feedback about where people are at. And you've got this segment that's like, yeah, it's about time. And you got this segment that's like, the climate always changes. So how do you bridge that gap? And I really see what we're doing now as a way to communicate the value in that. You want to bring people along, and obviously you're not going to get everybody right. You're not. But how do we bring people along far enough to say, okay, this is why we're shifting, this is how we shift.

AB Here are the tools to shift. And I think it's challenging. It's scary, right? It is. Well, we've always done it this way. Why do we need to think about preserving our resources? Why do we have to design walls differently? Why do we need to put an energy efficient, whatever. I know. It puzzles me in a little bit, too, because it's like, we are supposed to be like these lifelong learners, right? We're supposed to be inquisitive we're supposed to be asking questions. So personally, I think it's hard for me to understand why people don't want to change because we're always changing in adaptive reuse. We're looking back in time and why people designed it this way. Right. And so now we're trying to figure out, well, how do we enhance what you've done already to make it better and to preserve it, right. And so it does trouble me a little bit in that we've got a segment that doesn't want to move or doesn't think we need to move. So that's what I'll say about around the environment, around equity. You know, the statistics in our profession, they're pretty awful, I'll just not sugar coat it. And again, it's this how do we acknowledge the problem first?

AB Right. How can we talk about it without getting all uncomfortable about it? Right. And how do we say that? Well, yeah, it is a business proposition that you may be losing work because your teams don't look like the communities that you're serving. But I think the bigger issue is the heart thing. Right. Why don't you think it's important? Why aren't you doing this? You've got one person of color on your staff, and you think you've done something. You know what I mean? Why do you see that that's not a problem? So I think, again, creating the tools to start having these uncomfortable conversations, and I would say this, I put myself out there just to hear, and it's uncomfortable to hear about why people don't want to do it. But I think if we don't have the uncomfortable conversations, we're not going to be able to change the face of their profession. Right. Why is it that we need more women in leadership? Why is it that we need more people of color and leadership? You've got this new generation that's coming in that does not want to wait, and they want to see the change now, right?

AB And if we don't, we're just going to be irrelevant.

01:00:39

KL So to connect this to your career, you have a few months left in your term as president of AIA, Minnesota, and you're still, like, practicing full time while you're AIA president? Very much so. Short term career, long term career, what's on the horizon?

AB Oh, for me? Oh, gosh. Well, here's the other thing about our profession. We never retire. And I don't think that's a good thing. I don't. So I am actually thinking about retiring, like, not next year, but what does this next five to ten years of my life look like and how do I start positioning my practice, what I want it to look like? What kinds of projects do I want to pursue? This project that I'm working on around actually taking on more of a developer role, which has been really interesting. So maybe that becomes part of my exiting, if you will, out of practicing traditionally. I'm thinking about it. I am thinking about it. And I

think I'll always have some connection to architecture, but I don't want to be 75 years old still doing the daily grind. And it is a daily grind. It is not an eight-hour-a-day job. And I haven't figured out a way to make it that way. But I think for me, staying intentionally small has been part of my rationale because I can still be present with my family and there's tradeoffs. And I think for me, I've had to decide what success looks like. If you look at when I was in school, the traditional path was you go to an architecture firm, you kind of rise up through the ranks, and then you become a principal there. That never really appealed to me because it was so out of whack with how do you achieve this work life balance and be present in raising and being a part of a family and having a vacation? It just didn't make sense to me. And so I think another reason I went the corporate route not only for the experience, but also for that work life balance, because the architects there, they had an eight-hour day, right? They were on the corporate schedule. And that really appealed to me. And I think it's changing. The perception is changing that that's a "less than" because you have chosen a different path, that it's less than what the true experience, true, quote unquote, should be. But I think, especially with this pandemic, I think people have reevaluated what's really important, what's important to you. That's kind of where I'm at right now, what's important to me? How do I want to spend the next my kids graduate 2025 & 2028. You know, what am I going to be doing after they graduate? And truthfully, the philanthropic work that we do is really rewarding too. So maybe I do more of that. Maybe the foundation takes on a different kind of role. I don't know. But I'm thinking about it, and I think those are healthy discussions to have.

KL So if I were to ask you what you would hope your ultimate legacy would be to the profession, the answer would be work in progress. Right now you're working on that answer, reflecting on that answer.

AB Right now, I am. But I mean, I think I would hope that people would think of me in terms of service. Like, how can you? All of us have these gifts, right? And nobody's gift is better than another's. And I think sometimes we pit that against each other. You're better because you are the designer or you are the spec writer or you are the project manager or whatever the role is. And I think all of us have a gift to give and to contribute. And I think you can do that anywhere you're at, not just in the firm. So I think using the gifts that you have in a way that fulfills you but also does good.

KL So what does it mean to be FAIA?

AB For me, that's really a challenging question because quite honestly, I had been asked a couple of years to do it, and I was like, I don't know. What is it about? What I've done? Would make a compelling application, if you will. And I had to think about it long and hard. I did. And I think for me, it helped me clarify my why. It helped me clarify why do I do what I do and where I spend my time and how I spend my time and help me to understand the kinds of clients and projects I want to pursue. So that was the gift for me. I didn't need it for anybody else. You know what I mean? And I think obviously, it's an

acknowledgment, a distinction in our profession. So, yeah, it's special. I'm not pinching myself anymore. I'm not crying about it anymore, because when it first happened, I was probably in a lot of disbelief. But I think just some affirmation, like, the things that I've done are worthy and are making a difference. I would say the other piece of it was actually talking to people because you just do what you do, and you don't think about it. But everybody that spoke on my behalf, I went and I talked to them, and I was just like, well, not me specifically, but had conversations. And to hear what they fed back to me was really just I had no idea.

KL So was there a moment and impetus where someone sort of said, like, hey, this is something you should start thinking about. This is something you should go for? Was it like, you know, I'm sure there's, like, many subtle steps along the way, but, like, how do you.

AB Know how did it happen?

KL Like, yeah, you're supported by a lot of people in your application, but you also had to do a heavy lift to put this together. What's that moment? What's the importance of it as you've done it, as it becomes solidified? What's that importance for it being recognized?

AB Yes. Well, I think again, there's, like, the affirmation piece. I mean, this time last summer, I basically spent a summer reflecting on my life and writing. I've been telling people I wrote a thesis on my life and, like, what's really important about what I'm doing as it relates to architecture and how am I using the things that have been given to me in a way that is impacting people's lives, impacting the spaces they live in, working, what have you. I think yeah, I don't know. It's so hard to put in a succinct manner, but it's been I'm just truly grateful. Again, the committee that we have here is really incredible, and they actually help point you to, like, hey, I see this is a theme that's in your life, maybe you should focus on this. Everybody has to write this 35 word statement. So that is the thesis of your life. Maybe it shouldn't be tweaked this way. And it's just back and forth in helping you get real clear about what your purpose is. And so maybe that's probably a good way to say, like, what is my purpose?

01:09:03

KL Yeah, and I've perceived that there there is a real, like, energy and devotion among that committee in, like, identifying and bringing in and raising up through constructive critique these successful FAIA applicants. We have a really good team here. We're growing team of fellows.

AB We do. And I would say Rosemary was the one that recommended me, because I'm going to tell you how it happened. I got an email from Amber. Amber is like, hey, your name has been recommended to come to this fellowship meeting. And I was like, I was going to delete it, but I didn't. I was like, I'm not doing this. So I went to a meeting a couple of years

ago. I did. I went to a meeting. And I was looking around the room, and I'm just in there feeling totally unprepared and overwhelmed. Like, what in the world am I doing in this room with all these people, right? Because you never think you're good enough. And so I put it off. So after the meeting, I called Amber and I said, who put my name forward? So then I called Rosemary and I said, why did you do this? We talked. And so she gave me some good advice. I got lots of good advice along the way, but she was like, if you're going to do this, she's like, start documenting things that you do. And she was like, for her, she's like, then I started doing things that I thought might be part of this application.

AB I was like, okay, that's good. So I just kind of put it back. And then every year, the fellow committee is beginning, ready to start again. Delete, I'm not going to do it. So I don't know why I said yes last year, but I did. And I was like, okay, I'm going to do this. And then I called Dina Griffin. Dina Griffin is an African American woman. She's a fellow in Chicago, and Dina is also an University of Illinois alma mater. And I called her. I was like, okay, as a black woman, why should I be doing this? And we talked through it. I was like, because I know you understand. Because again, you don't see a lot of women of color in this profession, especially fellows, right? I don't even think there's 20, and why should I be doing this? And I just said, you know what? I'm going to do this because I don't want anybody else who wants to do this to have to go through this. I don't want them. And again, that visual marker, how can I make it easier for somebody else? And so it was really a process of being very vulnerable with, like, what you've done, why you've done, and really trying to figure out, like, what do I have to give and what do I have to share with somebody else?

AB And that's what I hope when people so when you called me and you told me you had my application, I was like, how do you got an application? I had no idea that they put it up on what was and so I laughed. I was like, oh, my word. I was like, okay. But I'm a firm believer in using what you have, whatever it is, and everybody has something to give.

KL And it's a tremendous resource. It affirms the complexity and the richness of what you have achieved and contributed. But the fact that that artifact is available also demystifies it. And I think that's a big part of helping make any of the changes that we want to see in the profession is just demystifying.

AB Absolutely. Because I would say that during the process, people questioned some of the things that I put in. I don't want to say too much because if I say it, then it's going to be pretty obvious. But in that questioning, I was able to and I don't want to call it defend, but really affirm why I chose to put some things in there and why I chose to leave some things out. So again, just clarifying my purpose in my why and what I pursue. And so back to Dina. Dina was like, I have a file of like, before FAIA and after FAIA. So I'm defining what after FAIA means and how do I use it as a way forward. And I don't know what that means yet. I don't. I'm sitting in it.

- KL** I think this is a good transition to advice that you would give to various constituents in architecture, to women, to NOMA members and the BIPOC community, to any emerging professional, overlapping advice and unique advice to those groups of practitioners.
- AB** So women, what I say, know your worth. And I think this is such a male dominated profession. Don't shrink back from what you know because you got here because you knew something, right? So don't let anybody tell you that you don't. And I think the work life balances, I think it's more accepting now for women and for men. There was no paternity leave before now, so I think that's more acceptable now. But things that were happening in the workplace when I first started have changed and moved forward. So sharing jobs, different three day weekends, flex time, all those benefits, right, I think are good and they're but they're good for everybody, for and for NOMA, I would say, you know, find a good mentor. Find a really good mentor who can talk you through some of the challenges you're going to have. And women obviously have challenges too, but it's different for people of color, and there's so many biases around your experience. So I would say find a really good mentor who can help you walk through that. And then for emerging professionals, I think architecture school is so different than what happens in practice.
- AB** So I'd say find a firm that aligns with your values and what it is that you think you want to do. And find a place there where somebody can mentor you and help you get towards whatever your path is, whether it's being registered, whether it's not, but finding a place where you feel like you belong and where you are affirmed and where you can grow. And that advice is for women and for people of color too. But I think knowing what you want to practice and how you want to practice having those, and I know that that's hard to do when you first get out of school because you want a job to put on your resume, right? But maybe spending some time just figuring out, like, if you want to do adaptive reuse, if you want to do sustainability, if you want to do skyscrapers or whatever, know that and then just start asking lots of questions. What firms are really good at this, who might be able to talk to and work through this. I think the AIA, not just because I'm president now, but I think the AIA has got a lot of good committees you can plug into as well to serve, to learn, right?
- AB** Because you're hearing from other professionals as to what's happening in their practices and you're like, well, hey, our workplace isn't doing that. Maybe, you know, I should be there. Maybe I can adopt some of that and graph that and put that into where I'm working.
- KL** And lastly, why would you encourage a new student of architecture to stay with their education, stay with the field, or even to a younger person considering the discipline or even anybody, maybe change your career? Why would you encourage someone to become an architect or bring architectural skills to communities?

AB Yeah, you know what, I have to say it's fun. It's been hard, but I've had a lot of fun. I've had a lot of fun kind of using both sides of my brain, the very super organized, detailed planning, organizational piece, but also like the really creative side of thinking about how to use things differently, thinking about how to craft things. And it's really a good marriage of those two skill sets. And I would say to somebody who's considering doing this, go to some find some programs, some camps, go find an architect to maybe shadow for a day to see if this is something that you really want to do. But I think it's the training that you get. Obviously you want folks to stay in the profession, but we know that that doesn't happen. But just the critical thinking skills that you get, they're applicable to lots of different scenarios. The planning piece is huge. The organizational piece is huge. That can be used in lots of different places. And also, all these new like, I look at I have a new intern this summer, and she's showing me all these AI things, and I would be the first to admit that...you know...whoa.

AB But there's an opportunity to be creative, graphically, visually. I think it's amazing. And also, how can you influence what is happening in your environment that you live in, that you go to work in, the spaces you play in? That's really powerful, that you're able to shape those spaces.

KL All right, thank you very much, Alicia.

AB You're welcome.

KL Fascinating conversation, and good to start getting to know you.

01:20:02

AB Yeah. Thank you so much. Bye.

[End of Interview]

Total Interview Time: 1:20:04

Credits

Project Stewards:

Minnesota Architectural Foundation (MAF)

American Institute of Architects (AIA) - Women in Architecture Committee

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