

The Minnesota  
Women in Architecture  
FAIA Legacy Project

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Jennifer Yoos Oral History Interview

## Introduction

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### 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 the Minnesota recognized with the AIA's highest membership honor, Fellowship (FAIA).

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.

### Jennifer Yoos



Elevated to Fellow in 2013, Jennifer Yoos creates beautiful and responsive buildings that thoughtfully integrate environmental design with social space. Her work is grounded in research into both sustainability and human factors and designed with invention, rigor and material craft.

## Interview

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Jennifer Yoos, Interviewee

Kimberly Long Loken, Interviewer

May 28, 2019

Kimberly Long Loken: **KL**

Jennifer Yoos: **JY**

*Track 1*

*00:00*

[General discussion]

**KL** This is Kimberly Loken interviewing—

**JY** Jennifer Yoos.

**KL** And Jennifer, would you state your name and place of birth for the archives.

**JY** Jennifer Yoos—March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1965—born in Minnesota.

**KL** So let's start out talking chronologically. Let's talk a little bit more about how you found architecture or how it found you.

**JY** In college I started out pre-med and then kind of migrated more into math—physics, and at night I took a lot of studio-based, fine arts courses. And the studio arts instructor was really great, and she gave me a studio space. And she was the one who told me I should look at architecture because she thought it brought together things for me. And so, she was the one who kind of helped me on the path initially. And I never thought of architecture before that.

**JY** Although my father taught at St. Johns and had friends from Breuer's office, the Abbey Church was like my first exposure to architecture and that work. And my parents moved to Minnesota from Chicago. And so, I would go to Chicago in the summers when I was a kid and I would spend my time with my aunt who had an interior design firm. She went to school at the Art Institute in Chicago and studied painting and design and she had her own firm. She would drive me around as her gopher during the summers when I was a teenager, we would go downtown and I'd look at the tall buildings And we'd go to

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Merchandise Mart and just kind of watching that and that mix of the arts and design. And I just thought that was really an amazing life.

**KL** So how old were you when you were at St. Johns or in the area of St. Johns and when you were exposed to the Breuer Church there?

**JY** The painting on the back wall (of my mother) was done by an artist at St. Johns when my parents were there. And I remember her posing for that. I must have been seven or eight.

**KL** So most of your childhood and your formative years were all in that area.

**JY** Yeah. And then when I was 13, 14, 15 was when I started spending summers in Chicago with my aunt.

**KL** So what made you choose pre-med?

**JY** My mother—how do I put this—she said I could either be a lawyer and a judge or a doctor. And there was like—you're going down this path—because she's one of those 60s-70s feminists and she wanted her daughter to do something that was typically male and ambitious. And so, I kind of went down this path even though I knew it wasn't right for me. And very quickly, organic chemistry killed it off. And having to call her and tell her, no, I'm not going to be a doctor was just very painful. There were lots of tears on her side.

**KL** I have a friend who slogged through organic chemistry seven times—

**JY** Oh, wow.

**KL** —and is now an E. R. doctor.

**JY** Oh, wow—impressive.

**KL** [Unclear] she did not let it get in the way.

**JY** That's very funny—that's pretty funny. Now, my dad was much better—his dad pushed him to be a doctor. My dad became a philosophy professor which his father was very ashamed of.

**KL** Oh.

**JY** Yeah, so he was very sensitive to needing to find your own path. But he was very good about not saying “you should do this” or “you should do that”. And that was very helpful.

**KL** So how quickly did you get to architecture proper, then?

**JY** It was probably my junior year in college I started to take architectural history courses, and I don't think—I'm trying to remember when I first took a studio course. It was probably junior or senior year because it used to be the old B. Arch. [Bachelor or Architecture] program. And so, it was like two plus four which was an absurd kind of a length of time for a B. Arch. So you would do like a year or two years of pre-arch [architecture], and then you'd do four years of studio. I think I did two years and then my junior year I started taking studio. And studio is kind of the beginning—it's not abstract anymore and it's design—. And I think I had trouble kind of reconciling it first, the art and the math and science together because I operated in them as two very different worlds. And architecture really brings them together which was interesting when—those two things started to inform each other.

**KL** Right. And where did you go to school?

**JY** I went to the U [University of Minnesota], and then I went to the AA [Architectural Association] for graduate school.

**KL** Okay. And what year did you graduate from each?

**JY** So I started in '83 to '86—I think, and I took a year off and then I finished in '91. So my junior year was when I started in architecture.

**KL** So any favorite projects or professors or classmates or notable experience from the school years?

**JY** So between my B. Arch. and graduate school I worked for five years. And I wanted to get to the point where I could get licensed, and then I went back to school. And I went back to school in London at the AA. And I was there from—I graduated in '98 so what five—no I started in '96? Something like that—'96-'98. It's a two-year program.

**JY** I'm sorry. I get the dates confused. It's like when my daughter was born, when I got married, when—school happened in between. And I think in school—I'm trying to think of teachers. I had one who was really significant at the U. So it was a different era than it is now, and there weren't women teaching architecture studios except for Cynthia Jara. And I had her for architectural history, and I really wanted her for studio because I wanted to have a woman professor so I would feel like I kind of fit more. And it was no other better reason than that because I wanted a rapport. And I felt like I didn't have a rapport with my professors. And when I think back of it, I don't think it was necessarily gender. I think it was more world view and how they saw practice. I think is very different from how I saw practice at the time.

But I had professor Joe Burton who had my—it must have been my third year of studios. And he was just fantastic. And he had studied under Louis Kahn and had—just his world

view was just really beautiful. And the way he talked about design and how he personalized design—and he was an architectural historian. I really liked that perspective of history and theory and design together which most of the professors I had up till that time were really more just basically practice and didn't mix the academic side to it. It was all kept very separately. So you had your academic courses and you had studio. And studio was very pragmatic—do a building—where's the trash can? Where's the loading dock? And the way he talked about circulation and movement in a building—it was just so much more meaningful to me. And it just clicked from that point. And I think to me he was the point where I felt like I was an architect and I was a good architect. And it shifted, before that I just felt disconnected.

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**JY** He was at the U, and he was the semester where I could have had him or Cynthia Jara, and I chose him even though I desperately wanted her. And it was because of how he talked about his work and his teaching. And I was just so excited about it—about him. And the people that I met in that course are still close friends—in that studio—because we all had that same experience and we bonded. And he really had a big impact on a lot of students because he taught them—rather than, here's a set of techniques and tricks, here's how you think for yourself, how you develop ideas and how you think conceptually and how you ground it in your own world view and set of beliefs. So he personalized design for you and you owned it. And that was a totally different kind of approach to design to me.

**KL** So how did you choose the AA, and then implicit in that question is what did you do practice-wise for the five years in between that led you to the AA being the right grad school for you?

**JY** I went with my boyfriend to London. I got a work permit. And he worked in a drag bar in Soho and I got a job at an architect's office. And it was—oh, I was probably 22 at the time, something like that. And so, I was in London, and it was kind of Margaret Thatcher kind of boom-time and Canary Wharf was going on. And I worked on the Liverpool Street Train Station which was this historic project. And I basically documented the existing historic façade, and then they tore the whole thing down. And then they remade all the parts like for the same clay for the bricks, for the same stone quarries for the stone, and they absolutely reconstructed it as it was originally. And so, I did all these measured drawings of it. And I learned—there was a South African architect who taught me how to do these kind of (drawings)—with ink on mylar where you're doing the finest line where slowly build it up. So you draw every line first in like a hairline, and then you add the next layer of building it up and the next layer. And it was just this beautiful process. And the

learning to letter, you know, the kind of old (school) way. And just the feel of that was like this beautiful craft of the drawing that I hadn't experienced in that way. I was always kind of a model builder and I liked to sketch, but I didn't like to construct drawings.

And there were young architects in that practice. There was a French woman who knew about the ICA [Institute of Contemporary Arts] and was at the Bartlett [School of Architecture] or somewhere like that. She was more in touch with British culture and history of architecture. And so, we went—we took the ferry to Paris, my boyfriend and I, and we had a list of her stuff to see. So it was like all through her lens and then she would tell me when there were good lectures at the ICA or about the AA. I really got excited about British architecture and culture like Cedric Price and Lubetkin and Tecton from the 30s, and the Russian Constructivism that was kind of permeating British culture. So there was so much that I was really excited about, and that kind of opened my eyes to it. And being in London, and it was this great cosmopolitan city, and I just loved it. And I was just working there, so I wanted to come back. And I wanted to go to school there. And that was kind of my fantasy.

I came back and I finished architecture school and I had Todd Rhoades for thesis. And Todd went to Cranbrook. Todd always had these great book lists. And he was very materials-based, and I really liked that about him. And he did this summer installation (with the Walker Art Center) where you volunteer to do work during the summer. And it was on Russian Constructivism and it was going parallel with the Constructivism show at the Walker Arts Center, we designed something for the Art Lab Project and constructed it. So it wasn't just we would design it and build it—it was a summer-long kind of course where we just learned about Russian Constructivist Art and architecture and then developed design concepts and then ended up building them. And then I was interested in Cranbrook because of Todd. I graduated. It was kind of during a recession—so there weren't a lot of architecture jobs. I worked for an artist, Michael Mercil who is married to the artist Ann Hamilton.

**KL** Oh, yeah.

**JY** And he was doing this bridge project. So I spent the summer in his studio building these big models of the bridge and drawings for him. And I worked basically with him, and she would come by and crit [critique] and so it was very cool. It was kind of before she was a big deal. And—yeah, I know, I love her work. Now it's like, oh, my God! She's so real and normal and not what you would think. So that was like one of those opportune things. And then there was a position at Cuningham [Architects] that opened. And they were doing this work on the Mille Lacs Reservation that was community-based work, so schools, religious buildings and master planning for the whole reservation. So they were trying to do infrastructure, water treatment, they were going to do a clinic—a library—I mean, just this whole assortment of buildings. And I always kind of—and I had been entering into things kind of by way of [history?] since Joe Burton and that got me excited about research. And

so, I got the position there [Cunningham Group], and I was working on these projects. And I worked on those projects I think three or four—three years. And one of them was these religious structures. They were called ceremonial buildings. And there—the whole history of how these had been developed and the kind of mixing of Western and Native and these different traditions of building and the precedents and then the temporal kind of aspect of how their architecture wasn't permanent. There was just so much that was really rich in it. And I also really liked that the Ojibwe culture really pushed art and making things and craft and that that kind of was a value. Where they didn't have resources, but they cared about what they were making, so you had to work economically, but there had to be creativity, expression. There had to be all these things that were I thought—I felt were meaningful to architecture.

And that was—and I also really got excited about wood structures—there was a really interesting engineer who was interested in round barns, and then I got to know Bruno Franck who we worked with later at that time.

And then that work started to migrate. I started to work on schools after I finished that work. And the school projects started to be informed by that kind of research about structures and these lightweight structures, and so, that was an influence. But it transferred, and I think some of the things that I learned from that is when you're developing a design, everything has to be integral to it, otherwise it gets pared away and it gets diluted. So I just became really interested in how structure could do that. So, because structure is something that you can't remove. So if the structure is beautiful, it's essential, you know. It's a part of what it is, and if that's where the ideas reside, then they stay there. And that was something I also learned on public school work. So, you know, I was kind of not happy with practice. You know, I think it was a gender-culture thing, the things I wanted to do didn't kind of fit with how most people practiced, the ambitions I had. I started a studio with some friends.

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An architect who was in Joe Burton's Studio with me, and two others, we were going to try to develop an office. And then we had a studio space. We did some competitions. We did furniture projects, things that were small kind of installations. And then we started an office that was small. It was just three of us. And the mix—I had a really strong connection with the architect who I was in the studio with but not the third. And I just felt like I couldn't see that continuing and I really wanted to go back to school. I met my partner at the time, and we started dating. And we got married just before I went back to school. But I had applied before we decided to get married. And so, I was kind of on that path already, so it was kind of odd; you get married and leave the country.



When I first applied, I applied to Cranbrook and the AA. And then I applied to Michigan because they had a dual program with Cranbrook. And it was kind of this odd thing where I got accepted, I think first by Cranbrook. But it was a three-year program. You had to be in residence, and it was super expensive. And then I got accepted by Michigan, and they offered me a full ride plus all these fellowships and so it would have been all covered. And so that was really tempting. And then I got the offer from the AA, and the AA had a really nice program where you could be there a year and then you could be here a year away and go back and forth. So you do your thesis, not in residence and commute. And I liked that idea. It was more affordable—London is really expensive to live in. So I lived there for a year and the second year I did my thesis and I went back and forth (for reviews).

But the year—so the year I went there, there were all these shifts in the culture of the AA. So the people that I was interested in—I loved Peter Zumthor. And I traveled around looking at his work, I bought his first book I think, I found a book of his drawings at Prairie Avenue Books in Chicago in like the early 90s before anybody knew him and they were just beautiful. And then I saw the Saint Benedict Chapel published in *Architecture Record*—I don't know what magazine it was at the time that it's changed names so many times. And I just found that work really moving. And there were a couple of projects that I remember really having an impact on me like when I was first practicing and that really resonated with what I wanted my work to be like. And I remember the Zumthor Chapel being one. I remember Marlon Blackwell published the Moore Honey House and it was a very small scale, —the light coming through the honey and these little honeycomb-like walls. It was just really beautiful. And then Will Bruder's Central Library that had the tensegrity structure where the tops of the columns fall short and the cables come together. And just it's kind of—the way of thinking about structures this way that it has humor. It's kind of communicating something about it that's almost magical, and that kind of quality and those works.

Those things really influenced me. And when I went back to school, I was looking for that kind of an education. And Cranbrook was changing leadership and I didn't like the direction it was going. I remember getting their catalogue and I didn't like the graphic design of it. It was so over the top and not readable. And it was like, okay, that's not in the right direction. And then the AA—Peter Zumthor had been there the year—two years before and it's like, okay, this is a sign. But they were also changing who was leading and Mohsen Mostafavi was taking over and there was a lot of Peter Eisenman's people who were there who were kind of being shifted out and Ben van Berkel. So there were interesting people, but I didn't really understand what it was heading from and what it was heading to. And I really didn't like Peter Eisenman's kind of world view of architecture as this kind of thing that is destabilizing and it's more about an expression of something than an effect.

And I think—is it Sarah Whiting talks about this—that this idea of what architecture's role is, whether it's something that's expressing or that it's something that's kind of creating an

environment or acting [unclear] is social. And I always thought it was about social. It's about something other than yourself that you have created that you stand apart from that other people use. So I think that world view—I wasn't sure how my world view was going to fit at the AA. And when I got there, there was like complete chaos because they had pushed out the Eisenman people, so they had this kind of ad hoc studio put together with Patrick Schumacher who was Zaha Hadid's partner.

**KL** Oh, right.

**JY** And Winy Maas from MVRDV. And Winy Maas was just kind of starting out, and I think they had one project published. And he was in architecture and landscape. And the studio was really this urban architecture focus. And then the third one was Brett Steele who later became the chair (and directed the Desin Research Lab (DRL) which the studio became and who was kind of mediating between the two people who were really at opposite viewpoints. But they were both young (and hadn't published), so I didn't really understand their world views. And I didn't understand that they really don't see the world in the same way. And they're supposedly teaching an integrated studio. So it was a very confusing year. But the confusion and the kind of not having a clear path to follow or a clear person who seemed to know everything I think made me more independent. And it was very stressful. We saw the class before us come in and they failed half the students. And we were told that was just about a matter of course. So look around you; half are going to not make it. And that changed this very collegial group into something that was a little bit more cutthroat and put stress—I made really good friends with an architect from Singapore and one from Germany. And so, the three of us, we later did a group project together.

The first path was kind of an independent project. And it was really hard and it was really stressful, but it was like the first time it felt like architecture was really clicking for me and that, you know, I went there nervous that coming from the Midwest, a lot of these students went to Ivy League schools. They had really, really good skills at public presentation and writing, and they were so polished. And so, I was really nervous going in. But my first review and presentation went really fantastically. And it was this project called Data-scapes that Winy Maas had developed that was—I still think was a really profound way of teaching design—that you take one set of conditions and you kind of make them extreme and you look at them in isolation. So it's like why architects design a chair. You can isolate function and you can think about that without all of the other complexities of a building.

We were working on an airport and I was interested in traffic control. And so, I just did all this kind of crazy research about air traffic patterns and control and how planes are navigated to a field and developed this system out of it that was just this field of the planes (that) were sorted based on size. It was just like making this kind of beautiful, abstract painting out of air traffic. And it just kind of came together so easily based on this kind of process that we'd been put into. And I think other people were struggling with it because they didn't accept it. They didn't like the idea of the Data-scape. They wanted to do a

building, and so, they were kind of trying to pre-engineer whatever their things were so they would get a building form that they had wanted to start with which I think happens in a lot of studios. And so, I think that was a really important experience for me about kind of research and kind of developing it. And at the end of that studio, I felt like I was one of the strongest students, and it changed my level of confidence and my ambitions.

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And it felt like everything opened up. It just gave me a different view of things that I didn't have in practice and that didn't have at the University. And I think it was being in that environment and succeeding in that environment which kind of changed my perception of what was possible.

I think the other part was seeing different practices that you would have seen in this period of time in Minneapolis, it was mostly big firms at that time. There weren't a lot of small firms. There weren't people doing experimental work here. It was much more pragmatic. It was before the Weisman was built. It was kind of a period of time where architecture wasn't as adventurous here. And so, to see these practices and finding out how people started practices and developing competitions and combining teaching and practice or all of the different practice models that existed elsewhere were really exciting to me. So I think that was something that was also influential was also being exposed to that.

**KL** So what was your thesis topic?

**JY** I was interested in doing a competition at the same time. So that was the original premise of the studio the second year is you would do a competition and research project kind of combined. So you would find a venue. They changed it to focus on London projects. And I wanted to focus on something that was U. S. and related to me, so they gave me an exemption. So I did this competition for the East River with the Van Alen Institute. And I did intermodal transportation hubs along the East River. So it was interesting. It was again bringing all these different forms of movement and how do you reconcile them in a building. So it connected ferry to subway to street to bicycle to just about everything. And the building kind of reconciled it. I mean, it was also the period of the Yokohama terminal, and so these kind of land-form buildings were kind of everywhere and Yokohama was developed by Foreign Office [Architects] who were teaching at the AA when I was there, and they had just won the competition. But my entry got an honorable mention, and so I went to the exhibition. And so, it was a good experience.

I was also teaching, and I started to work with my partner at the time. And he was interested because he hadn't been using digital tools and the AA was really about digital tools. And so, the deal we made was that if I would work in the office, they he would buy the computer and software that I wanted—that I needed for my thesis and that I would help people in the office develop and start to use that. Which was very different also than what was happening here at the time where everybody was using UpFront because it was coming out of the U. And I was using formZ because that was coming out of AA and all the tools that were coming out of the AA. And I think that kind of connection with academia has always been like, we continually tap into what's changing with technology and different academic environments are always so much further ahead than your local context of practice.

**JY** Yeah, and so when I left Minneapolis, I really didn't want to practice with my husband. I didn't think it was a good idea. And then when I was in London, he would come and he would sit in the lectures. And he was just so excited about everything. And I realized that the way he wanted to practice, and I wanted to practice were very similar. And so, that's kind of the time we started to talk about—I previously resisted it because I always felt like it wasn't a healthy thing to practice with your partner. That just puts everything together and it means you have no break. I wanted to stay independent and autonomous. And I think it's also hard—I have this issue with my daughter now. I don't want her to date architects because I think you get subsumed—the female usually gets subsumed by the male—identity. It's just kind of the way it is.

You kind of have to develop your own strength and maturity and develop. And then it becomes more balanced. So it took me a while to kind of find that spot and teaching practice and mixing things together and doing research to kind of find my own way. Because he had had a practice before, and so it was kind of a strange kind of shifting together. But the projects that we did together where it was pulling from my interest in wood structures or—that it was really good kind of mixing together our interests and the things that we kind of brought to it together and coming up with something that was neither one or the other. I think the work is this kind of coming together of layers of ideas and collaboration. And there isn't a thing that represents when the idea was first made, so like the sketch—when I go to one of our projects and I look at it and he looks at it, it's like this thing that's other than us.

Assembling of the parts and the different voices which is also interesting. I think the whole idea of authorship and architecture has changed so much with the kind of the way people now practice versus the old idea of the singular person. And I think if I look at practices that I admire of my generation, they're collaborative. And, you know, like ARO [Architecture Research Office], Weiss/Manfredi—who else—I mean, there's Diller Scofidio—there's so many, Williams Tsien. The practices that I think are interesting is not about one kind of design voice. It's about a collaborative kind of voice. And we've talked about this before that if you just do work by yourself, your work is only as good as what

you can come up with. And if you work with somebody else, then—and you kind of negotiate the better ideas through and it's really about the project and not about who gets to put their idea in, then the work gets better. So I think that kind of way of practicing is very different than the period that I went to school in and the great man, this is my thing, and this is how I made it, and this is my sketch of it, and it's on the wall.

**KL** So let's talk about some of your favorite projects at the current office, VJAA.

**JY** The first was the rowing club, and that was kind of coming out of some of my interests in the light-weight structures.

**JY** The Minneapolis Rowing Club (1998-2000), was also the first project that we did in the office that was digitally fabricated.

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And we used a digital model and worked with the people who did the glulam trusses to build the whole structure using that digital model which was way ahead—nobody was doing that at that time. And that was really exciting, that these tools could be used in so many different ways. And we were also really interested in environmental software and experimenting with that and daylight and really understanding the temporal conditions of buildings. And we always had this rule that we would try to develop multiple things out of our projects.

So with the rowing club we both developed studios that we taught using some of those ideas of the animate building. And we wrote about that, about how buildings are kind of an animation of their construction systems. And the temporal field was another one that we were very interested in as a set of concepts about how buildings kind of mediate movement and people and climate and light and these kind of environments. And it's an environmentalist viewpoint, but it's also social. So there are like a set of ideas that we just kind of continually pursued. We wrote about, we taught about them, we practiced them. We had a series that came out of the temporal field, the Beirut project also came out of those sets of ideas about how buildings can shape activity or activity shapes buildings. And then climate plays into it.

And we started working with others. I had a LOEB fellowship at Harvard in 2002-2003. So it was right around the time it was kind of between Tulane and Beirut. My fellowship required me to be in residence there, and Vince was kind of commuting back and forth (and we had a second office there). And our daughter was three.

**KL** Wow.

**JY** So yeah. And the fellowship hadn't had women who were mothers before. And they had two at that time. A really close friend of mine, Josephine Ramirez who is in L. A. [Los Angeles] who's in arts and music programming who had a son who was three. And they put us in the apartments above each other. And so, our kids kind of ran up and down and we kind of managed the work and the flow—we had a little apartment that we had as half office and then we had a mattress and a projector. And—oh, we had a copy machine.

**KL** Of course.

**JY** Doors that we used as desks for office. So we basically retrofit the apartment the fellowship gave us to use as an office. And then we slept there. And so, it was a very odd environment for—I think—for my daughter --which made her a minimalist! We didn't have a television. We used the projector, and we would project music videos from our computers—and just entertain ourselves in other ways. But it was just a really incredible experience. And we were working on Tulane and Beirut. We had just won it (the Beirut Competition), and we had been working with this climate engineer who was at Harvard, Matthias Schuler from TRANSSOLAR. So he would come by our office/ apartment because it was right next to the GSD [Harvard Graduate School of Design] and we'd sit and talk and work.

And we worked with students there in developing models and it was this kind of odd, disconnected situation with our Minneapolis office—but there was so much to draw on in terms of resources and really great people were there at the time. Sarah Whiting was there, Hashim Sarkis who did the introduction to our monograph, Margaret Crawford who really worked with us a lot on our skyway research book. And so, I was also developing some of the research (we had gotten a Graham Foundation grant maybe three or four years earlier to do research on the skyway system in Minneapolis and look at comparatives).

And so, we used the grant as travel money to go around to different cities and look at their archives and try to understand where these things came from. And it was kind of a forensic project. And part of the reason I was obsessed by it was it was really coming out of—those ideas were coming out of London. And they somehow ended up taking root here and taking root in Asia. And we didn't understand the origins and we had suspicions that Team 10 had something to do with it. And from others we heard, no that's Le Corbusier. And the Asian systems were different from the U. S. and all of this kind of speculation. So we really wanted to do this research. And it was also influencing our practice. We were interested in this kind of multi-level urbanism, and it was also being looked at a lot at the GSD at the time, Hashim Sarkis wrote a book on Corb's Venice hospital project for the case series. And had this really great research. And others were doing other things that kind of tied into what we were doing. It was more about the Mat building and Team 10 and not looking the realized systems which was still very taboo.

And so, we proposed to Hashim that we would do this case series book on the skyway project, and he and Sarah Whiting were kind of the committee that decided. So I presented that work to them. And so, we were heading down that route of doing that project, and I remember trying to kind of wrap up what we were going to do and put together the final kind of what the proposal for the book was going to be that year, and I met with Margaret Crawford at the end and kind of to talk over my research, and I had been taking her urban studies courses. And I realized in talking with her that it was really impossible to wrap it up neatly, because she pointed out all the kind of historical threads that we hadn't addressed because we were so interested in the kind of contemporary form and what was possible. And then all these tie-ins of projects and it just made that project extend out another ten years. And so, it wasn't so easy to wrap up.

So when we came back, I felt like we could do the book we always wanted to do. And it wasn't a five-year project but was a 15-year project. But it was like one of those topics with our practice that just kept reoccurring. It was a part of and how ideas migrate and how an idea that can have a very different social function which the multi-level city did in the 20s and 30s could change over time. And it really first came from kind of French utopian architecture in the 1800s and migrated to Russian Constructivism and was in London kind of through these routes of people fleeing post-war and these mixing-pots of ideas that were really rich. And you see in all of these things that were happening in that time, and then you saw these systems coming out of it. And then you see environments like the AA where all these people are coming together and teaching and having this enormous influence, and then these ideas spread.

And so, Team 10 really did spread these ideas that came in through other sources. And it was really interesting to me that the more research we did and the more we started to look at the lives of these architects, and Alison and Peter Smithson were really good examples. They were working in the city bureaucracies working on government projects. They were teaching. They were doing all these things trying to impact the public realm. And they were doing work that was both theoretical and practical. And they had an influence both on younger architects coming out doing experimental work, but they also were doing really radical work within government that was really changing how people were seeing what the city could be. And they were pulling ideas from Berthold Lubetkin the Russian Constructivist who formed Tecton. They were pulling it together—all these people and ideas, and it was this kind of collective development work that was really kind of amazing to me because that is what I think generated what we have in its poor form—in the Asian systems which are more adventurous, a more flexible, malleable—giving more power to the architect and to the design potential in these things.

But it's that they started out as these things that were idealistic, opening up the city. And then it became about closing the city. And that the same design concept could be used to do very different things is also very influential.

**KL** So I know that the distribution of your practice naturally ebbs and flows, but is there a more typical division between practice, teaching, research and writing, or do you think there's an ideal proportional split between those areas for you?

**JY** Our practice is 100 percent, so we don't split our time—the writing happens in between the work—this is why it took us so long. I mean, the fellowship year (where I worked half-time) was my most intensive year of being able to do focused writing and research. We always had a rule that we couldn't both teach at the same time. So he would usually teach Spring and I would teach fall. And our daughter was young, and I didn't want to travel. So I stayed here with her and I tended to be more in the office when he wasn't here. But the academic side of it was more like you teach a studio a couple days a week one semester a year. We used our vacation times and our weekends to do the other stuff. This work is not something that a firm can absorb financially, and it's kind of your own time. Which I think is kind of the challenge of being a practitioner and academic because you don't have an academic position that gives you the ability to do research.

Somebody asked me once how we funded the skyway project. The Walker ended up doing this really fantastic book, and then we did an exhibition at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] that they funded part of which helped us to pay people in the office to do drawings for it. But that was the only time that we could ever have the office work on it was if we had that funding from somewhere else that we could basically pay into the office to do that work.

**KL** Right, because everything else is speculative and you—starting a project out of passion.

**JY** So yeah, we got grants, we got basically various people to fund different pieces of it so we could bring in speakers, and we did a symposium that was kind of a small piece that helped us to push some of the content ahead. And various people really helped with that. But it was parallel to the office and it was like our hobby project. So yeah, the teaching and practice thing I think is so essential to practice, but it's not an easy thing to mix because you end up using your own time.

It's become better now that I've become older where now I can teach at places that offer more resources (now that my daughter's has grown up and moved away). I can travel a lot and I can teach in places where I can achieve a little bit better balance. But again, I do one semester at most a year, and it's like two days—two afternoons a week or three afternoons a week, even when I'm commuting. And Usually when I'm teaching, I don't have



weekends---and my partner's the same way. And for years he tended to commute more and teach. He taught at Harvard for eight years. And that was always kind of an ordeal of being gone all the time, but it did help the practice. I think a lot of our work is in higher ed [education], and the audience of our work has really been architects. So I think the connection between teaching and practice has been really essential.

**KL** And can I get a rundown of all the places you've taught?

**JY** Let's see---so I had a fellowship position at Arkansas that Marlon Blackwell set up, the [The John G. Williams Fellow and Distinguished Professor]. And this was one of the other venues to connect with research. They funded us going to London with students and to do work on a multi-level city project. And so, a big part of our research happened as part of that studio. And then Washington University---I've been teaching there since---I think four years now. And that also was while we were wrapping up some of the last bits of the book. And I was able to do a lot of research on Asian cities and there were a lot of great resources. There were a lot of international students there who really helped out a lot. And so, that was also important. I taught at the University of Minnesota here for 18 years and I taught mainly structures integration, the second year with Andrzej Piotrowski and I love teaching with Andrzej. I learned so much doing that. I taught that studio for 11 years.

Every semester they would bring in engineers. And they tended to be engineers either who I worked with or who I later decided to work with based on my studio experience. So the last couple years that I taught that studio, they were working with Meyer Borgman Johnson, Murphy Curran and Ryan Hopeman were the two engineers. And I loved working with them. And so, our engineering is pretty much just working with them now. Just because in the studio environment it was collaborative and creative and that you kind of test ideas and you really get a good sense of what it would be like to work with them. And I think the last one---the last studio I did was a tower studio. And I worked with Murphy on that. And there's something really nice about teaching here and practicing here where a lot of the students that would come from our studios at the U would come into our office and now we've shifted, so it's like Wash U students now in the office and more of a mix of people. We've always hired people that we knew as students because you really get a sense of who they are, what they believe in, and whether you could work together which is I think more essential than anything that they have in their portfolio or that you could see in what they would put in a resume.

I was at Harvard as a LOEB which meant that I wasn't an academic. I was there to do research and to do my own work. And I've been a visiting critic at MIT and a lot of different places

**KL** Alright, so we've talked about the balance of practice and research and writing. Are there other complimentary skills or interests that you bring to your practice or is there simply not another minute in your life?

**JY** I think we always overlap so much. And this is the thing I think I was afraid of is not wanting to marry and architect or date an architect is that there would be too much of everything is about the practice. And I think in hindsight—I mean, I look around our house and our house is very intentionally not about our practice, but it is. And the artwork is and the objects are things that we admire but weren't created by us. A lot of it is our daughter's art or family's art or friends or things that we find profound and meaningful that are related to practice like—the idea of the temporal or the animate or—that are concepts but they're kind of discreet around the house and they're not intruding on us and making us work.

And it's very funny now with our daughter becoming an architect or studying architecture is— when she was little, she was always in the office. And we had a trike in the office for her with a helmet so she wouldn't hit her head on the desks. But she was always in the model shop. And then when she was like 13 or 14, we were doing this enormous 20-foot chandelier with 300 LEDs imbedded in this cellular structure that was really complicated that we couldn't find anyone to build. And so, we decided we'd do it ourselves. And it was like folded origami kind of cells that needed to be wired very thinly so you couldn't see it. And it was for the Pritzker family and for a house that we were doing for them.

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And we got it UL listed. We designed it and then it was like, who's going to build this now? And so, we thought, we'll have students build it. But that's still expensive, so our daughter was 14 at the time and she built a third of it. So she built like hundreds of these different cells and the wiring and it was just like in heaven for her all summer while earning very marginal wages. But that was a profound experience for her. And she would build models in the office and she was really a better craftsman than a lot of people that we would hire, just because she's been around it her whole life, and she's just naturally very meticulous. And you know I realize that every family vacation we had was around architecture. And so, instead of going to Disneyworld, we took her to Shenzhen to see the Vanke Center because I had to be there for an A. I. A. jury. Or we had a teaching gig in Mexico City for two weeks and we did it in trade that we could see Luis Barragan's work. So she got to go along with that.

And so, it's like she didn't have a normal childhood because everything we did was around architecture or when we put together a skyway book, one of the cities—the first city that we visited was Calgary. And it was during the G8 conference, and they had shut down the skyway system and we weren't allowed to photograph. And that was our only time there. So we used her as a prop to pretend we weren't photographing but innocently touring—

because she was in a stroller and a toddler. And so, we would pretend we were taking a picture of her and we would take a picture of the skyway. And so, they wouldn't kick us out because we were taking pictures, (they said you can't do that), but since we looked like we were taking pictures of her, they would let us. And so, we were going through the book and there's like a little picture of Calgary when she was a toddler, the Vanke Center when she was like ten sitting in the grass.

So I think we didn't really separate our personal and our work lives. And that really worked well for us all. And in hindsight, we didn't damage her. I think she got an interesting view of the world. But it really helped the fact that we could find things in architecture that we were passionate about that could also be a hobby and that could use up all our vacation time or our spare time. And I mean, aside from working in the garden, and my husband tinkering in the house—that's what we do—it's just architecture.

**KL** Right. So you're in a unique position to give advice to students considering architecture, high school-aged students or students actively in it. So you've had this conversation with your daughter among countless other students. What advice do you give to students contemplating the scale of study? What advice do you give to emerging professionals?

**JY** I think to not assume there's only one path through architecture, that you can make it into whatever you want it to be, but that's also really hard to do and to make a living and to be able to kind of control the work you do. I was never happy working in large firms. I think my personality isn't the right type. I'm not outgoing. I don't put myself out there. I'm kind of more withdrawn. And our office is extremely quiet. My partner is the same way. And the people we hire tend to be very kind of quiet.

**KL** I think it's fair to say that your office is monastic.

**JY** Yes, exactly—exactly.

**KL** I think it's a high compliment to say that it is.

**JY** I think that's more that you can create an environment for yourself that fits with the way you work and you can find other people who want to work in the same way and care about the same things and you can create that. And that you don't just have to find a job. And so, I think the following your passion thing is something students hear a lot about. But I think going into it with eyes wide open because I think when you are passionate about things, people can take advantage of you—which happens a lot. I think understanding the context you're working in and the whole political aspect of architecture that we're running into now with our Goose Creek Project has always shocked me. That you can work really hard to do something really good that's for the public, and the way that things are, the truth is manipulated, and it comes out in a very different way. So I think the kind of public process—and we've run into this in public projects before—how you talk about your

work And how you can make people understand it. is really important to whether you could achieve it.

This project that we just did, the Goose Creek rest stop. There's a local politician who's trying to stop MnDOT [Minnesota Department of Transportation] from spending money on rest stops. And so, she took a budget that happened early on where this was a two-part project. So there's an infrastructure part and a building site part, and there were two separate budgets. Well, MnDOT later put them together as one budget so that they could do the project faster. And she said, "Well, that shows you doubled the cost of this," but it wasn't true. It's exactly the same budget, and it cost the same as it would have if it was two projects. So it's been in the news and the media, and it's been everywhere. And people are so angry. And we opened last week, so we went to visit it. And there's some guy there saying, yeah, this was originally a \$ 4 million project—now it's \$ 8 million. And it's like, she's so effective at her messaging and it's so dishonest, but you can't fight it. And it's very frustrating because people go from being very excited to be in a building to being very hostile towards it because they keep calling it a boondoggle which is a term created about WPA [Works Progress Administration] projects initially.

**KL** Really?

**JY** Yes, boondoggle came from the WPA, and it was again people trying to stop that work in the public realm from happening. And it's like the boondoggle was on budget. There's no excessive spending. We used materials that are used everywhere in other MnDOT projects and it's a boondoggle. So I think that thing that students need to understand is basically how to talk to people about your work. And I think being able to frame the message of what you're doing and how it's relevant to them and how it addresses things that they care about and how it's useful to them and meaningful to them is really important. And I think it makes your work better too.

**KL** So how you talk about your work it important to achieving it. How does that relate to your legacy to the profession? It seemed like a good lead in.

**JY** I don't know. It's funny I was trying to think of what is meaningful about being a fellow. And when I first became aware of fellows was like I was maybe in my 20s and I went to my first A. I. A. convention and there were these guys with medals. And I did not ever see myself ever being there or going there, but now I think about what it is— it basically acknowledges a body of work and what you've done in the profession at a certain age and whether you've managed to make that body of work meaningful and to do something with it. I think there's something about that kind of standard for assessing your work at the late stages of your career, that's really beautiful about the fellowship, just preparing the submittal—kind of working with other fellows and what is meaningful in practice and what the A. I. A. cares about, what the concerns of practice are now, how your own body of work fits into that. I think the body of work—I think the things that I'm most proud of

about it are—the experimental qualities of it, that it ties together theory and practice, that it's experimenting with new ways of building craft, new technologies, that it's about the social and the environmental.

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So I think it's about the values that it has. I don't—I mean, I see my practice as a series of images of buildings over time, but that's not really how I see the aggregate over time. I see these kind of trajectories of ideas that have informed the buildings and I think make them better. I go to the Walker library and I feel very good there. And it's because of how it's used. And that the kind of very inexpensive material systems don't look inexpensive. And they look like they were cared for, and this wasn't a low-cost public building—that it's like any other building that was cared for. And you don't have to do something that's expensive to do that. It's about how it was developed and detailed and thought through.

So I think the thing that people go to these places and they feel special or they feel important or they feel cared for. Many of the things around our house are by Enzo Mari, the Italian designer. And I love Enzo Mari. We have an enormous collection of Enzo Mari things. They are just embedded everywhere in the house. And he did this series called *Autoprogettazione* where he did furniture designs that anyone could build using kind of off-the-shelf lumber. And he gave them away. So you buy the book. You can do any of these furniture designs and make them yourself. And they're intended for you to make easily for yourself. And so, making design accessible like that. And a lot of his things, the coat hooks on the back I talk about a lot—they're just these beautiful shapes. And then there's a little spot for the key. So it's like being aware that when you hang up your coat, if you put your key there, you won't lose your key. And then your bag goes there.—it's like caring about your comfort and making your life a little bit smoother and the lyrical quality of them is kind of joyful, so that the function and the joy and the beauty of these things come together. And I see that in a lot of more product design than architecture sometimes. And I find that very admirable and I hope our work is like that.

**KL** So you talked about how motherhood has intersected with your career and having a personal-professional partnership and seeking out women, especially early in your studies. How has being a woman influenced your career, or when hasn't it?

**JY** I think having a child is the biggest influence on your career because it slows you down in a way that's different than—and men in our office take time off when they have children, but I think it's different for a woman, just the kind of—the space you're in and the things you're aware of and care about is different. And so, I think finding ways—my father when

my daughter was born, he called me and—he turned—he’s 96 now—so he must have been 75, 76, and he had retired from being an academic. So he said, I have time and I don’t want you to take time off from work. I want you to keep working and not distract from your career. I’m going to be your day care provider. Okay, yeah. But he did a lot of that. And so when my partner was traveling, my dad would just basically move in with me. And when she had chicken pox and I had something I couldn’t miss, he was there taking care of her. And I think that was an incredible thing that wouldn’t have happened if I wasn’t overextended and trying to do something that I shouldn’t have with a child. The fact that my daughter was raised by a retired philosophy professor and they would—the stuff that they would do together, she’s really high energy and exhausting and she’s still that way. She’s wonderful that way, but I would have had three kids if I had a mellow one. But she was totally exhausting to him.

And one weekend—and I was in New Orleans for project meetings and he was kind of beyond himself. And so, he went out and he got a video of Julia Childs making omelets—the thin kind rolled. And she was like six. And then he bought like four dozen eggs. And so, he just set her up in front of the VCR and had her learning to make omelets. And she can still make incredible omelets. And they’re just beautiful. And it’s just like these things—you’re not sacrificing for your practice or for your work, you’re finding other ways to find good solutions to balance things. And I think everybody does it in a different way. And I think other people find ways. Tom Fischer told me once when Odette was really little—his daughter baby-sat for Odette when she was maybe two—one or two. And I think he could tell that I was kind of feeling like a bad mom. And I was trying to do all these things. And he said that the thing with kids is—and daughters and mothers—is that they see you as a role model. It’s not about what you’re doing for them, but they see you as being happy and doing the work that’s meaningful for you. And that that has a more profound impact on them. And there’s something like that. It was a very wise thing to say and it was very helpful at that time because it gave me permission to focus on my work and do the things that were important to me and not feel like I was harming somebody.

**KL** Alright, so in our long and winding conversation, I think we’ve very organically covered the topics that our Women in Architecture Committee has been interested in exploring with you, but I also wanted to give you an opportunity in our conclusion to talk about any themes or projects or experiences that we didn’t get to.

**JY** I think one that’s interesting to me is my current experience teaching at Washington University. And part of why I wanted to teach there is that I like that it’s a very building-based practice. But I realized at some point I was there and the women on the juries—the architects on the juries that they would bring in from New York or Spain or wherever, were women my age. And I didn’t have that experience when I taught here [Minnesota] or at other places. And I teach opposite from Nanako Umemoto or [Kathryn Dean] or there’s some really wonderful Spanish architects who’ve been there that are my age and have their own practices. And I haven’t had that kind of experience that you sit on a jury and it’s an

all-women jury who are all between 50 and 60 and are there because they're practitioners—that's been a really interesting experience to me. The dean is a woman, and the chair of the graduate department is a woman. And both are practitioners. And I really have gotten a lot being in that environment, which is something that I was shocked by. And it's—because I'm so used to that never being the case. And that it's always just me.

**JY** But these are practitioners. And they're not academics, but academia is drawing them together and they're putting them in these environments because they want that—and I don't know if it's a chicken and an egg thing, because it's who's choosing them and why and why are they all coming to this one environment where I'm not seeing them in other places. And I think it might be the kinds of topics and interests more than anything. I think it's not as much of, oh, we're just going to find women. I think it's this kind of bringing together of people who have particular interests and ways of teaching and that are practice-based and in small practices.

*1:19:57*

**KL** And do I recall correctly—is this still the case at Wash U, that there's an overlap with their sociology or their social work program or simply that it's an option for some students to pursue a joint degree?

**JY** Yeah, the school—part of what's nice about the school is they—you can overlap with anything. So once you're admitted, you can, if you're in the art program, you can do a double degree with engineering. And you don't have to be admitted into the engineering school. And then they do things to make things overlap. So they have strong social work. one of the things that really appealed to me—they have fine arts with architecture. But they also have architecture with urban and architecture with landscape. So I had a lot of students who were doing dual degrees in urban design and architecture or who were coming in with another degree and then doing something that had a specialization, I like that mixing together, more multi-disciplinary is really nice.

**KL** Alright. Thank you. This has been a delightful conversation.

**JY** Thank you. It was fun.

[End of Interview]

Total Interview Time: 1:21:25

## Credits

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