

The Minnesota
Women in Architecture
FAIA Legacy Project

Joan Soranno 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 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.

Joan Soranno



Elevated to Fellow in 2010, Joan Soranno is motivated by the expressive quality of architecture. Her buildings resonate with the unique inspirations of their state and program, embodying a spirit of energy that rises intrinsically from their time and space.

Interview

Joan Soranno, Interviewee

Kimberly Long Loken, Interviewer

March 14, 2019

Kimberly Long Loken: **KL**

Joan Soranno: **JS**

Track 1

00:00

[General discussion]

KL Today is March 14, 2019. This is Kimberly Loken at the offices of HGA in Minneapolis interviewing Joan Soranno. Joan, would you state your name, date of birth and city of birth for the records?

JS My name is Joan Soranno. I was born in Boston, Massachusetts on August 19, 1961.

KL Right. So we'll go through the themes and topics in roughly chronological order. So let's start by talking about how did you first find architecture or how did it find you?

JS When I was in 4th grade, we were living in California, and my parents and my family moved to Milan, Italy. So I actually grew up in Italy from 4th grade until a junior in high school. And I think living in such a beautiful European city with a rich architectural history—just being surrounded by that every single day—had a huge impact on my sense of design and architecture. And then, in addition to that in 7th grade in Italy, I took a mechanical drafting class and I just fell in love with drawing. I'd always liked to draw, but that combination of creating something with the precision of drafting, it just clicked. Of course, in 7th grade, I was thinking I was going to be a draftsman. And then in 12th grade, when my family actually moved to Minnesota, I took an architectural drafting class. And that's when I put two and two together, the combination of, you know, a potentially creative profession with the kind of creative precision of drafting and creating space that it really gelled and I realized that, yeah, I wanted to be an architect.

KL So what took your family to these different locations into Milan in particular?

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- JS** Well I was born—again, as I said, I was born in Boston, and my dad was an executive at Gillette. And, when my dad got the job offer in Italy, it was for Braun which makes the shavers and the coffee makers which, you know, a company that is renowned for its industrial design [unintelligible].
- KL** Right.
- JS** So Braun, at the time, in the 1970s, was owned by Gillette. And so, my dad, through his connections with Gillette, got this position for heading up Braun, Italy, and so it was a fantastic job for him because he actually got to work with Dieter Rams. So we had in our home all these beautiful, classic designs by Braun which are half of them now are at MoMA [Museum of Modern Art]. So it's being surrounded, not only by this incredible architecture in Milan, but then my dad's job at Braun and having these beautiful objects in the house. It had a profound influence on me growing up.
- KL** Right. So was there a lot of talk about art and architecture and design in your family, or was it something that your family really cultivated, or did it—maybe it was something that more just like infused from the location you were in?
- JS** No, my dad is a very creative person. Although he was a business executive, he's a really good painter, and he can draw really well. So he was always sketching and doing small sculptures at the house and such. And I always took art classes, so I come from a big family. There's nine of us—
- KL** Wow.
- JS** —so many of us are in creative professions. So I think a lot of that came from my parents. So yes, always going to art museums, travelling, again, had a profound influence on me.
- KL** What are some of your favorite places that have stuck with you from either growing up in Milan, or traveling around Italy and Europe in general? What are some places that really resonated at the core when you were young and have stayed with you?
- JS** Of course, in Milan the landmark is the Duomo which is a building that had been built over a thousand years. It took a thousand years to build and it's kind of this odd, gothic confection of architecture, but it's profoundly powerful as a piece of architecture. So one of the first days when we landed in Milan for the first time was my dad took a couple of us down to the Piazza, and there's always photographers that snap photos of people and then you can pay for the photography. And there's this early photo of my dad and my brother and sister feeding the pigeons, and the Duomo is in the background. So I spent many, many times there growing up as a teenager, walking through that building and going up to the roof. And it just—it's such a striking building. It kind of [unintelligible]—

- KL** The roof is crazy. It's like a marble playground.
- JS** It is. It's really—. And then right next to that is the Galleria [Vittorio Emanuele II] which is renowned also. And so, although as a kid, weren't thinking of it in terms of any kind of architectural beauty or integrity, we were shopping there. They had a really cool—again, this is the 70s—kind of knick-knack place called gadgets. And we would spend—we spent so much time shopping there. And again, within the framework of the Galleria, not understanding kind of where we were in this extraordinary place, but—
- KL** Are you at like the Spencer's Gifts of Italy just buying weird little plastic crap [laughter]?
- JS** Oh yeah, it was totally [unintelligible]—
- KL** But it's nicer because it's Italy [laughter]?
- JS** It was the 70s, so of course there were lava lamps and I had crazy psychedelic stuff and weird posters, but it's such an odd experience as a teenage because, again, this is your home, but it's within the framework of these architectural landmarks like the Galleria in Milan. But, to us, that was just home. So, again, that deep appreciation or understanding of that kind of architecture combined with my interest in art and drawing and form and spatial 3D things—it all came together. And I'm sure that experience in Italy had a profound impact on that.
- KL** I assume moving at such a young age, you also became fluent in Italian?
- JS** Well, my parents, they knew that they wanted us to go to an American university, so we enrolled in the American School of Milan which was very eclectic because a lot of European families want to send their kids to American universities, so they enroll them in the American School. So the American School is very small percentage of Americans and actually foreign kids obviously speak fluent English, but it's a very eclectic group of people. So mostly surrounded on a day-to-day basis with English speaking, but of course we picked up Italian. And I would say we were pretty fluent, but I'm definitely not fluent now because you just don't speak Italian a lot now. So it's easy to learn and easy to lose.
- KL** And did your family have Italian heritage?
- JS** It does. Soranno is part Mexican and part Italian.
- KL** Alright. Well, we've already talked a little bit about your dad as a person who's sort of situation in life greatly influenced your career. Other people and events that influenced your career as we sort of move from high school and into college and beyond?
- JS** Yeah, it's something that's going to fast forward into my career. I would say working with Frank Gehry on the Weisman Art Museum had a profound impact on me as an architect

because what I saw from somebody like Frank Gehry was that the world is filled with endless possibilities and to not be afraid of really pushing the limits or the boundaries of architecture and always be exploring and pushing.

10:11

And then also his process of developing architecture was really interesting because it was mostly centered on physical models. And, although in school you build tons of physical models, a lot of architects have kind of gone away from physical models. And Frank would build huge models for every project that he worked on. And so, just watching that process had a huge influence on me.

KL And physical models, to this day, are an important part of your process.

JS Yes. We still, even though there's a lot of pressure to not do physical models because you have the computer, it's still—there's still a difference—a fundamental difference when you're talking about form, scale, shape, space, to seeing something physically and experiencing it three-dimensionally than even something like virtual reality, which is great. It just doesn't replace physical models.

And then the other person that obviously has had a huge impact or influence on my career is my husband and partner John Cook who I actually met working with Frank Gehry on the Weisman Art Museum. John was already at Meyer, Scherer & Rockcastle. I joined them to work on the Weisman Art Museum and that's where we met. And John is kind of that classic renaissance architect that can kind of do it all. He's actually a very creative person, has wonderful ideas, but then grounded in thoroughly understanding how buildings go together, understanding building systems, materials. And, because he builds things in real life, he understands how to—again, if Frank is doing these crazy details or we're suggesting these crazy details, he can figure out a way of doing them with integrity that they actually last and they don't leak and there's some integrity about them. So John has had a huge influence on me and obviously our practice.

KL Well, before we get too far ahead of ourselves into career-end projects, let's back up to entering architecture school. Where did you go to college?

JS I went to the University of Notre Dame, and my father went to Notre Dame. And so when we—after Italy, we moved to Boston for nine months, and then we moved to the Twin Cities. So I actually went to three different high schools which was crazy: tenth grade in Italy, eleventh grade in Boston, twelfth grade in St. Paul. En route to St. Paul, we stopped

by the campus of Notre Dame. I'd heard about Notre Dame from my father for years and completely fell in love with the campus. The campus is so incredibly beautiful. It's a small school which appealed to me. They had a fantastic architecture program, the highlight being that the third year you spend in Rome. So, for me, I wanted to do that to basically go home and go back to Italy because I never wanted to move back to the states. When we moved, I tried to convince my parents to have me stay with my best friend until I graduated high school, and they said no. Yeah, so I went to Notre Dame. It was a five-year program.

KL Okay. So B. Arch. [Bachelor of Architecture].

JS Yep. Bachelor of Architecture. Actually, I think it was a Bachelor of Science in Architecture. I think it's a B. S.

KL So Notre Dame is noted for having a program that's particularly rooted in Classicism? Or was that the case at that time?

JS No, and thank God, because I think, if I would have gone there, I would never go to that program now. I don't agree with that program. I can see it for a graduate studies, but to take a seventeen-year-old and an eighteen-year-old and think that they understand the full depth of what Classicism and Beaux Arts architecture is is a little bit of a stretch. So, when I was there, it was just your kind of basic, eclectic school of architecture, like many schools of architecture. So it didn't narrow in its focus until the early 90s.

KL Okay—alright. So as we loop back into your career, what was your first professional position? Was that here in the Twin Cities or was it interning in South Bend?

JS No. I went to Chicago and I worked at Booth Hanson which was a—and this was the mid-80s, so Postmodernism was all the rage, and Chicago was one of the centers for Postmodernism with architects like Larry Booth, Stanley Tigerman, Tom Beebe, Harry Weese. You know, you had all these architectural icons doing a lot of really interesting postmodern architecture. So I went to work at Booth Hanson in Chicago for about a year and a half—and fantastic experience, really intense—80-hour weeks. It was a tense atmosphere. Larry was a pretty hard-driving person, got yelled at a couple times, and decided to take a break from that intensity and move back to St. Paul about after a year and a half. And then Larry Booth told me, “Well, there's only one architect in the Twin Cities you should work for.” And he said, “That's my friend Milo Thompson from Bentz Thompson Rietow.” And so I think he actually called up Milo and said, “You've got to hire this person.” So I worked at Bentz Thompson for only four months because I basically got there and I love Milo—he's such a fantastic architect, but I kind of was the youngest person on the totem pole, most inexperienced. And I spent four months basically running blueprints. So that's when I got a job at HGA [Hammel, Green and Abrahamson] for the first time.

KL Alright. So let's talk about some significant projects in your career. What are notable ones, personal favorites, and what in particular made those projects successful?

JS Well, I think the project closest to my heart is Lakewood Cemetery Garden Mausoleum which we finished in 2012. That was about a four-year project from start to finish, from interview through construction. And Lakewood was truly the dream project. It had the perfect client. It had a really great budget. And we had plenty of time to do the project. So it's a landmark place, and we basically were charged with designing a building that will last forever. And that building—it was a building that had to be a healing environment for people, a contemplative, beautiful healing environment. And to actually create architecture and space around those ideas and then ideas of memory, remembrance, commemoration—it was truly one of the most profound experiences of my life, and I know my husband John's life too. And within that—Lakewood, we live about five minutes from there, so that's our neighborhood. And we were actually married at Lakewood Chapel. And we're going to be buried there. So it's also wrapped up in our personal lives in addition to being an architectural project. It has had really deep meaning and importance in our lives.

KL How about some challenges that shaped your career—the flipside of things instead of the favorite projects—some challenges—expected ones, unexpected ones?

19:57

JS I think initially, when I was in school, I was interested in design. People come at architecture from all different sides, and I was definitely coming from the art side of architecture. If you look up the definition of architecture, it's the art and science of building. My interest definitely was coming from the art side. It's not that I didn't have interest in the science or the technical side, but in school the art side is all I focused on. I would skip structures classes or the professional practice classes to be in studio designing buildings. So, when I got out of school and I started as a very junior designer, what I was realizing is that my lack of understanding or knowledge of how to put buildings together was going to really limit me in terms of my abilities to do great design because I was basically at the mercy of project architects—senior project architects when I came up with a really cool idea of them saying, “No. We can't do this.” And then I had no come-back because I didn't understand some of the fundamentals.

And so that's when I decided to really devote a big chunk of my early career to going all the way through projects, through construction documents, tackling really complex detailing to understand, again, how buildings are put together, properties of materials and how to work with engineers. And so, I spent—again, even though I'm a designer, I spent

over five years just working on technical drawings. In fact, when I worked—when I went from HGA to Meyer, Scherer & Rockcastle to work on the Weisman Art Museum with Frank Gehry and John, a lot of my colleagues were like, “Why would you want to do that? There’s no design for you in this.” And I said, “I don’t care.” Just well, one, the thought of working alongside Frank Gehry, but also wanting to really challenge myself on how do you detail a Frank Gehry building? And I learned a whole lot. So I think coming out of school in my early career, that lack of technical knowledge was a huge challenge for me.

KL Let’s talk a little bit about complimentary skills and interests that enhance your architectural practice.

JS I think, obviously—a lot of architects can draw. So I love drawing, and I’ve always loved drawing, and that’s played a huge role—just being able to visualize things. Also, I’m not quite sure how much this fits into architecture—I’m also very much interested in calligraphy. My handwriting—I’ve been told I’ve got a lot of ability in calligraphy and handwriting. So, again, I don’t quite know that directly applies to it, but I’ve always been interested in that. I also have a very good graphic sense about things compositionally that I think has played a huge role. I can’t think of anything else.

KL I’m fascinated by your interest and skill in calligraphy. It makes a lot of sense to me that the underlying systems of typography would be quite a nice compliment to architecture, right?

JS Yeah, and it’s also precise. Many times, when I’ve taken art classes, I have this tendency to get really precise. It’s like drafting. Everything is very micro and precise, and all my art teachers would always give me a huge paint brush. And it’s like you’re not going to use this little pointy pencil and these little cross-hatches, you’re going to use this big paint brush and you’re going to do it for 30 seconds—make a piece of art. That just—I broke out in a sweat. So I think I have a natural tie to calligraphy. Letter form is just such a beautiful thing. And I think that overlay of beauty is something that has basically been a thread through my entire life.

KL Right, but it’s beauty with structure still. Like do the B and the D mirror each other or not, and if they don’t mirror, what’s the deviation and why.

JS Yeah, and then just some of the—like we’ve done several synagogues. And so, although I’m not Jewish, just the Hebrew letter form is so incredibly beautiful, and a lot of our work in those projects was inspired by that letter form. So I’m just, again, fascinated by calligraphy. And when I retire from this profession, I’ll probably have these images of the monks during the middle ages, these illuminated manuscripts. If I had been born a man in the middle ages, I’m sure I would have been illuminating manuscripts—absolutely.

KL So you do plan to retire. That’s something a lot of architects can’t fathom.

JS No, I—yeah. And I think a lot of people, whenever I say that, they are shocked because I think—yes, they think that I will work until I drop dead and no. No, it's—I love it, and it's been my life, and I've spent—I think one of the reasons for my and our success is I tell people I can outwork anybody. So much of success has to do with discipline and the hours that you—what is it, the 10,000 hours to perfect something. I've always been the person that will just outwork everybody around me, but it's exhausting. And it's a lot of stress, and I'm just not one of these—I'm kind of a pretty high-strung person. And so I love it, but it's like at some point, yeah, just want to try to get away from the stress.

KL Right. So, at this juncture in your career, you have a robust practice, a pile of national recognition. As you think about the years until retirement, the years after retirement, what are your thoughts about legacy—being a fellow connotes a sense of legacy to the profession? What are your thoughts about legacy?

JS You mean what is my legacy?

KL Yeah.

JS And I'm always reluctant to say my because, again, with John it is a practice that we do together. But legacy is one of those things that—that's for other people to say what our legacy is. I can speak to what we've always wanted to do which is to create beautiful architecture. And, again, that idea of beauty is really profound for me. So I just like to think that people that go into our buildings 50, 100, 200 years from now experience—walk in and say these buildings are really beautiful places and inspire people. And a lot of our work has been religious work or connected to art museums which have this thread of transcendence about them. So that idea of creating transcendent space is something that is really—has been really important. And we seek projects that have that element of transcendence. And again, for us, a lot of that overlay is this idea of beauty.

KL So when one prepares an FAIA [Fellow of the American Institute of Architects], there are a couple of areas in which one can focus, and yours obviously is design.

30:00

Can you tell me a little bit more about what it means to you to have the recognition of FAIA?

JS Well, what I think is great about the FAIA is I think, first and foremost, we always want happy clients. I mean, our clients are allowing us to do what we do. They are giving us these commissions. They are paying these fees for us to create these things for our clients.

So having happy, satisfied clients is our primary concern and driver throughout our career. To me, what the FAIA stands for is being recognized by your peers, which is a wonderful thing because our peers are the ones that understand architecture. They understand what things are—not that our clients don't, but your peers are the toughest critics. And so, to be—to have “Fellow” is some acknowledgment or recognition from your peers that you've done a job well, and that's an honor for me.

KL Right. So speaking of peer groups, the number of women in architecture has been increasing over the years. What was the percentage, roughly, when you were in college in the 80s, the percentage of your class that were women?

JS I would say probably about 40 percent women. Now, it's over 50 percent. And, unfortunately, if I look at my class, and not a lot of women are still practicing architecture, which is pretty much what's been happening in schools of architecture—it is 50-50 or more. But 30, 40 years into a career, how many women are still practicing?

KL Right.

JS And that's where the numbers drop off, unfortunately. And I'm hoping that will change. I don't know. The needle has not moved much in the last couple decades. If you look at the, again, the women that are still in architecture decades later, the needle has not moved much from the 70s to now.

KL Exactly. So this idea that, oh, it will take a generation—the pipeline—it's not bearing out.

JS It's not—it isn't bearing out unfortunately, so something's happening in those decades where a lot of women are dropping out which is unfortunate.

KL So what does it mean to you to be a woman architect? Is it something that is very present in your mind or just sort of comes up more in these occasional demographic reflections on the profession?

JS You know, I hate to say this, but it is never in my head. It's never in my—I don't think of being an architect through the lens of being a woman architect. I think part of that probably comes from my upbringing where, again, seven kids. Six were women—six girls, one boy. And having parents and a father especially who basically said, “You can be whatever you want to be.” There was never this lens of you are a girl or a woman and you go here. It was never—my father always—I grew up getting reinforcement from him that I could do whatever I wanted to do. So when I said architecture, he's like, “That's fantastic. Go for it. You would be an amazing architect.” So I did not—I grew up in a household of women in an environment where I could be whatever I wanted to be, so there was never that lens of being a woman architect. I also have the personality of generally not being shy

about things, or not having a problem speaking up. So it's just not been a thread through my career thinking about it through that lens.

And there's a part of me, for good or bad, that doesn't want to stereotype. I think about how I am as a woman architect or how I am as an architect, and there are characteristics or threads in our work that could be subscribed to being a woman architect, but I'm nervous talking about that because it's like, then you're somehow also excluding men. An example of that is we grow up with this image of architects in "The Fountainhead," Howard Roark, the kind of massive ego—blow up buildings if you're not happy—the lone wolf. And, in our practice—in many of our projects, we've actually tried to take our ego out of it. It's never been about kind of making that big, strong, aggressive statement. It's about reading the land or the client or the projects and doing what's right for them, not what's right for us. Is that a woman characteristic? I would hate to say it is because that is basically saying men can't have that kind of non-ego-driven or more empathetic streak to it. But, again, as an architect, we try to take our ego out of a lot of projects.

Again, an example of that is Lakewood, where that's a 25,000 square foot building. We buried three quarters of that building program underground. So, when you come to the street, all you see is this little 5,000 square foot pavilion. The client was thinking we were going to put 20,000 square feet up along the street, take down a whole lot of oak trees and make a really strong statement. And our attitude was, no, that big strong statement in this pristine historic landscape with this beautiful chapel in the background would not be the way to go. We wanted a much more quiet, contemplative space that saved trees and let the landscape shine. So that's kind of putting our ego aside a little bit. Is that a woman characteristic? I would say, no, I don't think it is. But that attitude has driven a lot of our projects, that idea of empathy, of really feeling what it's like. And again, with Lakewood, one of the things I've talked about a lot was really being glad that we got that project later in our career than earlier because earlier I had never been touched by death. Nobody around me had ever died. It wasn't until I was much older in my 50s that people actually close to me had died. To actually have that experience and that sense of empathy basically shaped that design of that project. So that idea of empathy is another huge piece that is a connector of all of our projects—is that inherently female or—I would say, no. But again, how do you define what being a woman architect is? It's a tricky question.

KL It is a very tricky question. This has been a thread through all of the conversations with FAIA women in this series. And many have answered similarly to you. But I guess another way of inquiring about this is recognizing that you're a leader in your firm. You're a leader in our community. You're recognized nationally. You've talked about the percentage of women that you went to school with, and you haven't broadly continued with that same percentage of women so, as a leader in your firm and in our community, are there actions that you have taken, are taking, would like to take that you think may enhance the retention of women in the field?

JS You mean that I could personally help with or?

KL Assist in advocating for or things that have happened here at HGA like within your tenure of leadership.

39:54

JS I think, again, there is a lot of talk and our firm has taken this very seriously, especially in the last two years is this idea around equity, both gender and racial equity. Everyone's—I think a lot of people are doing it, a lot of people are talking about it, which is really great. And you realize that so much of moving up the ladder of your career is about having advocates and mentors that can advocate and help you get to all those stages, and I think, historically, women really haven't had as many mentors or advocates, so I know personally here we have a mentor program and I take that very seriously. I have several mentees every year, a lot of them women. And again, just trying—because I've achieved certain levels here, I was on the board of directors and, for the last two years the chair of the board, I think I can offer a lot of guidance and support and also advocacy at the highest levels. So, yeah, I take that really, really seriously. And, again, our firm institutionally is talking a lot about it. So things about how many women are on our board of directors, how many women leaders do we have, and really trying to change those statistics. And I think the more firms that do it as time goes on, hopefully it changes. I don't know if it will. Hopefully it will. I think it will.

KL So on this topic of mentorship and advocacy, you're providing it to others. Your parents provided that kind of upbringing for you. What would you say to a young person considering going into architecture? How would you invite them into the field, describe the field?

JS We talk with a lot of high schoolers interested in architecture, and the first thing I ask them is, "Do you like to work hard?" Because it's just not for the faint of heart. This profession is not for the faint of heart. I mean, it's a really tough profession in terms of the amount of hours you have to dedicate to it. They did a survey I just read a couple of months ago; they did a report on college degrees and programs and what are the top majors that have—or what are the majors that have the most amount of homework outside of the class? You've got classes, but who spends the most hours outside of class on homework? The number one was architecture. Number two was engineering. Number three was pre-med. I think most people would think pre-med. Architecture was number one. It's an insane—anybody who'd been through this field or school knows it's really, really intense. So the first question I—because you're not going to make it, or you're not going to succeed. I mean,

you're just not. So how much do you literally like to work? Put in hard, hard time. And I think you have to have a pretty thick skin. And that starts in school with reviews and getting crushed—which I got crushed so many times in reviews—of just being able to pick yourself up and keep going, which has to do with grit. And they talk about grit as being so essential to success. And this is a field that you need grit because there are a lot of bumps. There's going to be a lot of people not out to get you, but kind of, because it's a creative field; there's always this aspect of critique, whether that's your clients or peers or bosses—on and on. So you have to have a thick skin.

KL All of those things would also apply to emerging professionals, but would you have any advice for emerging professionals?

JS Two things: never being afraid to ask questions, even if in your head you think they're really dumb, and never being shy about asking for things. And I think it's really easy for anybody early on in their career to feel like I can't ask this question because it's so incredibly naïve or dumb. I mean, that record went through my head so many times. Because, when you get out of school, there is so much that you don't know. I mean, a 40-year-old architect is a young architect. It takes 20 years to just start to feel like you can master this field. So when you're really young, it's so overwhelming in terms of just feeling like—when you get out of school, especially if you're a good student, you're feeling like, "Oh yeah, I'm just going to set the world on fire." And then two weeks into your first job, you're like, "I don't think so," and "I know nothing."

So that ability to just go up to somebody and explain a vapor barrier—tell me what a vapor barrier is. Even though they're thinking, "Oh my gosh, have you had any schooling at all?" So a big part of I feel my success is just never been afraid to ask a really dumb question or a naïve question, and then also not expecting others to advocate for you or understand what you want. You have to put your stuff out there. You have to go for things like—. And you know, it's—what's her name—Sheryl Sandberg—leaning in. It's this idea of kind of owning your career and owning your passions and then putting them out there and asking for things, whether that's a project or a particular career path or opportunity to work with an architect. You just can't be shy about that because people don't know what's in your head. And those two things, I think a lot of people struggle with that in their careers, especially early on.

KL Alright. So that brings us to the conclusion of our prepared questions, but I did want to provide an opportunity for you to address any additional stories, people, buildings, events that you wanted to share that maybe didn't come up naturally.

JS Probably in the similar vein to asking questions and making sure that you're asking for things that you necessarily want, I think a big part of this profession is that you realize that you're dependent on getting—having a great career in architecture, especially in something like design, is dependent on getting good clients and being able to sell yourself in order to

get those clients. They don't really talk about that in architecture school. You just think in school, these projects are just going to magically fall in your lap.

KL Right. Those homework assignments come fast enough, and everything else will [laughter].

JS Exactly. And they just kind of—and you have no idea how hard it is to find great opportunities. And so a lot of that is your ability to connect with others and have them trust that you're going to create something really beautiful.

49:58

And I think a lot of that has to do with being your authentic self, and not feeling like you have to be overly perfect or like a salesman. It's just showing clients who you are. And a good example of that for me was, when we were doing the interview for Bigelow Chapel at the United Theological Seminary, so it was an interview. And interviews are really tense situations. And you've got ten people looking at you. You're making a pitch to basically tell them hire me. And so, what you're told early on is, well, you have to go in there and be slick, and you have to be perfect, and you have to wow them and be intelligent. You have to be all these things at once—so high pressure. And you're never going to admit a flaw or that you don't know something. You've got to be the expert, right?

So I had spent months doing research on this project, and we were giving our presentation. And usually the questions after the interview are a lot of times about fee, they're about schedule. Well, the president of the seminary, Wilson Yates, he looked at me and he said, "Joan, you and John gave a fantastic presentation, but at the end of the day, what are you afraid of?" And I was like, oh my God! That question just completely—the idea of somebody ask you what are you afraid of? So I just went into kind of hyper mode where I was like—I started saying something like, "Well, I don't get easily intimidated and I'm not afraid of a lot." But in the back of my head I'm thinking, oh, that's just a pile of crap because I had been obsessing over the last couple of weeks about something. And so I thought, okay, I can't do this anymore. So I said, "Wilson, do you want me to be really honest with you?" And he said, "Well, you're in a room full of theologians, so it's probably wise." So I said okay. And I admitted to him, because John and I had never done a religious project before—and usually they want people with experience, so I said, "I've been kind of obsessing about feeling like I don't have enough understanding around theology or Christianity to do this project justice.

Because I'm like, how do you ever feel prepared to design around this idea of God. And what I realized, to admit that in an interview was like—but it was being honest and it was

being authentic, and I was telling him what—. And afterwards he said, “It’s very clear from the way you talk about religion and creating spiritual space that you actually are a very spiritual person, and I think he really appreciated the honesty. And I think a lot of times in architecture—and I think this gets to school where they’re like, thick skin and be strong and be confident—sometimes just being kind of vulnerable or authentic or even admitting you don’t know everything can have a really powerful effect on people. And that taught me a lesson because I realized I can be honest. I don’t have to be this perfect robot up there. I can admit things to clients. And you realize at the end of the day a lot of it is just making connections with people. So it was a big lesson for me.

KL I think that’s a perfect story to conclude so many of the themes you had talked about today. Thank you very much Joan.

JS Thank you Kim.

[End of Interview]

Total Interview Time: 54:36

Credits

Project Stewards:

Minnesota Architectural Foundation (MAF)

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

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