The Minnesota Women in Architecture FAIA Legacy Project

Meg Parsons Oral History Interview

January 30, 2023

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.

Elevated to Fellow in 2020, Meg creates award-winning learning environments that are flexible and adaptable for the future and that support all students, teachers, and communities through a process of authentic community engagement. She advances professional and public knowledge by creating new methods and approaches to the development of educational facilities. Meg has a unique perspective on licensure, access to the profession, and equity. She mentors and promotes licensure and the protection of the public through her service to the profession

Interview

Meg Parsons, Interviewee
Kimberly Long Loken, Interviewer
January 30, 2023

Kimberly Long Loken: **KL**

Meg Parsons: **MP**

Track 1

00:00

KL Today's the 31st, right?

MP I think it's the 30th.

KL Today is January 30, 2023. And this is Kim Loken, AIA, interviewing Meg Parsons, FAIA, at Cuningham Group Architecture, Inc. at 201 Main Street in Minneapolis. Meg, for the oral history records, will you introduce yourself by your full name, place, and year of birth?

MP Okay. My full name is Margaret Sturgis-Graff Parsons, and I was born in Massachusetts in 1962. I go by Meg, so please call me Meg.

KL All right, well, let's start by talking about how did you find architecture, or did architecture find you?

MP Oh, a little bit of both, I think. So when I was young, I was going downtown with my Dad on a Saturday morning. I was taking swim lessons downtown, and he went to work during that time, and I remembered the IDS building being built, and I turned to him, and I said to him, when I grow up, I want to build buildings like that. And he said to me, I think I was probably about 14 at the time, he said to me, no, you don't. You'll be drawing doorknobs for the first seven years of your career. Wow. Okay. No, I guess I don't want to do that. And fast forward just a little bit. In high school, I really had no opportunities to take art. I was college prep all the way math, science, et cetera. But in my senior year, I decided I wanted to be an exchange student. So I applied through AFS for the Southern Hemisphere, which would mean I'd leave halfway through my senior year, I was done with high school. I actually applied and was accepted. But it wasn't to South America like I expected it was to South Africa.

MP This is 1979. First of all, my parents were not super excited. I was 17 at the time. It was three years after the Soweto uprising, and the world wasn't as close as it is now. There was no internet. There wasn't a lot of information. Anyhow, they let me go, and I spent that year doing stuff that I wasn't able to do in my regular high school. And one of those things was art. And I had an art teacher by the name of Patty Mace who was a huge influence on me. We talked about design, did lots of drawing and silk screens. She really mentored me through that process. And okay, I don't know how far we want to go back, so I'll just talk.

KL Yeah. That's what we're here for.

MP So while I was in in South Africa, my father sent me a college application to Carleton College, and it was the only application I filled out. And remember, this is all by hand and snail mail at the time. I filled it out, and I got in, fortunately, perhaps. So, when I came back to the United States in January of 1980, I had a few months before I started at Carleton in September of 1980. Anyhow, Carleton. My now husband I knew each other in high school, and he graduated from Carleton. It's a great place. Northfield, Minnesota is a town of cows, colleges and contentment. For me, two of the three were accurate. I was interested in urban studies, women's studies and politics and didn't have a lot of incoming stuff when you live in a rural community. So after, well, my sophomore spring, I did an urban studies program in Chicago. I also studied under Paul Wellstone, and my freshman summer he got me a job doing labor organizing in Philadelphia. So, lots of interesting stuff. But anyhow, I ended up leaving Carleton. I took about a year and a half off from college.

05:04

MP During that time I learned Spanish because that was really what I wanted to learn before. And by the way, I don't know it now because you have to use it or lose it with languages. I spent some time in Mexico. I ran a language school there that catered to tourists in San Miguel de Allende and taught English as a second language for the locals there. I went down there to learn the language and the woman that was running the school was

American, and she was about to have a baby, and she said, would you run the school while I'm on maternity leave? I said, sure. It was really a lot of fun. Anyhow, fast forward. I ended up back in school at Columbia University in New York City. And first of all, my undergraduate major is in political science. My undergraduate thesis was in daycare policy, which hasn't changed, by the way, since that time in the early 1980s. We still don't have a national policy for children under the age of five, which is, I think, a mistake on our part. We don't support women in our society well.

MP It was about maybe a year after I'd come back to school that I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. And I was interested in history and psychology. I was reasonably good at math, I was reasonably good at art, and all those things kind of added up to architecture for me. And so in my last, maybe year and a half at school, I took lots of art history and architectural studios and other courses that would support that. I did a calculus class. I had not taken a calculus class in college and it was one of the prerequisites for getting into architecture school. So I did it over a summer with all the pre meds. Now, first of all, calculus shouldn't be called calculus. It should be called finding the area of a donut. And once you understand that, it makes a lot more sense. But I ended up with a very good grade in that class, only because I spent every afternoon in tutoring, basically to get through it.

07:51

MP I graduated from Columbia in 1985, and at that point I did apply for graduate school, to the University of Pennsylvania. And my assumption was that I wouldn't get in the first try because it was all pretty new to me. And again, my major was poli-sci It wasn't architecture. I think if I'd spent one more term, I could have had a double major. But I was done.

KL Really?

MP I was done with undergrad.

KL Okay, well, I was a little curious about the fact that you were able to take architecture studios without being a declared.

MP Back in the day, it was not an issue. And I did a summer program at Columbia that was led by Lars Peterssen and Cynthia Jara here from the University of Minnesota. It was a kind of a pre-professional *do you want to do this?* type of studio. It was great. It was just really well done. So, I got my portfolio together, I applied, and I got in to grad school. And at this point, I really didn't want to be back in school right away, so I deferred entrance for a year. I worked for a landlord in the University of Pennsylvania area, bought my first car, bought my first house, bought my first dog, a German Shepherd. The house was kind of in a borderline area, beginning to be gentrified and not gentrified at all. And my Dad said, well, you should get a dog because that will protect you. But he didn't realize, and I didn't think

about it, you have to walk the dog at night before you go to bed, so it's dark anyhow. I started then at...oh and one of the other influences, probably as a part of that employment, they had a Christmas party, and I won a drawing for $1,500 to travel.

10:12

KL Wow.

MP And again, this was pretty much pre-internet and cell phones and the rest of it. I called my friend Gretchen Green, she was teaching English in Japan, and I said, I'd love to come visit you in Japan. And she said, I'm sick of Japan, let's go to China. And I said, okay. And we met in Kowloon outside of Hong Kong, and we traveled for a month in China. But it was another really huge influence, it was the old China, not the modern China. This was probably 1986 or 1987. I went, came back, went to the University of Pennsylvania, did a year, then did a summer program in India, which again, was just fascinating, and did the next term at University of Pennsylvania. I had never worked in an architectural office, and at this point, I was in debt for grad school because my parents weren't going to support me through grad school. And my now husband was here in Minneapolis. And so I made a decision to take a year off at that time. And essentially, I dropped out after a year and a half, and almost two years of architectural school.

MP What I wanted to do was work for a year to figure out if this was the right place for me, this was the right profession for me. And so it was just before Christmas, Jim flew out. We packed up my house with the dog and drove back to Minnesota.

MP Hit a snowstorm in Madison. I remember that. So, after arriving in Minnesota, of course, there was Christmas. My Dad got remarried, and then it was like January 2nd and I'm like, I better get a job. So, I had done informational interviews the summer before, and one of them was here at Cuningham, and they were the first people I called. And I said, is there an opportunity for someone like myself to come work with you? And I got an interview for January 3rd. They asked me to bring in lettering because at the time we were hand lettering drawings, and I was hired on the spot for $6.50 an hour. I was so excited. It was so great. This is 1989. And I started work January 4, 1989. They told me to come in at 8:00. Now, East Coast, typically businesses start at ten and they go to six, so I was a little shocked by the 8:00, but I made it in. The day after I started working, January 5th was my birthday, I turned 27, I went out with a group of new colleagues, slipped and fell on the ice, and I broke my wrist, my right wrist.

MP I didn't have health insurance, so I didn't go see a doctor for 30 days. I just wrapped it up. When I did go in, it was a fracture, and it wasn't too bad, but they had to cast me in a cast. And I said, you have to cast me in a cast so I can hold a pencil because I can't lose this job. So, that's what they did.

KL And you've been here ever since?

MP Yeah, I have been here ever since. When I started at Cuningham Group, there were 20 people. And out of the 20 people, and that included everybody, out of the 20 people, there were two licensed women architects. And that was the highest percentage that I had found, which at the time seemed pretty amazing. I did do an informational interview with a different firm that will go unnamed, a small firm. And there were there were, you know, four guys. This was, again, the time of parallel rules and hand drafting. WCCO was on in the background, and they were smoking at their desks, because you could do that then. And after the gentleman who was taking me around asked if I had questions, I said, well, have you ever had a woman work here? He said, yeah, but they really didn't work out. And I'm like, okay, see you. So, I think that just in general, now, there are a lot more women in the profession. And I think that we're at a point where women are leading firms, and that makes a big, huge difference in terms of how women can traverse this.

15:31

KL So I want to back up just a moment to early perceptions and misconceptions of architecture. How is it that your Dad thought you were going to be drawing doorknobs and doing schedules for seven years? What awareness of architecture did you or he have at that point? From the inside or the outside?

MP My Dad was from South Dakota originally. My maiden name is Graff and the family business was Graff Motor Supplies. My Dad got into Harvard for college, and I think there weren't very many Midwesterners that were doing this, traveling from Sioux Falls to Harvard. He graduated from Harvard College, I think in 1960, and he married my mother that following December. Because a lot of his friends were going onto law school, he decided to go to law school. I believe he was interested in architecture, but he made the decision to go to law school instead of architecture school. So I think that's where some of his preconceptions came from.

KL He had some other friends. He'd been to the studios. He had a sense of it. All right, so you hadn't finished your degree when you started working at Cuningham. Your wrist healed, and you returned to the drafting boards, and you reconvened with some U of M professors at the U.

MP So, I was married in 1990 and I was just working, basically. We transitioned to computers at the time I joined Cuningham group - we were using a computer to draw the base lines on a drawing, and then we'd put mylar in the ink plotter and would plot those lines - not in order, just anywhere that fell. It was really fascinating to watch. We still had the old blueprint machine in the back with lots of ammonia, but we were kind of on the cutting edge of getting into the computer and computerizing stuff. But my job was to, after the drawing came off the plotter, to hand letter notes, to put dimensions in, and use Zipatone.

And not everybody knows what Zipatone is anymore. I had this conversation just recently, but Zipatone was sticky stuff that has pattern on it, and you used it to show shading for demo plans or whatever, and you burnished it onto the drawings, using an X-Acto knife to cut it. I used to go home with pieces of Zipatone just all over me. I just wasn't very good with sticky stuff.

Cuningham grew a great deal and very rapidly in the early 1990s. We'd been doing churches, residences, we had started on schools. When I came into the office, Oak Point Elementary School in Eden Prairie was on the drawing boards. When I came on, I was working on additions to Eden Prairie High School with John Hamilton, who was the principal in charge. And then we got Minnetonka Public Schools. We were adding on to each of their six elementary schools. And John Quiter was the principal on those schools. There were three Johns that were principals at that time - I used to think I had to change my name to John to become a principal. I had never considered anything other than design when I was thinking about architecture, but John Quiter asked me to become the project manager on the Minnetonka projects, and he really mentored me. I also worked on the boards on one of the six schools. There were six schools that were supposed to be put out over twelve weeks of the summer. I did a lot of the initial programming work too, which I had also never thought about as part of architecture. I remember John often led the client user meetings, and so I observed him leading them. He picked me up at my house one morning to go out to Minnetonka, and as I got in the car, he said, I have laryngitis, you're going to have to lead the meeting.

MP And so I did, I didn't totally fail at leading the meeting, but that was a very interesting growth spurt for myself and for a number of my colleagues. We issued one school every 2 weeks and somebody would own it and make sure that everybody was organized on it. In addition, I think there were about eight of us underlings, there were three experienced architects, so we weren't just all on our own but we put one set out every two weeks, and they were 80 hours weeks. Nobody asked us to work that, but that was just what we needed to do to get stuff out the door on time.

21:26

KL On time and the schedule of part and parcel of the academic year schedule. So, the non-negotiable deadlines.

MP The building that I worked most closely on was Groveland Elementary School out there, which I think has gone through more changes since then. We had to make it accessible because there were two different levels and we had to take out a classroom and create a ramp. It was a fascinating project. That was the project I was doing the punch list on and there was a contractor that walked-through and he said, oh, are you going to be the teacher in this room? I said, no, I'm going to tell you what you need to fix.

Also, in the early 1990s, I worked in Roseville. We did the additions and remodeling to a number of elementary schools. Falcon Heights was the one I worked on most closely and then the high school as well. And again, I assumed the overall management role under one of the partners. I learned a lot about just the steps of management and how we look at things, which has helped a lot in my career. I also kind of saw myself as an interpreter between the design architects and teachers because there are different ways to communicate, and some of the design architects were, of course, very visual.

MP But coming from a background in poli-sci I knew that words were important too. So, it was an interesting growth period in my career. Let's see, where are we? Mid 1990s. I ended up doing some work up in Alaska at that time. I don't know how that fell in our lap exactly, but mostly master planning. And then my first daughter was born in 1997, my second in 2000, and my third in 2002. So, during that time, I wrote specs for about three years because I didn't want to do the early meetings or the late-night meetings. I wanted kind of a nine-to-five or eight-to-five job and learned a lot there. I also learned I didn't really enjoy specs as well as I thought I would. It was after my third daughter was born that one of my clients, Kathy Christie from Anchorage, who had moved from Anchorage School District Facilities, she was the head of facilities there, up to the Northwest Arctic Borough School District. She called and said, you know, I've got this great project. I'd really like your help with it. And so that kind of got me out of specs and back into more of the architectural role.

KL So, you opted into specs as, you know, your own internal version of a parental policy?

MP Yeah, sort of. I mean, I took six months off with each of my kids, totally unpaid. We had to plan and work for that. But I think that time is really important for all parents, both men and women, and that is one of the things, you know, that that I pushed really hard when I got on the board at Cuningham, this is what, 2016ish, to get parental leave. I was pushing for six weeks parental leave, got four, but I'm still pushing. There'll be more changes. And it was also that period that I remember John Cuningham came to my desk, and he said, you know, Meg, if you want to be a partner in the firm, you've got to go back to school and get your degree and your license. And I said, okay. And I give a lot of credit to John for working with me to figure out how to make that work. So, I averaged 32 hours a week and did nine credits a term at the U of M.

KL Yeah. So how much school did you have left? Like, two years, of coursework.

MP Well, okay, so remember, I hadn't been in school for 15 years at this point.

KL Right, but you had accomplished the first two years of an M-Arch?

MP They didn't count the summer in India. So, first year and a half. It was about two years that I went back to school, but nine credits a term, not a full load. I remember I had to start my

NCARB record. I'm pretty sure I was the reason for the six-month rule because I submitted 15 years of work at one time.

KL I don't know the six-month rule.

MP The current policy at NCARB to get your AXP Architect Experience Program - it used to be IDP Intern Development Program - is you have to report your work. Right now you have to do it in six-month chunks to get 100% credit for it. I just submitted 15 years at one time because at that point you could do so. I had all my timesheets in a binder, and I had two principals that were involved with all the work that I did, so they signed off on it.

I remember applying to the U and Steve Weeks, who at first I felt was my nemesis and much later my champion, said my academic work was 15 years old. I said, yeah, but it was at University of Pennsylvania. I mean, it's not a fly by night school. The one big thing I argued was that I shouldn't have to take the pro-practice class because I'd been writing contracts. They finally relented on that so I took a watercolor class instead, which was a lot of fun. I graduated in May 2006, and I spent two years, so whatever that is, 2004 to 2006 finishing my MArch.

MP The other thing that I did at the U was a historic preservation May term with Bob Mack up in the Orkney Islands in Scotland. That was fascinating. I was the oldest one there, except for Bob, so I'm in my forties at this point. I started taking my tests through Wisconsin because you didn't need your NAAB-accredited degree to start them while I was finishing my degree. There were nine tests at the time, and I graduated in May of 2006, and I had two tests left. I took those over the summer. So I was licensed in 2006 through the state of Wisconsin and got reciprocity to Minnesota shortly thereafter because I had all the qualifications for the state of Minnesota. So nonlinear.

KL Nonlinear, but totally sensible. Right. All of these things adding up and coming together. So obviously your career has been completely oriented around educational facilities. Within the work that Cuningham was doing at the time. Yes, they had this big push to get all of these projects out in that dense period of time, but had you been inherently attracted to public work or to educational work like, was there some dabbling after that first twelve-week period of all these school sets.

29:48

MP So the firm history is that in the early 1990s, Tom Hoskens brought the first two casinos to us, Grand Casino and Mille Lacs Casino. The reason we ended up doing this work was because the money from the casinos was going back to the communities. So, we also did, I think, two schools up there, medical clinic and a worship space, and as that part of our business developed, we created a reputation across the country and we still do a lot of entertainment work. We currently have five studios, *Grow*, which includes education,

nonprofit, cultural types of work. We do some worship work, but not as much as we used to. *Play* is entertainment, so it includes the casinos, big name entertainment, resorts and such. We've done work worldwide in *Play*. We also created TESS – Themed Entertainment Sustainability Summit - and it's about creating sustainability in entertainment types of projects. In *Live* we've got senior housing, affordable housing, and market rate housing, but it's all multifamily housing at this point. It tends not to be single family housing. W*ork* -we have a big campus outside of Madison for Epic Systems. They're the medical software company. I think we started working with them probably over 25 years ago with their first building. What's interesting about this work is it's now more thematic than it used to be. The campuses have themes like Wizards Academy and Emerald City. They are looking at how to attract talented young people with creative spaces. It also has the largest geothermal field in the United States and in North America. So, they're also looking at sustainability. We actually no longer call it sustainability, we call it regenerative design, and it's a part of our process on every project. It's really looking at how we can develop buildings so that they don't extract from the earth, but they give back. It's pretty cool. So high efficiency envelopes and regenerative energy is something we look at pretty much on every project.

KL And you do a lot of sustainability data tracking on your projects as well, right?

MP Yes, we do. And then the last studio is *Heal*, which is medical work. Both hospitals, medical office buildings, mostly on the West Coast. So we started with 20 people in 1989. We're now between about 285 in six locations domestically. We've got offices in Minneapolis, Denver, Phoenix, Las Vegas, San Diego and Culver City, which is LA. So mostly on the West Coast side of things. And that growth has been really interesting to see. I have these five high school friends, women friends that I get together with, and one of them said to me, well, how can you stand doing the same thing for 30 years? Well, it's not the same thing. There's a lot of different things that I've done. And the serendipity for me has been being in a place that I can grow as it's growing. I'm now the board chair for the company and we just hired a new CEO. Her name is Jacqui Dompi. We also hired a new COO Sandi Najera. As we look to the future, that's one of the things that I feel is really important in terms of legacy and EDI or JEDI or whatever you want to call that equity piece, is understanding how we can help build a place for women, where they see female leaders, where they can see a future path for themselves.

KL And then international work as well. Your portfolio, which is a nice mirror to all of your international experiences as a student and between student episodes.

MP Between student episodes, yeah. It's certainly interesting working in a different culture. One of the projects I remember quite clearly was an international school in Azerbaijan, in Baku, and we designed the whole school, master planned the whole school, but we really only put drawing sets out for some of the site work and some of the initial stuff. I'm not sure the school ever actually got built. There was a fair amount of site issues in terms of

soil quality out of the Soviet era, but we put out a set of site drawings that had no spec, but each drawing had English, Russian, Azerbaijani, and I think there was a local language as well on it. So, we had to find translators for all those, which was fascinating.

KL So in your FAIA packet, you talk a lot about designing *with* not *for* which matters on every project but would certainly be exemplified by designing internationally with different cultures and communities. Talk more about how you nurture that process of *with* not *for*.

MP So this has always been a part of our process, but I think in the last 15 years, we've begun to hone those charrette skills. And it was interesting during the pandemic because you couldn't do it face to face, but we did manage to do it with electronic tools. One of the things that I feel very strongly about is that warm, safe and dry are givens. Now, what is it that it takes for a school to become a part of the community? How is it that we think about learning before we think about the building? And so that's part of the process that we use. We're doing this right now up in Grand Forks. They've got a new middle school. We'll go out to referendum in May. The community doesn't know yet what they're getting, so they want to understand better. What is this thing that we're talking about? Last week we went up and we did a visioning session and we did a number of activities, including 'forces of change', where people write on a big sheet of paper. What do you see is going to affect education in the near and distant future? We did a video provocation where we showed them, it was actually an elementary school rather than a middle school, but what types of things are people looking at? Because sometimes when you're in a community, you don't know what else is out there. And this video is about a school in Hawaii where the barriers between the learning spaces were flexible and adaptable. The furniture was flexible and adaptable. It was a different way of thinking. What they have right now is essentially the same as when I went to school, it's a junior high school, so it's double loaded corridors with bearing walls that you can't take down and they can't group students the way they want to. At the charrette, we did an I See/We See exercise, and the prompt is you're taking a group of international folks through your school that's been very successful for your community. What do you see? And individually, what do you see? So they do this exercise on Post-it notes, and it's one idea per Post-it note. And then at the table, they do "We See". So they kind of begin to group their "I Sees" in different things, and they write a "We See" statement.

40:01

MP We had six tables do this. And then we asked for volunteers to synthesize the vision statement and bring it back to the group at our next meeting. This vision statement is not about the district as a whole. It's about this building, this place for students to learn. In the group we include teachers, staff, administrators, parents, students, community members, business leaders, et cetera, so it's a mix of people because everybody has their own view of how this particular school is going to work in their community. And then next week, we will also do what we call a 'think outside the blocks' or 'block party exercise'. We have little

colored foam blocks and we let them play. And then each group comes back and shares with the full group why they put the learning studios where they did - we don't call them classrooms because as soon as you say, classroom everybody has an idea of what that is. What we're trying to do is have folks think differently about how spaces might function for students and for teachers. And they talk about why they've arranged things a certain way and that helps us create what we call common ground. There may be some interesting outliers as well, but we essentially take all the ideas and then model it. We usually use SketchUp at this level because it's easy and come back with a solution. It may not be exactly perfect, but then we get reactions to it in our third workshop and at the end of this process we have an agreed upon direction. When we were doing this for Alexandria High School, which was probably about ten years ago now, we did this over the course of a day and a half. So we were together as a group for a day and a half. In the case of Grand Forks, they couldn't dedicate that time. So we're doing it in evening meetings over the course of three weeks. So, the old way of doing things was you'd listen to someone talk about what they want and you as the architect, would come up with three schemes and then you'd pin them up and you'd talk about each scheme, and you'd ask them to pick and they'd always pick the wrong one. It was never the one you liked. Or they would say none of these work and they want to combine everything and you go over budget when we come back to a group with one and it gets altered. In this case, the result is theirs, it's not ours. It is about what they need and what they want. And what this also allows is for a great deal of innovation in thinking. Because again, as soon as you say classroom or cafeteria, you get an idea in your head. Alexandria High School is a great example. In fact, the reason we're working in Grand Forks is because they saw our work in Alexandria. It was a new high school, finished in 2014. The center space is called Eat Meat Greet and it serves as a cafeteria. There's a food area, serving area, but it also serves as the hub for the entire community. The learning areas are off to one side. It's also pre-function space for the big gym, for events, and for their auditorium for 1000 people. And it's where everybody hangs out when they don't have class and when they're not hanging out in their learning areas, they're hanging out there. And this was the students' idea. That didn't come from us, that came from them. And they own it and they love it. So that's that design *with* not *for* piece I think it's so important.

KL Do you go as young as kindergarteners in involving them in charrettes?

MP We like to. In fact, we're doing so now - and I don't claim ownership over this one - my colleague Heidi Neumueller and her team created an activity recently, it was kind of like a carnival. They had a family night at Bruce Vento School on the east side of St. Paul, and they were going to serve pizza, so that was the draw. It wasn't us. But in their lobby we set up a number of stations and we gave the kids and the adults 'passports' so they could get a stamp at each of the stations. And one was, where do you feel the safest? Or where do you like being in your school? And we had a map of the school, and we explained where things were, and they would put their sticker on one of those. One was, what would you like to see culturally in your school? And we had a big scroll, and people just drew. We were just

prompting and helping. We had one creative exercise where they just had a lot of stuff, leaves and sticks and other stuff to create a little collage. And then we photographed those and asked them, what's here? What's important? We had pictures of interior spaces, and we asked them to put dots on the ones they liked. And we didn't tell the parents this, but we gave the students a certain color and we gave the parents a certain color dot. And then again, we had a storytelling station where they would talk to somebody about what they saw as important. So all this was an incredible way to gather information from kids as young as kindergarten up to fifth grade. In the charrettes the block playing is great for folks, but we needed another method to gather information from young kids, and this was highly successful. We don't say we're using trauma informed design because immediately you feel like you're in trauma, but we do look at mental health and wellness as a part of our projects. And this is a way for them to talk about where they feel safe. Where they feel they belong. What do they need to make them feel safe? What do they need to make them feel that they belong here?

And what came out of that was really the importance of play and the importance of gathering and community. And so, as we've been developing Bruce Vento, we're looking at it through that lens. How is it that we can create places within the building that are fun, that can be playful? One of the interesting things about the site is there's a 39-foot difference diagonally across the site and it's got a lot of grade change. And as a result, the building has to change levels as well. We're only in Schematic Design right now, are starting Design Development, but there's been a lot of opportunities to add that element of play and so it's been a lot of fun. You have to have fun at what you're doing or why are you doing it?

47:46

KL So I want to ask you about another kind of information gathering that you are involved with, which is that you taught online for several years at San Diego State.

MP That was through A4LE (the Association for Learning Environments), and it was on community engagement and master planning. It was really interesting because I got to share all these ideas with people that are out there in the field as architects and facility planners. I did that for about six years, and then they took it in house to A4LE, and it didn't work in my schedule the same way it had, but it was a lot of fun when I did it. There's not one way to do any of this this is just what I have found works and what we at Cuningham have worked to developed together.

KL And in teaching there, your audience is a professional organization of other education across the world. Right. And you received an honor from them as well.

MP Well, I'm an accredited learning environment professional through (ALEP) A4LE.

KL Through the time of your elevation, which is just a few years ago. So it's a pretty current number, you're one of 255 education planners to be designated as such.

MP Yeah, as I said earlier, when we were offline, that was one of the things that prompted me to actually to look at being FAIA, because I was encouraged based on the work that I was doing there.

KL Right. So that's an important reflective moment in your career to realize that there's a body of work, there is a dynamic narrative, but one that fits together and speaks to the fullness of what you've accomplished. And to pursue the designation of fellowship, that suggests an opportunity to maybe talk about complementary skills and interest in that dynamic path. Like you said, if you're not having fun, if it's not playful, what you're doing, what are the other things that you're bringing into being an architect and being an education planner?

50:22

MP Not quite sure I understand the question, but.

KL You mentioned earlier that you were delighted to place out of your professional practice class and take a watercolor class. Instead, you mentioned in the delight of the preservation focus studio in Scotland. So are there things that you've enjoyed as maybe a passing experience or a new hobby or a lifelong hobby here?

MP So, creativity is very important. Always in my life I draw. I've done stained glass in the past, I've done quilting in the past. There's just a whole bunch of outlets for that. I have found in more recent years that it's harder to make that time and life has its own pace to it. I used to compare it to catalogs. So when you're in your twenties, you get all the clothing catalogs and all kinds of personal stuff, me stuff. You get married, you start getting the household catalogs with all the gadgets, et cetera. And then you have kids and you start getting all the kids catalogs, kids clothing, kids toys and whatever. Now I'm in this other phase where we're empty nesters. Now we've got one graduating from college, one is a sophomore in college and the other is working on her masters. She's actually in Budapest right now, flying to Tokyo soon.

KL So you've passed on the travel bug?

MP I did. My eldest, Evva, is in a masters program. It's called Master of History in the public sphere, and she's the only American in the program. There are 20 people in her cohort. It's a two-year program and it travels around the world. So she was in Vienna for a fall semester. She'll be in Tokyo spring semester. She's doing an interim January in Budapest doing archival research. And then next year she's not quite sure, but she'll probably be in

Lisbon. So, yes, I passed on the travel bug, and I think travel is very important. I think that one of the things that my husband and I wanted for each of our children was to have a second language. And honestly, I didn't care what language and he speaks German really well, so all three of my girls are fluent in German. Evva, my eldest, has taken it one step further. She's conversational in Arabic and she's learning Spanish and Italian right now. But getting outside of your own culture, being able to see from outside, which was my experience in South Africa when Jimmy Carter was the president. They saw him as being very weak and indecisive. And it's very interesting because and perhaps there was some of that internally to the States as well, but he was also very thoughtful, and he didn't make quick decisions. But being able to see from the outside what you and your country look like really helps you reflect on the world as a whole. And we're no longer segregated. We're all integrated, really.

KL Before, this is a lovely moment to be getting more philosophical and to start talking about the direction architecture is heading in. But before that, I want to talk about your service and your involvement with AIA Minnesota, with NCARB, with the University of Minnesota College of Design, and the mentorship that you give to people at various stages in the licensure process. At what point did you really launch and crystallize a real service path?

MP Because my path to licensure was not linear, I felt a need to be a support to people who were on the path to licensure. It was really probably 2007, after I got licensed, that I first of all, was asked to serve AIA, Minnesota and NCARB in their architect licensing advisor position. And I did that for close to nine years. So through that committee we'd go out and we talked to firms. We went over to the U's pro-practice class, talked about the path to licensure and what you need to do to get there. I think that many students, in particular, don't have a good sense of what it's going to take to be licensed after they graduate. They're so focused on schoolwork. And to me, it was important to help people be aware of that. It was Gary Demele, who was the sponsor for my FAIA, who was stepping down from that position and took me out for a couple of glasses of wine and twisted my arm to do this. But it was fun. And it was then that I became involved with NCARB at committee level.

MP I also applied to be on the state licensing board - I'm currently on the state board. I'm serving my second four-year term. I was the vice chair and chair. I'm now just a member board member. But that also launched me into leadership at NCARB So I'm now the Region Four Director on the National Board of Directors for NCARB And part of that impetus came from the fact that I when looked at a web page for NCARB, this was probably back around 2016, the picture of the board was all older men. One of the things that we're working on right now is our governance structure at NCARB. How do we make it possible for people to sit on the NCARB board so they don't have to go up a leadership ladder that takes 15 years to get there? Currently it takes a long time through regional leadership to national leadership. And so that's in process. That's one of the reasons I wanted to be on the board, is to make a change there. I think I've always pushed on those

boundaries for women. I told you the story about walking through the building and being thought of as a teacher. I remember a sales rep for bleachers. I asked him a question about the distance between the bleachers and the game line. We knew we had game tables, et cetera. He said, oh, I bet you were a cheerleader, and you just want to say, this is so inappropriate. I don't need to hear this stuff. It's just not okay. But again, I think we have made great strides, and we will continue to make great strides. This is part of the legacy thing that I feel is important. As I look at my career, I do see kind of an end coming up, not of who I am, I'm not going to die, but probably of working full time. And I want us to think about the fact that equity shouldn't be something that's tacked on or added on. That is a part of everything we think about in a firm and in working with our clients. Equity, diversity, and inclusion. It's about belonging. It's about creating place in a firm for people to feel they belong. It's a lot harder right now with the pandemic. We're not all back at Cuningham. We have a work from anywhere policy. And that policy means that you don't necessarily have to live near one of our offices or come into our office. What I find when I come in is I'm energized because I love seeing people, I love talking to people. But we want it to be more of an opportunity and not a mandatory thing. I think in the industry, we're seeing people push back on the idea of mandatory stuff, particularly with younger staff. That being said, it, may be more beneficial for younger staff to be in the office because it's easier to mentor face to face. We have looked at that, and there are ways to do that through zoom, through Miro board. What was the original question? It was about mentoring?

KL It was just broadly a prompt about your service path. So it hit some facts and some chronology, but also the focus and the areas of dedication and service.

59:52

MP So legacy things I think about: EDI is not a tag on thing, and financially the firm is on firm footings, that we're not a commodity. It's not lowest fee gets the job. It's what do we bring to the table? How do we create opportunities for community in communities? How is it that we listen and hear so that we design *with*, not *for*? I mean, that's so critical to me. And lastly, innovation. Just because it is, doesn't mean it needs to be. Just because we have all these schools that were built in prior years with double-loaded corridors, that's not what we're looking at for the future, that's not where education is going. And we need to think more broadly. We need to look across - so I talked about five studios - but really what we need to understand is the connection between studios. *Heal* and *Grow*, the connection is mental wellness. It's wellness. It's how do we create spaces that create joy? And honestly, walking down a corridor with lockers on either side does not promote joy. It's not an uplifting environment to be in. It's almost like a prison. So how do we think about things differently? Yeah, I'll step off my soapbox.

01:01:22

KL Well, you've done a really good job of pre-answering the direction that you see the field of architecture heading in, the changes that you hope to see in the field. But I do want to dig in a little bit and talk about your work here on the board and some specific changes that you've made to Cuningham and changes that maybe happened a little faster in a private organization than in a national public organization or professional organization and circle back to parental leave policy and other cultural and community efforts that you're making in what is Cuningham?

MP So I think John Cuningham really led the charge on a lot of stuff in the sense that when we used to have design reviews. It wasn't just architects in the room. It was the accountant, it was the receptionist. It was about people. And it's about how you connect with people and how architecture connects with people. That's been the strength of the culture, I think, here at Cuningham for a long time. I think that I was one of two women that were elevated to, or were given the opportunity to buy into Cuningham in 2007. And up to that point, and that wasn't that long ago. Up to that point it had been a guy's club, basically. And they'd go out golfing together and they would do this together, and they'd do that together. And I think that as some of those folks have retired, we've had more opportunity to say, well, you know, let's think about this a little bit differently. And when we were selecting a new CEO, we had two finalists. And it was unanimous on the board that we go with our new CEO. And I think it was because she brought some of that awareness, freshness, and ability to think differently about the profession. She's actually not an architect, but she's worked in the AEC and industry for 20-25 years. But she begins to help us think, how do we simplify internally? Shouldn't we be thinking more about an external focus and bringing what we need to do, particularly around regenerative work and the equity and diversity work into our projects? How is it we think about it differently? And to me that's so refreshing. And it's something that I think is really important moving forward. I think I said this already, but I want Cuningham to be a place where people feel they belong, regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual preference, gender, whatever. And how you do that is by making connections with people and creating teams that work well together, which also increases kind of that sense that you can make a change, that you can help move things forward. And I see that, and I want it to continue well.

KL And I think something about the culture of the company as a person in town, a person in the sphere, influence of Cuningham. I've always been aware of your art show. The employee created art, which is a fundraiser, and I've attended a few of the Urban Currents presentations discussions. So it's always struck me that you are kind of an open-door community and looking at inviting people in to talking about art and design a little more broadly.

MP I like to think so, yes. And of course, the pandemic has changed some of that for us too. It's interesting. I hope that in the future we do find a way to bring people together internally, because it is more difficult now, because I think there is value to that. Doesn't mean sitting at your desk every day. Because I think that people really do want the

flexibility. They want to have their own lives - even before the pandemic. I would sometimes leave work early to go see a basketball game for one of my girls or whatever. I'd always say, I'm going to my daughter's basketball game. And the reason I did that was to give permission to other people just by modeling it. Because I trust folks here to get the work done, to do what they need to do. Family always comes first, in my opinion.

KL So you helped institute a change in the early parental leave policy.

MP Yeah.

KL But it's interesting to hear you talk about what that kind of organic parenting policy is.

MP Yeah, I think that, again, there are different ways that people lead. Some people have got the flag, and they're asking people to follow the flag, and they're out in front. I tend to lead side by side or from behind. How can I support people to be their best? I had a school principal pull me aside after a meeting one day. At the meeting, a younger woman was leading the meeting, and I was in the back taking notes. And the principal said, I just want to compliment you on mentoring and letting this person take the lead and that you're supporting her. She said, I've got a 30 year-old daughter, and, you know, that's what she needs. She needs someone supporting her as she moves forward in her career. And I didn't think about it that way because I just wanted this person to be successful and be seen as the leader. And yes, I could have easily led that meeting, but my role, I felt, was to be supportive. So that's about leading and leading by example, going to your daughter's game or whatever.

KL You mentor, you model. As we move towards a conclusion, I want to ask you more about just specific advice that you would give to I'm going to ask it a couple of different ways, but while we're talking about parenting, what advice would you give a parent in the career of architecture? And I think this one's the most open ended. It could be at various points in their career, various points in parenting. But maybe the younger architect, younger parent comes to mind first.

MP Okay, so I'm going to share a story. My daughter Elise, who is graduating from Bryn Mawr this spring, was accepted to Tulane School of Architecture School out of high school with a nice healthy scholarship because she was interested in architecture. But she made the decision to go to Bryn Mawr. She said Mom, I'm just not sure about architecture. And I said, that's okay, you don't need to be sure right now. Her major is in the growth and structure of cities or urban design, and while she is not looking to go to graduate school immediately, she wants to take a year off, she is considering architecture school still. I think one of the things that coming out of NCARB are things like the IPAL program, where you can go to class, do internships, and sit your exams during your time in that program. Dunwoody has an IPAL program. I think that would be an excellent piece of advice to anybody thinking of architecture, knowing what they want to do coming out of high

school, as it shortens the path to licensure. I think one of the things that we haven't done well is expose high school students to the profession of architecture.

01:10:26

MP And having a student that was interested in architecture, I did find a program at Washington University in St. Louis. I think it was a four-week summer program. My daughter's reaction was they were weeding people out, they weren't encouraging people. She said a couple of people just left after the first week. So I think as a profession, we need to do a better job of exposing, and particularly if we want to create diversity in our profession, exposing folks to what is an architect? What does an architect do? What type of career path can you have? And there's not one career path. My opinion is that architecture school teaches design, but they don't teach all the other things that you need to think about to become an architect, whether it's management, project management, collaboration, technical skills. There are design skills. Design, though, isn't just about the building. It's about the process, which is, as you can tell from my FAIA application, something that I feel very strongly about. So advice, maybe it's advice to architects now and to some of the organizations we're involved with is how do we open the door to people that may not know what an architect is? I've done numerous interviews with high school students. The latest one was a woman. She was probably 17. She was deciding between architecture and engineering. Well, there's a big difference between architecture and engineering. So I did a phone call with her, and then I called up an engineer friend, a woman as well, and I said, Can I give her your number? Can you talk to her about what it means to be an engineer? I haven't heard back. I don't know what's going on, but I think that we we're not very transparent in many ways to the public - we protect health, safety, and welfare - but what does an architect really do? How do we create community? How is it that we help people understand that the barriers that you see can be broken open in a building by design?

KL I think it's very appropriate that you inverted this question.

MP Ok, I totally didn't mean to but..

KL No, it's perfect, it's the natural conclusion that the question is sort of built upon this idea that architecture is difficult and torturous and that we need to be giving advice to various groups of people in order to make it into and through architecture. And you're just saying, well, get your act together Architecture.

MP I don't know if you were at the AIA convention, the panel of owners and I want to say underlings that's probably not the right word owners and employees. Do you remember? Were you part of that?

KL I was not. I think it had a kind of emerging leadership bent to it.

MP At this session one of the male owners said, why is it that we say things like, just because I did it, you have to do it? Because I worked 80 hours weeks. You all should be doing 80 hours weeks. Why are we imposing that, when with our children we always want them to do better than we are? The woman architect sitting next to me said, it's because men are the business owners and women are at the home. So there is still that attitude of you have to pay your dues. And I don't believe that. I believe you can excel at a young age using what you know and how to propel yourself further depending on what you want to be and what you want to do. The opportunities exist now. They didn't exist the same way when I started 1989. Right.

01:15:10

KL Although the challenge of identifying the path may be perennial.

MP It is, and I don't mean to be glib, but I think that well, and this is true of any person in their 20s, right. Not just women.

KL And it's not just our profession.

MP Yes, and it's not just our profession. My daughters are 25, 22, and 20, and they're all like, well, I don't know what I want to do. It goes back to serendipity. How is it that you figure out a starting point that's where you want to start, and then are there ways to figure out where you want to go from there? So who knows? Who knows? I think architecture is unlike a lot of other professions. We with a project have a beginning, a middle, and an end. So there's always a celebration point in your work day or your work life. And you also always have to learn something new. You always learn whether it be the project, the client, the building materials, the soils, whatever it is, there's always something new to learn, and that's also exciting, and you have to be open to that.

KL Well, that sounds like the perfect place for us to pause this conversation. You're going to get right back to continuing and discovering, learning, traveling. Thank you. It's been a pleasure. Pleasure. Bye.

[End of Interview]

Total Interview Time: 1:20:04

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