The Minnesota Women in Architecture FAIA Legacy Project

Renée Cheng Oral History Interview

August 2, 2018

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.

Renée Cheng

Elevated to Fellow in 2017, Renée Cheng connects profession and academy, analyzing and promoting innovative practices, new forms of representation and alternative project delivery methods to facilitate critical discourse in the profession and advance innovation in education.

Interview

Renée Cheng, Interviewee
Kimberly Long Loken and Brittany Clair Pool Lindsay, Interviewers
August 2, 2018

Kimberly Long Loken: **KL**

Brittany Clair Pool Lindsay: **BL**

Renée Cheng: **RC**

Track 1

00:00

KL August 2, 2018. Interview with Renée Cheng conducted by Kimberly Loken and Brit Lindsay. Alright Renée, so we'll just talk through this more informally. We've got a framework of topics, but this is a good opportunity to ask some follow-up questions and go on tangents. So we'll just go back and be a little more chronological to start. Can I ask you to state when and where you were born for archives? Are you comfortable with that?

RC Sure. Yeah, I was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan on July, 1963.

KL So how did you first encounter architecture—in your childhood or as you—?

RC You know, when we go through admissions, we always look at all these essays, and there's people that say, I've known I wanted to be an architect since I was a small child with Lincoln Logs or Legos or something like that, and I was never like that. I used to—I definitely loved to make things always, but when I was in college—. I grew up in a fairly traditional Chinese family—I'm first-generation American-born. So a sign of success in that kind of culture is to be a doctor or a lawyer and also pretty much to go to either Harvard or MIT—Yale was kind of okay too.

KL (Laughter).

RC So, when I got into Harvard, my parents were really pushing hard for medicine because I did like science. And I started pre-med and was really, really unhappy. And it was very clear to me that that was not what I wanted to do. My mom was an artist, and so she was always saying that you should only be an artist if you would die without it, like it really had to be a calling. When I was unhappy in pre-med, I started taking classes in the Visual Environmental Studies program which was essentially like their arts school. It was a little

bit more—slightly different—more environmentally broad than just art. But I took a drawing class taught by a person who had studied under Joseph Albers when Albers had been at Yale. And he approached drawing from a very optical, neurological and perception point of view that really, really resonated with me, and I just loved the class. My parents were pretty worried, like, oh, no, she's going to become an artist (laughter) and she's not going to be a doctor. So I finished undergrad thinking—not really sure what I wanted to do—but having a portfolio with drawing and having a background with a lot of the physical science stuff that I did, and then actually psychology.

So picking architecture for grad[uate school] was really like, well, this seems like it would work for a lot of my interests, but I really didn't know that much about it. So, it's an unusual path compared to a lot of people that I know that come through architecture school is I really more—seemed like it would work. And then I entered graduate school and I'd stayed at Harvard, so I had still a lot of ties. I was teaching a class that I'd been in that I really had transformed my life at that time. That became a real anchor for me. So, it took me a while to figure out what about architecture and what blend of things that kind of addressed a lot of my interest in the perception issues that my really great interest in making things, using my hands and a kind of resonance with beauty and social issues of what could be better for all and benefit all of society. So, it really took a while for me to find my place in architecture. That's a little different from other people that say, "Oh yeah, I grew up knowing that I wanted to be"—I'd never met an architect until pretty late in life. I think my great-grand uncle was an architect that I never met. But my grandmother was like, "Oh yeah, it runs in our family." I'm like, "Well, I guess so." (Laughter).

KL Maybe this will come up a little bit throughout our talk today, but what were some of those ah-ha moments in graduate school where you did start to see those connections, the things where you were initially like, oh, this might play out when—. What were some of those moments when you were like, yeah, psychology—

RC That connection is—.

KL —or the colors—perception?

RC Yeah, the psychology connection has only become clear in the last decade or so as my research has getting more into organizational behavior and collaboration. But there were definitely times in [architecture graduate school] where I almost quit in the first year. It was rough. I was in with—I don't know what your background was, but I was essentially what is often called a three-plus student [non-architecture major]. But at Harvard they mixed everybody, and so I was in with people that had done a year and a half at the Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies that Peter Eisenman was running with Mario Gandelsonas and Diana Agrest in New York. And they had done undergraduate architecture at Columbia and then had gone to the Institute where they had really heavy theory. And I was

lost. I did not know what they were talking about. And so, I had approached a lot of things very compositionally the way that relied on my training.

So, I think the thing that kept me in was certainly a couple of teachers and classmates. But when I started doing these really intense charcoal drawings where I could see the space and the sense of space in my head—I didn't know a lot of precedents. I didn't know a lot of the—I didn't know a lot about construction or detailing or materials, but I could envision what the space should feel like. And so those were not required, like when they were at the end of the first exercise—were much more like following a rule set or doing things that weren't more compositional. It was the classic cube problem and the Italian villa problem and things like that. It was like the library problem.

So, I just started sketching on my own, these perspective sketches. And my other work was pretty crude and not very architectonic. But these sketches just got a lot of attention like, "What is that," and "Where is that?" And I was like, "Well, I think it's kind of here." And they were like, "No, that couldn't be." "Well, I want it to be there. Can you show me how to make it look like it would be there?" (Laughter). So, it was kind of through those perspective sketches and then really rough models that I was really comfortable with. So I was super comfortable with just generating a ton of stuff. And so that was where I realized that, unlike some of my classmates that were much more—like, they needed to think everything through and have a set of rules and understand what the—how it related to precedent and program—because they knew so much, I was kind of fearless because I didn't know any better and I was like, well, this is what I imagine. And so, I realized that that was a strength.

And then I taught drawing the whole time that I was in graduate school. So, I had that base in having had the class myself and having then—it's a teaching fellow position which is more like a co-teacher as opposed to a teaching assistant. And so I was really given a lot of responsibility with the professor William Reimann. And so—talked with him a lot about what the pedagogy was on the teaching. So, before as a student, you're not aware of the pedagogy sort of coming through, and then professor might talk about it a little bit. But this, having those conversations with him, really helped me understand this role of perception and space and what's drawn and how it's communicated that then later, whether it's communicated for drawing as the end result or drawing in order for other people to build into that—and becoming a life-long fascination. But, of course, in hindsight I can look back on it, but it's harder to say at the time because it was really—you know.

KL So, was the drawing or the teaching or both kind of a lifelong fascination?

RC It was the idea that you could teach drawing as a way of perceiving space in that drawing was essentially a kind of communication for lots of different purposes. For an architect, drawing is really your only means of communicating to clients and to people that eventually

build the space. But, at that time, just seeing drawing as much more than I'm producing a drawing, but that it was really a thought process, a way of expressing, a way of testing and seeing and a way of using drawing as a way to probe your perception and other people's perception and communicate with others.

KL Can you talk a little bit about your mother's artwork?

RC Yeah, so I brought a book that we can go through later in that part of the section. So, my mom was a painter. She passed away about nine years ago, and she had been trained with—classically with Chinese brushwork and then with the Russian Academy of Art in Shanghai which was very Beaux Arts space, like a lot of line and volumes and figure and a lot of the classical ordered stuff. And then she came to America for college when Hans Hoffman and the New York school DeKooning was really prominent, the abstract expressionist. And so, she got very involved with that kind of abstraction, which she hadn't before because she had been drawing from life or from these set ways of how do you draw bamboo or bird or something with the certain brushstrokes.

10:02

But she had all that discipline, and so her work is pretty amazing and blending both East and West and has a really joyful sense of color.

And so I grew up with her as a very active artist. She taught art at the University of Michigan for 30-some years. And her last year of teaching was my first year of teaching, so that was also a really important influence on me.

KL Yeah, really interesting.

RC But I grew up around art, and we would go to museums. And she was always doing painting in situ and so I would sometimes be sketching, more so after I was more trained. And so I had a lot of art history through an artist eyes. So, we went to tons of museums, but I never had a formal art history class, and so, I never actually never even took them. I went to one—periodically there were some really good teachers at Harvard, but I never enrolled in one. But I went to the lectures, and it was really interesting to see it from the historical point of view, with chronology and trends and movements. When I had heard—I was familiar with all these artists, but from my mom's point of view, which was either from her Beaux Arts training or from her classical Chinese training or from the abstract expressionist or through her own work, and compositional movements and things like that, but through an artist's eyes.

So, it was really interesting to see art history and architecture history formally when I had been immersed in it for so long through a really different lens of looking at where things fit in the world and the kind of creative practice of the spaces we live and the things that we perceive.

BL Because of her painting background, do you think she was more supportive of you in your switch to architecture?

RC No, it was actually the other way around (laughter). So, ever since I was a little kid—because I drew and painted and made a lot of clay when I was really young, she was worried that I was going to pursue a career in art, and so she was telling me, it's like, "It's great that you do this. This is a really important way of understanding yourself and learning about the world and about yourself, but you should only be an artist if it's a calling, if it's a mission, if you feel like you would die without it." And that's what she tells her students. That's what she told her students. That how she felt, is that she really—she couldn't breathe if she didn't have art, and she was so prolific. She drew and painted all—after she passed away, she was very neat about cataloguing things, and she had a lot of active galleries and sold a lot of work, but there was a lot of stuff that was uncatalogued because she was just so amazingly prolific. So, she just made stuff all the time every day and then would go in these peaks and valleys of really intense production and then more reflection. But she was concerned about career, and she also saw I was much more interested in science than she had ever been, so she was like, you could be a doctor and paint on the side (laughter).

KL And just to kind of close the loop on that part of your biography, your family's biography, when did your mother migrate?

RC Both my mom and my dad came for college. So, they had actually left China during the Japanese invasion when they were in high school—kind of middle school-high school and then went to Hong Kong. And then from Hong Kong had to figure out what to do. And she actually had options to go to the Royal Institute of Art in London or the Beaux Arts in Paris, but her largest scholarship was the Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. And so she ended up going there, and it was a tiny little place. It was actually Maya Lin's dad was her professor there—tiny place, but she was the only Chinese person people had ever seen, so little kids would go up to her on the street and touch her because they had never seen someone that looked like her, and she was really homesick. And there was no such thing as Chinese food, and you couldn't go home, and you couldn't Skype, and calling was like once-a-month kind-of-thing, so she was really, really homesick.

And my dad was—ended up being an engineer but he was at Bradley University, small school, because that's where they happened to get an application, like physical application. And they had some kind of distant family friend that was in the area and could get that application and send it to them. So, it was really a chaotic time for the Chinese that had

been forced out of China with the Japanese and the Communists. So, first generation, American-born, which I think does factor into their ideas of success, and when I read a lot about first-generation immigrants, there's things that definitely resonate about parents' ambitions that were thwarted because of circumstance that then was channeled through their children.

KL Alright, so people and events that influenced your career: you've mentioned a few already. Are there others—other people or other events that are significant turning points either early or later in your career?

RC So, there was—at the time when I was in college, the Ethiopian famine was very severe, and there was a group out of England called Oxfam that was doing, at that time, some of the best work with relief where it was the, "Teach a man to fish and he eats for a lifetime," as opposed to "Give a man a fish and he eats for a day." So, they were really interested in development of food systems and they'd been around for a long time, but—. So, I got involved with a group that was fundraising for them, and I don't know how this came up, but somebody came up with the idea to do a bike ride across the country from Seattle to Boston and get pledges—kind of pennies-per-mile type of thing. So, I had never really ridden a bike more than around town, but I was like, "Sure, we could do that." So, I had a bunch of friends that were doing it, and it drew this really amazing cross-section of Harvard students that were—the only reason we were together was either because of biking or because of the Oxfam part or because of the challenge of riding across country, or this really funny collection that has been a really great group since then.

And so there were also two doctors on the ride, because statistically when you ride that far—it was about 8,000 miles because we did zig-zagging—.

KL Oh, wow (laughter).

RC So, statistically when you ride that far with—and we had 40 people—the chances of someone getting hurt or injured were pretty high. So, the insurance company at Harvard said, you have to have a doctor with you. So, we ended up with two doctors with us, one who was super, super successful. He was taking a break on his way to clearly a superstar. And the other was trying to figure out what to do because he couldn't handle when patients died. And I realized, here's two models, one was successful, and the other—and they both ended up treating me. I had an accident and they both treated me. And the one that was questioning whether he should stay in medicine and actually ended up leaving was the better doctor. And I was like, hmm, I don't know if I can develop a thick skin, and I had—the whole entering medical—the pre-med track—my biggest question was how will I handle it if a patient dies? And obviously, you can choose medicine where you don't see that, where you're not part of that, but it is inherently part of being responsible for someone's health.

And so, seeing the two of them brought it home for me that I can help people in ways that isn't through medicine. And given my personality and my emotional preferences and things like that, maybe medicine isn't the right thing for me. In addition, I was having a lot of trouble with the big—the huge chemistry classes and things like that. And it was like, you know, I better rethink this. So, that's when I came back and took the drawing class. I told my parents, you know, I think I need to figure this out. And I actually wanted to take time off and they were like, "No, no, no. Don't take time off. You won't go back." So, I said, "Well, I need to take time off from pre-med, so let me take some other classes. And that's when I ended up really re-thinking things.

KL So, how has your experience in architectural education influenced your design approach? And I think this is something that we could look at both in your own education, but now also your career as an educator.

RC So, my career as an educator started when I was in graduate school. So, they kind of developed at the same time, which I think is part of the reason why I consider them to be very intertwined. So, I was learning to be a designer, being trained to be a designer while I was also teaching that drawing class that was really foundational and fundamental. And so we were teaching students to draw folded paper corners and bagels and ellipses, so it was a really fundamental—it was the first drawing class. At the same time, I was learning cubes and what is a villa, an axial—all those kinds of principal type things. So, they were happening at the same time where I was learning it, and then I was also teaching a form of it at the same time. So, after I left school, I went into practice and I knew I wanted to learn more about that—the field and be immersed and to get my license, and so I did that full time.

20:03

And then, as I started getting a little further in my career, I started realizing I really missed teaching. And I was trying to figure out, what was the model to practice and teach? And I had friends that were in the same state of wanting to incorporate teaching more, so a bunch of us kind of went to full-time practice, some with more clearly the intention to end up teaching. And I hadn't really thought of that necessarily as a goal, but it was more just because I missed it so much. And so, I started a little bit trying to teach in New York, because we had a practice and we were starting our own practice which was really intense, so it was hard to find the time to do it. And the New York scene of teaching was really different. I mean the students just had a different attitude. They were super-sophisticated and almost a little jaded. And it was super-competitive to get into teaching because so

many people wanted to do it. And it does—had a kind of competitive attitude around everything that I was just—it wasn't what my idea of teaching was.

So, then when I realized at a certain point that the practice that I had founded with my husband was at a kind of crossroads of whether we'd stay in New York and invest, or consider leaving. He was really wanting to leave New York, and I was really, really thinking, I think there's a way to combine teaching with practice if we weren't in New York. And so, we had an opportunity to move back to Ann Arbor where—my husband actually loved Ann Arbor. And I was not that happy about moving back to my childhood home, but it ended up working out really great. And so that's why I could have my first year of teaching was my mom's last year of teaching. And I learned a lot about a part of your mom that you never thought to ask like how do you run a critique? How do you work with students that some are more inherently talented, but some work harder? How do you deal with that?

So, I ended up going to her class teaching perspective, one- or two-point perspective, and she came to my class to teach collage, and so—and we did a little exhibit together, Cheng and Cheng in Italy. And we shared a mailbox because—oh, art and architecture in Michigan is one of the only schools in the country that they share a building. And so we were actually seeing each other in the hallway all the time. And so it was pretty unique to be able to have that opportunity with her. So, teaching and practice for me have always been completely intertwined and maybe, again, that's this kind of—what are we seeing, how can we communicate what we're seeing, how can we see in the best way to foresee things don't exist yet? So, as a theme, that probably runs through both my own design work and types of tools that I use to design and work with clients.

Of course, now my dream of, oh yeah, I will balance 50/50 teaching and practice—for a while it seemed like it might work if my husband was willing to do 100 percent practice. Getting the flow of projects for our own practice with me full-time teaching was really hard. And then part-time teaching wasn't satisfying. And part-time practicing wasn't satisfying, so we were doing small things like additions or a small house which was fun and fine, but I really love big, complex projects where there's a lot of systems, a lot of people, complex program, complex client, often cutting-edge systems. And you couldn't do that with the kind of balance that I was foreseeing.

And so, realizing that, if I needed—it was not satisfying to be halfway in one and halfway in the other, so I ended up choosing teaching. And he ended up doing different things so that the practice wasn't the full-time thing, so my outlet has been through case studies and through following practice—following trends and practice—documenting the ways that people work through those complex projects, so it's ended up being a different path than I had foreseen.

KL What years were you at Harvard and what years were you in New York?

RC So, I was at undergrad—graduated in 1985—and then I graduate graduated in 1989 and then went immediately to New York and stayed in New York until '93 or '94 —started teaching at Michigan for a couple of years, then Arizona for a couple of years and then here.

KL Kind of continuing on this, but you're approach to design pedagogy—how has that evolved as you have, as you were talking about how you interact with students—the different approaches and abilities, but then also what you are bringing in with your perspective.

BL Maybe you could tie in the research—your interest in research too.

RC So, I think it's definitely evolved and changed. So, I've been teaching for close to 20 years now. If you include grad school, it's way more than that. So, I think I could say it's evolved, but I could also say I've simply been uncovering where I am now so I can look back and see the threads of what I knew to be the core of my teaching from very early on. So, issues of communication, perception; issues of synthesizing across multiple potentially contradictory facts, and the ability to empathize with who you are designing for as well as that future that isn't here yet that you're having some influence on is ending up why—when I first started teaching, I was teaching drawing and design, which made sense based on my background and interests. But I was also asked to teach construction because I had been in practice and been more and more interested in detailing. You know my classmates who knew me from graduate school were astounded that I taught construction and professional practice because I was not that interested in those classes when I was in school.

But now it makes perfect sense to me because I really realized through practice. Practice—specifically working in Richard Meier's office—that the details were where the design really came through and that the bigger the design ideas were all reinforced and could be read legibly through details and decisions about whether or not the joint was a centimeter or centimeter and a half, and the rules that we were generating. And those discussions, which were amazing that I had with—at that time it was really more Tom Phifer who was the lead architect in New York when I was there—were really amazing and helped me clarify for myself in practice why design ideas were continuous with detail and construction and program and use. So, I taught from that point of view because I was asked to teach a construction class. And the textbooks that were out, they were good reference books, but they didn't seem like you could just teach from them and get anyone interested.

And so I was given a lot of latitude to develop it, and there were some really good teachers who taught it for a while—Tim Stenson who had been at UVA [The University of Virginia]—I think he's at Syracuse now. So, he had set up some things and he said, "Well, here's this chunk of the class that I'd like you to run." And so I did it as case studies through the projects that I had been involved with, and then realized there aren't enough

case studies out there. There weren't at the time. So this was the—around '92 or '93, and it really was pretty rare for people to be teaching case studies in any kind of construction technical depth. It was more case studies through historical precedent-type-things. And it was hard to get the information from firms, the working drawings and students were often not shown working drawings. So, trying to get from here's the big conceptual design idea to here's the detail of how the building meets the ground or meets the sky, turns a corner, openings—and these are all lectures that I've given to Brit before. It was not that easy, but it was also not that hard—you could use your network and get sets of work in drawings, and then you had to figure out how to extract in ways that it was approachable for students instead of looking through this big thing.

And then post-9/11 it is so much harder to get working drawings now. And so I had some experience with some federal projects where they were concerned about security, but that was pre-9/11. And then post-9/11 it really changed. So, I was fortunate to be starting this when people were like, "Oh, you want our working drawings? I was just about to throw them out here. Give me your FedEx number and I'll send it to you." And so, I had—and I still have a lot of really amazing working drawings including some from like Beinecke Library. And so some of them were contemporary. I started collecting around the 90s, so I have a lot of Frank Gehry's early stuff, not early stuff, but like the Experience Music Project, and I have this building and have found some Rapson stuff and then Steven Holl's buildings. And so, if I had connections in the office, I would be able to usually get some working drawings in Polshek's office (now Ennead) []'s where we rented office space for a while.

So, I really realized how, to me, it was the only way it made sense to explain construction was through the design idea and through case studies of buildings that students cared about and learned about in other ways and looked to for other sources.

29:59

So, for me, it made perfect sense. And then I realized, there were very, very, very few people teaching like this. And so there wasn't a lot of material; there were no textbooks.

So, I just had to develop a lot of this material myself. And then the way of looking at a building from how it meets the ground, meets the sky, turns a corner, how an opening is made—those are moments that my professor Rafael Moneo was introducing, but before that it was actually Vince Scully, at Yale who I never had as a professor. But it was his—I think he had seven corners, so he had like inside corners, outside corners, corners around a window, etc. So, I just adapted that and said, "These are the moments where these bigger

design ideas become legible. And then it made perfect sense to me to introduce that in studio and tie it with studio and, at that point, I was teaching tenure-track at Arizona, and they asked me to coordinate with the studio and the technology sequence, and so I just married them. And we won a bunch of awards and got really good feedback from the students, but it was really developing a lot of that material pretty much from scratch, although Max Underwood at ASU [Arizona State University] was incredibly supportive, and there were a couple of other peers that were also like, "Yes! That is the way things need to be taught." And so Tim Stenson and Patricia Kruker—so they just started having conferences where this stuff would be discussed a little bit more. So, we were all trading material and trying to get—"Oh, I got this drawing set and I think I can share it," and "Oh, I know someone who's at Norman Foster's office who will talk about Stansted Airport." So, we would share things and kind of share it around.

And then, from there, again, because of this idea of communication and how does one work with others through drawing, it became an interest [] in representation around the time BIM (Building Information Modeling) was starting to become popular in practice, but not really adopted in schools. And so, at that time, I was coordinating studios, I think, and we ran one of the very first BIM studios in the country, and it was kind of a disaster.

KL (Laughter).

RC It was really hard—not enough rooms in town, new BIM. So, the technology of it—I mean, this was probably 2001, so it was not—there were very few offices in town using BIM, so we had very few practitioners who we could rely on to help with the technology part, and so we did our best, and the students did their best, but the results of those studios you could tell they were just wrestling with the program to get anything out. And so, it was definitely a learning experience, but it also was pretty intriguing because it was like, okay, parametric, three-modeling drawing where a drawing is just a two-dimensional slice through. That's a very different approach and just makes more sense than two-dimensionally drawing and then trying to figure out what the three-dimensional would be, and then explaining to people in two dimensions something that they're going to need to do in time and space with money (laughter), and manpower and then users and stuff like that.

So it was like, this is great, but it's so clunky and it's so awful to be working with as a designer, and so we actually let it drop for a while and then picked it back up when it was more common practice in firms and there was more support for us to teach it in school. And then, from my interest in BIM, we ran some experiments with not so much BIM per se as parametric. Like if you could use data to generate three dimensions. And so we actually did a really fun model with string and a frame and rules and descriptive geometry just to test these ideas of what does all this mean? And then, from there, it became integrated project delivery because it was like, how do people use and communicate around this model because it's now a different thing, and with 3D and data and costs and sequence

attached to it. And so I started getting into integrated project delivery, and now more recently into lean construction which is lean, you know, like lean, not wasteful. But all of that is really still consistently been case studies, like connecting the bigger design ideas with the client needs and uses, with the cutting-edge technology, with three-dimensional communication over time, letting people collaborate and bring forward their best ideas. So, to me, it all makes sense as all being connected and taught through case studies. And those case studies need to be documented in a way that's consistent and you can compare and contrast.

And so that's the kind of research that I've been doing. And I get students involved either as research assistants—and then I use the case studies also in my teaching. So, I've used case studies in my teaching since I first started. And documenting them has been trying to figure out in order to be able to teach.

KL Alright. I just want to add one footnote. When Renée says this building, she's referencing our location of the Steven Holl addition to the College of Design [Rapson Hall, University of Minnesota]. So, my next topics are about your favorite projects and expected or unexpected challenges which I think flows right out of what we have been talking about which is developing this curriculum and the challenge of introducing BIM for the first time. You mentioned that you did work at Richard Meier's office. How many years were you there or which years?

RC I was there for two years and I think it was around '90 to '91, somewhere in there.

KL So, I'm wondering, with the emphasis on axonometric drawing in that office, how that is maybe another piece sort of weaving through what you were just talking about with 2D to 3D and developing the detailing. In my experience of practice, I maybe sketched here and there in axonometric, but we didn't have an office culture that really emphasized that. I'm curious about that piece maybe fitting into some of this larger arc.

RC So, it wasn't so much access as it was model, because I actually started there as a model-maker. And a model-maker in Meier's office is actually a design role. I was actually working more closely with Tom Phifer as the lead designer than some of my peers that were doing the working drawing sets. And so usually he would ask me to study a certain area, and I would produce the study that he asked and then three, four or five variations of it, or sometimes variations and then some ideas of my own. And he was great about reviewing that and kind of sketching through it with me, and I would be sketching often in three dimensions either perspective or axo to be able to see where certain things would be resolved. And, again, usually coming back to the rule set of the grid, the module, the panel size—things like that. So, I think that was kind of less on the axo drawings, many of which were drawn after.

KL I have heard that (laughter)—some retroactive—.

RC But the models were extremely important to design process and they were take-apart models. So, they were, in a way, the fragments you choose to take apart become axos, and I ended up very much teaching from that in the series of exercises that I first developed that I don't think you were ever exposed to. I taught it here for a little while, but it was mostly what I had done in my tenure-track before I came here where there was a series of exercises with 2D drawings, axonometric drawings, fragment models and sketches, tying all that together.

KL And was it after that that you started the practice with your husband?

RC Yeah, directly after that with a little detour into full-time ceramics for a while, which was before Meier's office.

KL Ah—a detour into full-time ceramics. That's a perfect segue into complimentary skills and interests (laughter).

RC So, I draw a lot. There are times in my life where I draw every day and times where I don't draw as often. And the ceramics—it's frustrating to do part-time ceramics because, having had the luxury of doing full-time ceramics for almost a year, you can catch clay in exactly the right stage—because if it's not quite the right timing—and if it's not quite dry enough, you can wait a day. If it over-dries, you can wet it down and do it the next day, but if you're only going once a week or every other day, you're kind of rushing it because that's the only time you're going to be there. But if you're there every day, the process is much more organic and can be much more responsive to the material. So, the last time I've thrown was actually for—up at St. Johns. Richard Bresnahan, we do orientations on the Breuer designed St John's campus for our graduate students. So, I met him when I first came to Minnesota and we first started doing [our M.Arch student orientation there], and he's amazing. And so he has this incredible wheel that is a traditional Japanese wheel that I'd never seen before where you're pulling with your left foot and pushing with your right at the same time. It's quite a workout. You also have to be balanced, and the wheel base is actually fairly small and it's super smooth [action] and it's—there's no motors. But it's a different type of kick wheel than I'd been used to that had more of a pedal that you'd push.

So, one year I went up a day early because he had been saying, "You should come throw, you should come throw," and I said, "It's been a decade since I'd thrown." And he said, "You should come up a day early." So I finally managed to go up a day early and throw for the day.

40:02

I wasn't even expecting it. I was just wearing normal clothes. I had to put towels all over myself and stuff. So I threw a series of bowls then that he was able to include in his next firing. So, that was the last time that I threw which was a couple years ago. And it was definitely fun, but hard to commit to just doing a part-time thing. So, drawing and cooking—I think cooking is probably a complementary interest of creating, thinking ahead a little bit, but not overly thinking and composing based on multiple things including time and taste and color and preferences of others. So, I would count that as a related interest.

BL Generative process (laughter).

RC I rarely cook from a recipe. I'll look at multiple recipes and sort of figure out the basics.

BL At one point you just have to let go and see what happens (laughter).

KL The year that you were doing ceramic full-time, what shape did that take?

RC So, I was disillusioned with [architectural] practice—so I guess a theme that's coming through that I didn't expect would—that many times I've almost quit architecture (laughter). So, after school, I went into practice, and I worked for a large firm, and I worked for a small firm, and I tried some teaching, and I was like, You know, this isn't what I thought it was going to be. I'm still missing something here. And so, I thought, you know, I need time to think this through. And I had the opportunity because we were, with this amazing luck, had this super low-rent situation. And my husband—I wasn't even married to him at the time—was making a pretty good income and had saved a lot and earned a lot from having done the teaching stuff and my parents were helping with the loan, so financially, I was one of the probably few people for whatever weird coincidences was able to afford to take a little time off while living in New York.

And so there was a great studio called the Greenwich House Pottery which was actually started as a Settlement house [at the turn of the century]. And so it was a ceramics studio and a bunch of other social community things. And there was this really great instructor there, and I had a great instructor when I was at Harvard at Radcliffe Pottery Studio as an undergrad. My aunt is a very serious ceramicist who is—actually two aunts and my mother were all ceramicists, and they all exhibited—so, I had grown up around it and done things with it but thought, okay, I'm going to take this year and see where it goes. And so I was starting to do show and sales and firing with other people that were making their living as professional ceramicists that were—some of them were doing production stuff. And it was like, you know, it's too small; it's too simple. And I miss—there's a great process, like you never know what's going to happen between the clay and the firings, especially if it's wood firing and the glazes. And there's amazing alchemy and interaction and synthesis, but it was what I could do on my own with the clay and these materials and maybe with the person firing and some collaboration there, but it wasn't complex enough and it wasn't spatial, and so, I was like—okay—in complete control of this process and have all this wonderful

serendipity through all these elements, but it's not—it doesn't have the spatial aspect, it doesn't have the full collaboration aspect with other people, and it doesn't have the user.

And so it helped me clarify—that's what I want about architecture. So then I had an opportunity to go back to architecture through Meier's office, and it was—and I was able I think to engage differently than I had in previous offices because I knew more what I wanted and what I loved about architecture that I couldn't get any other way. And so I think I was more actively learning those pieces than I had been in my previous office experience.

KL What were the large and small offices that you'd worked in prior to that year?

RC So, I had a great experience while I was in graduate school at William Rawn's office which at that time was tiny—is now quite a bit bigger—but we think we were eight at that time. And then, after school, I went to I.M. Pei's office which at that time was fairly large. It was I.M. Pei at first and it was Pei Cobb Freed while I was there, and then a very small office that was residential—high-end residential that was super—I remember placing a tennis court on this estate and thinking what am I doing?

KL (Laughter).

RC I went into architecture because of trying to do low-income housing, and I'm placing a tennis court and really worried about it. You know it's like, what am I doing (laughter)? So that's why I ended up going to ceramics. I was like, if I'm going to do this, I might as well do it for myself and figure out what I'm doing with all of this.

KL And I'm sorry, the office that you worked for in graduate school—the name again?

RC William Rawn Associates.

KL Alright. So, with Brit here, this is a very appropriate question: what is the advice that you would give emerging professionals beginning their career in architecture?

RC So, recently Jim Cramer and Scott Simpson put together a book called *Lessons from the Future* a book where we each were asked to write a letter to ourselves when we graduated knowing what we know now or some kind of time-warp thing like that. And I remember thinking, when I graduated, the world was very, very different. The world was different, architecture was different, the building industry was a different world—well, maybe the building industry hasn't changed that much like it needs to change, but the potential was different or we understood the potential differently. And so I ended up writing it more for Brit and your generation of if you were graduating into the context that you're graduating now in the 2018, '19, '20 and the pressures we have for 2030 and the sustainability goals that we have, the urgency that we know is around diversity and equity, the stagnation that's

been happening in the building industry. So those are all much more known now, and also more clear to me with the perspective that I have now.

RC So, the advice that I would give to students now, given my perspective in knowing where I can see things more clearly than I could when I was a student, but knowing that there's a real urgency, I think, that a lot of the graduates feel that, when I graduated, we certainly wanted to do good and change the world, but it wasn't as clear, the kind of looming crisis that is happening on so many different fronts, whether it's resources or energy or population or social issues or international globalization. There are things that really, I think, today's students feel in addition to the pace of technology and feeling like there's just a lot of pressure to be doing stuff and to be doing well with it and making the right decisions.

So, my advice would be to use that urgency well and not feel pressured to make lasting decisions that you can't go back on and to still allow yourself to explore and allow yourself to find serendipitously things that in hindsight will make sense. And that really, from my own point of view, there were a lot of decisions that I made that, in hindsight, I could say that was critical, but I didn't know it at the time. And, if I had known it, I probably would have been too scared to make that decision. And so I've made life decisions by throwing darts or flipping a coin. And what often happens in those situations is that, when it comes out heads, and it means you move to New York versus California—

KL (Laughter).

RC —and you're like, "Yes!" You're like, "Okay, that was the right decision." But if it had come out tails and told me to move to California and I was disappointed, I would be like, "That's a coin toss. I don't have to do what that coin toss said. I can choose to go to New York because obviously now, that's what I want to do." And so there are times when you just need to make a decision based on the information you have at the time and try to make sense of it later and realize when it's not working or what aspects of it are working, and that freedom to test and experiment through a number of situations in my life, including the fact that my parents helped a lot with my student loan debt, and that I had opportunities to be earning money while I was in school.

49:59

Some of our graduates don't have that luxury of choice and that feeling that they're not pressured. So, urgency is one thing where you can feel like there are things that need to be done, and I can have a contributing positive influence on that. That's good urgency. You

know, there's a bad urgency where it's like, I need to decide this now and it's going to set the trajectory for the rest of my life. And, first of all, that's not true. You can never say that there's a decision that's irreversible when you look back and say, that was seminal—well, if it hadn't been, then the next one would have been or if it would have been the wrong way, you could have undone it.

So, that's bad urgency where you feel like you don't have choices. And so I think that there's trying to get students to see their choices in different ways. Is that good advice? (Laughter).

BL It's actually really good advice for me right now (laughter).

KL I had a quick question and it's kind of following up on the question before this last one. I just imagine, hearing more about your life story, I kind of wonder if looking back you see where being a woman might have been advantageous for you, for how it set you apart in a positive way, because I heard you mention a couple of different things that I've read that certain women have said.

RC So, I think that I'm—right now, at least in where I am in my career, I am very often in a position of being other, or in the jargon of some of the equity diversity training, of being target as opposed to agent—so, being part of a target population, being the only woman in a group of men, being the only academic in a group of practitioners, being the only minority in a group of whites, or some combination of that. And so the ability to work effectively when you are in the minority working in a majority culture is something that I think comes more naturally to women, potentially comes more naturally to minorities and it's—you either develop it—and I don't think it's innate—because you're in that situation more—. So, when I say naturally, it's not so much like you're either born with it or not because I've definitely learned there are skills that you can be taught and, now that I know more about the formal training, I can look back and say, that's exactly what I've learned through the school of hard knocks, as opposed to being taught, and given more perspective, and ways of learning a gentler way.

But, if you are often put in that situation, you either learn to navigate and become effective or you find other ways of pushing back or becoming activists in other ways, but you can develop those things if you're put in that situation. So, I think women are maybe put in those situations more often. I don't know exactly what you picked up on in terms of the themes that you heard, but I'm right now working on the AIA [American Institute of Architects] Guides to Equitable Practice and there's some really great work that we're tapping on from the Women's Leadership Edge that is out of the Law School at Hastings at UC-California and that is—Joan Williams who has done a lot of really great social science research and tapped a lot of research that is not necessarily architectural or even professional and identified certain tendencies that happen predominantly to women, but

also people of color, of the prove-it-again where you have to—you don't get credibility, you don't get the benefit of the doubt, so you're proving it again each time.

And then the tightrope fallacy where you have to be feminine but not too feminine, and not too masculine but masculine. So, trying to find that behavior is a super narrow line of being seen as not too aggressive, but aggressive, but forceful, but not too forceful. So, when I'm reading about her work, it's like, oh, yeah, right (laughter). So, there are things with some of the scenarios of the mansplaining and all of this kind of stuff that you're kind of like, oh, yeah—yep (laughter). And then we've been interviewing all these people and they have these great stories and you just hear things like, "Oh, that's what was going on," to something that happened to you. And so it's helpful, I think, to hear it reaffirmed by others that it wasn't just you in that one meeting in that one situation at that one time, but that this is a pattern. And it's not a pattern that's being done maliciously, and it is a pattern that actually can be corrected. And there are role-playing solutions to not just the person whose in the target situation, but also the allies that can help correct that and identify that—and a lot of the work around unconscious bias and things like that.

So, it makes more sense now, having lived through it, but certainly my identity in whatever form it was was probably a pretty important part of the reactions I was getting and why I made certain choices. And I could try to look back and pinpoint all of them, but I can say holistically it for sure made a difference.

KL Tell us more about what it means to you to be FAIA [Fellow of the American Institute of Architects]—maybe how you chose to initiate the application and then achieving it as well.

RC Ok. So, I think there are people—and I don't know whether this is an inborn personality or if it's more things that have evolved over time—but I'm definitely a very goal-oriented person, and so, when I started on the tenure-track, it was very clear. It was like, here's your timeline; this is what you need. It wasn't like crystal-clear—it was just like you had to have excellence and you had to have trajectory, but it didn't say you had to have a certain number of articles or this or that or teacher ratings or anything, but it's like, after six years, you will be evaluated for excellence, and then if you are deemed that you have met those criteria, then you will get associate, and then you—the next step would be professor. So, it never occurred to me to not go forward for professor—shortly after I got the associate. I immediately started working on getting the professor dossier both created through the work and also beginning to document it and having that as a goal.

So, after I finished the professor role, first of all, I had all material (laughter) and a lot of it was very intertwined with AIA and AIA had been a really important part of why I was able to do the work that I was able to do. And there was a real need, I think, in AIA for the kinds of work that I was doing and the kinds of conversations that could happen based on the case studies and integrated project delivery type work. And so it took me a while I think to recognize oh, there is such a thing as FAIA. When I first joined the AIA, I don't

think it was really part of what I realized was in there. But then, being who I am, it was like, "Oh, there's a next step! I should take that." And so then it was clear I had material and I could bring it forward and that there was also a real strength to the type of case that I could bring forward as an educator looking at others. And Laura Lee was a mentor and a colleague and Daniel Friedman—who both got FAIA very early in their careers who were both full-time academics—and they both said, "You need to do this." So, it was brought to my attention early enough that it was like, okay, let me just get my stuff together for the professor thing, and then shortly after I can pursue that.

KL So, what year were you awarded the fellow status?

RC Recently, so probably 2017, I think.

KL We'll fact-check (laughter).

RC I think it's on the back of my medal which I did bring (laughter). Recently (laughter).

KL So, as you said, this is something that you're achieving relatively early in your career—mid-career. And you have some new challenges afoot in your career as well. So, while the question of legacy is an ongoing question, is it something you're starting to think about?

RC If given the urgency that I also feel about the way that the profession could go in an optimistic future versus could have as a dystopic future, I really feel like I need to help influence and push toward the optimistic future. And so, whether or not that's my personal legacy, it's less important to me as if I feel like I can get things to move. And so I'm constantly looking for disruptors, for catalysts, for trigger points for things that could be pushed forward, whether it's an individual discussion with someone who's very influential or a group that has a voice, that has a place, and influence either through the fact that they are owners or the fact that they are dealing with policy or something like that—those are the opportunities that I seek most.

1:00:03

And then, certainly, students broadly are an essential part. Like you could never talk about trying to build an optimistic future without setting the foundation for as many students as possible, because you never know which students are going to end up influencing in what ways, and they're all going to contribute in some form or another. And it's not even students in my class or in my studio or my classroom or my seminar, it's students in other schools and it's students internationally and it's students that are in related fields like construction and engineering and landscape architecture.

And so it's really a kind of urgency that's less about legacy and more about—I'm in a position, I have a voice, and the FAIA for sure is part of that—of, if I want to have a voice, with FAIA, it's potentially a slightly different, more influential voice. You know, recently, Frances Halsband was circulating a petition, first among the FAIA around the ethics provisions that she wanted to propose, and it was great and I jumped right on that, and I had never met her before, but really offered to help, did the best I could to kind of spread the word and collect the signatures she needed and signed up to be a delegate and all that stuff. And I could have done that as an AIA, but I wouldn't have found out about it if it wasn't the fact that it was part of the Fellows group, so it brings you into a different room by being in FAIA, and so I definitely realized that.

And the same thing with professor. At the rank of professor at a university, you have a different voice, a different role, a different responsibility, but you're at a different—you're invited to different conversations than—so that is maybe less about the later of like, it's what needs to be done as much as, if you have that, you then can see things more broadly. You know, you also potentially lose things, so you're not as close to junior faculty or the people that are early in their career, but you just take on a different responsibility to bridge that more actively as opposed to have it be your peers.

KL Alright. Wonderful. I think this is a great expanse of a conversation. I enjoyed it very much.

[End of Interview]

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Maureen Colburn, AIA; Amy Kalar, AIA; Lindsey Kieffaber, AIA; Ben Linzmeier; Kimberly Long Loken, AIA; Erica Schultz; Heather Whalen, AIA

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