

The Minnesota
Women in Architecture
FAIA Legacy Project

Rosemary McMonigal Oral History Interview

Introduction

Legacy Project

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

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

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

Rosemary McMonigal



Elevated to Fellow in 2015, Rosemary McMonigal widely promotes the idea that architects add efficiency, beauty, and lasting value in residential design. She advances the profession and strengthens its image through project-based research, technical innovation and public outreach.

Interview

Rosemary McMonigal, Interviewee

Kimberly Long Loken, Interviewer

April 11, 2019

Kimberly Long Loken: **KL**

Rosemary McMonigal: **RM**

Track 1

00:00

[General discussion]

KL Today is May 5, 2019 and we are on Tyler Street in Northeast Minneapolis at the offices of Rosemary McMonigal. Rosemary, would you state your date of birth and city of birth for the record.

RM Yes—October 9, 1957—born in St. Paul, Minnesota.

KL Alright, so let's talk a little bit more chronologically as we look at the arc of your career. Let's talk more about how you've found architecture—or how architecture found you.

RM In high school, we read books about careers and one of them talked a lot about math and architecture. I had strengths in both and thought, why not try architecture, so enrolled in pre-arc [architecture] at the University of Minnesota. And I was fascinated by the idea of the left brain, the math, factual things, linear analytical logic—those types of things. And then the right side being more about creativity, imagination, arts, intuitive thinking. And architecture has turned out to be a great way to have both.

KL Right, so other things that you were doing in high school or even earlier in your childhood that embraced these two sides of your brain—hobbies or other classes?

RM We were always encouraged in our family to do math and science. That was a big focus. My parents made it very clear you can do anything you want as long as you can support yourself. And I had the arts side of thing, mostly from my Mom who was a very talented artist. And I kept embracing that through school. And it wasn't necessarily the college path, but for me it was an important part of my school.

KL And what kind of media did your mother work in?

RM Mostly painting, water color, acrylic, some textiles.

KL And what was your dad's profession?

RM He worked at Honeywell for most of his career. He was a World War II vet that had the ability to go to college and went to business school—worked at Honeywell mostly on avionics.

KL And you have siblings?

RM Three sisters, no brothers.

KL And do they similarly pursue art-and-science blended career paths?

RM We're all in very different careers. My oldest sister is an M. D. She works for NASA—Head of Laboratory Science. I have a sister in St. Paul in public health. And a younger sister in Portland working for Intel. You know, definitely, she uses also the marketing and arts—both factual and arts side of her brain.

KL So then you would have started in pre-architecture at the U in what, '72?

RM '75.

KL And so, like, your sisters' pursuing their careers, you were part of a generation of women where you were a minority in architecture school. Do you remember the rough proportion of your class?

RM Very few. I don't know the numbers, but there were only a few of us that were women.

KL So let's talk a little bit more about life at the U [University of Minnesota] in the mid-to-late 70s—some of your favorite projects, classes, professors if you remember them—things that stand out.

RM I would say what always stood out about architecture school is it was the greatest influence on my career, hands down. I was always amazed by how many fellow students knew architects or had them in the family. I had never met an architect before. And here we were in studio classes, professional practicing architects teaching and critiquing. It was amazing. It was rewarding. It was stressful but amazing too.

KL So what was your first job in architecture?

RM Well, can we just go off the record here for a minute?

KL Sure.

RM So are we going to follow more the questions, or should I just spill into answers that I think are more related to other questions?

KL It can be totally organic.

RM Okay.

KL So we're probably going to wind up—

RM Circling around?

KL Looping on these themes throughout the interview, so don't feel like you have to save an answer for later.

RM Ok. Alright—good.

RM I would say that one of the most challenging things was getting my first job in architecture. And I was a student. We all worked our way through college. All of us did in our family. And I remember getting the phone book for Minneapolis and St. Paul. Those were objects not around anymore. But going down and calling every firm in the phone book and not getting a single interview. So you'd say, how'd you get your first job? And somebody had posted for a job at the architecture school and I had applied, and thankfully got hired.

KL And what office is that?

RM It was with Cenex. And that happened to be an agricultural business based in St. Paul, and they had an in-house architecture and engineering department.

KL Okay. And that was while you were still a student? So you were interning in school at Cenex?

RM Right.

KL And did you continue to work with them after graduation?

RM You know, I did. I also, after graduation, I had applied for a fellowship and was awarded that, so I worked with an architectural firm in Finland for a while. So I had left Cenex to go there and then came back and also continued to work at Cenex for a short time.

KL Tell me more about that fellowship. That sounds amazing.

RM It was. Arkkitehtitoimisto Annikki Nurminen was the name of the firm. And she was an architect I would say more from the World War II era. And there in Finland, over 50 percent of architects were women. So being in an office with two-thirds or three-quarters

women was shocking to me versus back in school when there was just a small percentage of us. So it was a wonderful experience.

KL And how long were you in Finland?

RM I think it was about—I'd have to look back. It had to be at least three months that I worked with them.

KL And what year?

RM 1982

KL So how long did you continue at Cenex and what did you do next in your career?

RM Well, I continued to work there for a short time, and then I worked for a small architectural firm and then I formed my own firm.

KL And what was the other firm that you worked at prior to that?

RM Charles Levin Architects.

KL And when did you go into business for yourself?

RM 1984.

KL And what prompted you to take the leap?

RM You know, I'm not sure there's any one thing, and I was determined not to take any clients from current or past employer with me. Thought if I made the leap, thought if I'm ever going to do it, I should do it when I'm young. And went ahead and started my own firm.

KL So you have a lot of residential work and small commercial work and run the gamut between workaday things around the neighborhood that are probably run a little more lean, and of course in quite luxurious homes, but also a fair bit of work in the building sciences. How did you first position yourself and your firm?

RM We first did only commercial work and one of our early commercial clients that had us do building for their business and then another building for their business, they approached me to do their house and I said, no, we don't do houses. But they felt that I knew them better than anyone, and they persisted. So I thought, well, let's go ahead and do this. And it turned out to be a very rewarding experience, and fell in love with doing houses at that point. So we started that challenge of moving from a commercial-only firm to one that did residential and commercial, and found that to be very rewarding and good for both project types and as well as our neighborhood work.

KL So you keep saying we. Did you have employees from day one?

RM I did. I think within six months I added a staff and felt like it was important that you give people opportunities. I didn't always have opportunities. So we found we had enough work that we could employ others. I was never interested in being a large firm. I still wanted to do architecture—didn't want to do strictly marketing or office management. So we've remained a small firm that all of us are very involved in projects.

KL Right. And what sizes has the firm roughly fluctuated between?

RM Well, from when I started as a sole practitioner for about six months to the largest we ever were ten people. And at that point, when people left to either go back to school for their masters or take jobs elsewhere, I was okay scaling back to our normal size which has been pretty steady at five to six people.

10:02

KL And is the structure then essentially that everyone is a project designer and a project architect and handling the business of their own project? Is that kind of how all of you—you keep your hand and not becoming just [unclear]?

RM We are all very involved in—most of us are involved in all the projects. And that makes it interesting. We have critiques and discussions about projects and jump on various projects depending on deadlines.

KL So let's talk about some of your favorite projects and what made them successful and why.

RM I appreciate that question. I had to reflect back because so many favorite projects, right? [Laughter.]

KL Of course. And we can talk about as many as you want here in this oral history. That's the beauty of this oral history.

RM We had one client, and at our first meeting they said they wanted a round house. I feared a silo or geodesic dome. And we kept talking and talking. They finally described the importance of the circular motif. And it was gleaned on their time working on a Navajo Indian reservation in New Mexico. They had been given a sand painting with the meaning medicine man—both clients were in medicine—and it was round. And that was very inspiring to see what that image was that they kept talking about. So when we walked their 22-acre site—beautiful site—we can to a unique point where we could see features of a

wooded ravine, a lake, a WPA planted pines, and in the distance, the original farmstead in the land. It was a farmhouse and a barn. So that circular design of the house suddenly made sense. The house evolved to include those site features, the views in daylight. And the base and fireplace of the house are stone which is what's on the original barn. And there's two colors of siding. One is a gray-blue that came from the lake and the sky. And the other is a golden color that is from the color of the died corn stalks in the fields that are still farmed around the house. And that was a very close project for me with the client. We enjoyed working together and all the details of that.

We've also had multiple clients who are strategic planners, often times from business. And they have a very long-term approach to their projects. And one we worked with for years, they had—the couple had worked in various Asian countries and Minnesota. They envisioned a multi-phased project. And that was my first real exposure to a client that thought that way. Since then, we've had many like that, but they were one of the first. And as a result of that, we had a 17-year period where we constructed designs to meet their goals and transform the house without redoing any previous work. And it was also interesting because they wanted to respond to the local context of their site and incorporate elements of the Asian culture that was so important to them from their work history. So the design really pays tribute to their site. It's on a lake; there's water; there's sky; there's landscape. But then there's also these Asian elements, often asymmetrical that appear in the inside and the outside of their house.

And we had a third project that I thought back to also as a very important client. They were extremely articulate. And they requested a house. They gave me this in writing—a single sentence that said, “Cheer and shelter them and give strength to body and soul.” Most clients don't give a single sentence like that [laughter]. That's the program. It's like wow! So the universal design of their house evolved to meet the major goals—of being free of chemical odors and providing access to the house and site whether a wheel chair was or was not used. And all roof water is collected on the site in gardens. She's a master gardener. The house footprint is small. It's 880 square feet. And three levels are accessible by an elevator. And areas throughout are customized to meet their 17-inch height difference between them. And due to the client's sensitivity to off-gassing and VOC (volatile organic compounds), we spent over three years testing every product that went into the house—very much a learning curve for myself, right? And we found solutions free of harmful chemicals. Rooms have windows on two or three sides for cross ventilation and for daylight. And they see their house not as a response to her disabilities, but as they gave us the final quote on the project, “A place for life's possibilities.”

KL Nice. Are you comfortable identifying the names of these houses or the names of the clients or are those private?

RM I probably would need to ask them if you felt that that was important.

KL Sure. I'm just thinking about—because they're notable and they may already be published other places—just to be able to connect your descriptions to specific projects for future researchers.

RM Okay.

KL Alright. So we've talked about your favorite projects. Let's talk about people and events that have been important in your career that have influenced your work or created major moments or shifts in your career.

RM Well, certainly architecture school was the primary one. Then my first job as hard as that was to get. Next would be starting my own firm. And I'm really grateful to all the clients that hired us and collaborated with us. I mean, we wouldn't be here 35 years if it really hadn't been for them. And I would say the third challenge would be our shift from commercial to residential that we've touched on already. And that also lead to an important part of our work. For 27 years we've done affordable housing, much of it for public housing agencies. And I'm very proud of that work having extremely limited budgets, but projects that positively affect the lives of so many people. That also bridged to a lot of our neighborhood work that we've done too.

KL And how did the neighborhood work evolve? Is that you're also a resident of the neighborhood in which your office is located. So is that a very organic thing or did you seek to provide some pro bono services?

RM Good question.

KL A blend of that and maybe some more.

RM When I first started my firm, we were part of the neighborhood, and we were for years. And my office has always been in the Northeast or Southeast part of Minneapolis. We subsequently moved to a new house in Roseville and our work here has stayed in the neighborhood. I worked on a number of things pro bono and as a volunteer when I lived in Northeast. And you and I touched briefly on the historic Hollywood theater that a few of us worked on getting placed on the national register. Of course, those things you always do for the love of the community, not because it pays for anything. And served on neighborhood groups and business groups that were as part of the neighborhood too. We've done surveys and studies, both in Northeast and Southeast, some of which have been paid and some pro bono.

KL What have been some bumps along the way for the office. I would imagine of course there are economic challenges for sessions and what not. Have there been other challenges. Were some of the moves just prompted by a lease going up or were you like seeking a particular space or—?

RM We have made some moves—physical moves—for the office primarily because of lease changes. They never go down—the rates. They always go up. Each time we’ve always felt like it was very positive in the office, a good chance opportunity for change, and each time a better reason for having an office in a particular location. So we’ve weathered those. We’ve weathered recessions. I think there were a few firms that didn’t do any layoffs during the recession. We’re fortunate to have been one. We didn’t cut hours or lay anybody off. We had a great backlog of work and we had clients still come forth with projects. So I feel very fortunate that we have weathered those.

KL You’ve also had some projects that were not buildings, but more about the building process. Could we talk a little bit more about some of your technical research?

RM Sure. Unusual, to say the least. Oftentimes, we had project-based research and clients that were willing to be part of that. So we might have worked with the University of Minnesota in the cold-climate housing area. Or other people at the University or even builder groups that were looking to explore things.

20:03

So some of our research that we’ve done, it’s never been in the cloud. It’s always been a result of actual testing and monitoring that’s occurred. We’ve tested I would say about 80 percent of our homes during and after construction for air quality, air tightness and performance. And we used that for fine-tuning the project as well as for tracking results. And, you know, we’re excited that the results of that have helped shape the Minnesota energy and ventilation codes that are in place as a result of those projects.

KL And you also have a relationship with Marvin, or a couple of different things, right?

RM We have had some good projects with Marvin, and I appreciate that Susan Marvin was a supporter of the FAIA application that I had. Marvin is, of course, a leader in windows and doors and all things in exterior fenestration. So we’ve been able to use their products and give them a little feedback too along the way.

KL Alright, so I think this talk of research is a nice segue to complimentary skills and interests. Some of this work has been client-driven but become its own complimentary skill and interest that you can keep paying forward to future clients to things like the state code that benefits all the citizens of Minnesota. What are other things that you bring to projects—personal skills and interests?

RM Well, I would say I love to draw. I love to read, do textiles, garden, see art and theater, travel. And all these things frequently spark a design idea. It may be the shape of a courtyard or color or texture or the scale of room. And this enhances my practice, no doubt.

KL What kind of textile work do you do?

RM Well, I like to design clothing and make it.

KL Very cool.

RM Thanks.

KL Are you wearing one of your creations today?

RM I am.

KL Excellent. For the record, it's a lovely blue jacket with a contrasting red zipper.

RM [Laughter].

KL What are some of the places that you've travelled that have stayed with you the most?

RM I would say Japan was very influential when I travelled there a number of years ago. Just even around the U. S. I remember once - I was talking with my husband recently about this - we had been in Taos [New Mexico] in the winter once. And we went to a very small museum there. There was no one else there but us. And it had the most beautiful courtyard that we sat outside in for about an hour. So no matter where you are, whether you are in the middle of Manhattan or in rural America, there's always something to stop and enjoy.

KL I'm excited to ask you more about your garden later, but I am curious about your approach to site design and how those two things tie together. You talked about walking this 22-acre site and finding the views, and so the scale of landscape architecture and civil engineering, then the intimacy of a garden. I'm just curious about some of the—a little more detail on the aspects of garden and landscape that strongly appeal to you.

RM And while we're not landscape architects, we have teamed with many good ones, and we've had many clients who are master gardeners or very knowledgeable about their site or their city lot. I would say doing residential architecture, you end up with clients appreciating site planning much more than you may coming into an existing commercial building that needs an addition. So suddenly you have clients caring about where does the sun come up in the morning and what rooms get light at the end of the day. Or is the height of my windowsill the right height to see down into my yard or a distant vista. And all of those site factors

really influence how you design the project. We spend a lot of time on site analysis before jumping into any design.

KL So let's zoom out a little bit. We've talked chronologically. We've talked about projects and challenges, and we've moved to sort of the something-something that you bring with skills and interests. What do you say when you're talking to students, emerging professionals? How do you talk about architecture to future architects?

RM Well, I tell them to listen and to listen more—that their clients have much to tell them and to find things that they have in common with their clients. Architects you work with or know will also share things with you. Contractors are your partners. You shouldn't be afraid to ask them how to build something or improve a detail. And to find other architects than those you work with to share things with and talk and mentor. Try different project types and designs. Learn what excites you and what you're passionate about. Learn about more than architecture, perhaps through volunteering in your community or with a non-profit or through hobbies and family. And finally, I would say to work very hard. Everyone appreciates that.

KL So speaking of mentorship and partnership, who have been mentors to you?

RM Oh, everybody I've ever worked with has been a mentor. Many clients have been mentors. The majority of my business knowledge comes from clients who have mentored me.

KL Pausing to write something down. What about to not students who are already studying architecture—emerging professionals and interns. What about younger students? What would you say to a middle or high school student who, like you, had never met an architect before? How do you talk to them about why architecture might be appealing, what its value is?

RM I've certainly done a number of school programs and now we start as early as fifth grade. And we've learned that young girls especially will stop wanting to do well in math and science as young as fifth grade now because they think it might not be cool. We try to turn that and show them that you need that math and science as a background for much of what you could do career-wise. We oftentimes do projects with them—multiple visits in the school to help follow a project through. And we always encourage students who are considering architecture to come and shadow us and spend a day with us. We might bring them over to a large firm to have them shadow at a large firm also so they can see the difference between the small or middle office and a large office.

KL So speaking of girls in the profession and starting as young as fifth grade, can we talk a little bit about what it has been through the arc of your career to be a woman when you have felt that it was significant and also possibly the days when you don't think about it? I'm sure there's a range.

RM Well, I definitely look different than most architects who are men. But that said, I've spent my whole career trying to emphasize that my credibility is as an architect and not as a woman. Right or wrong, that is the way it's been. Have clients hired us because I'm a woman? Yes, often. And the reality is I'm an excellent listener, and I'm passionate about our clients and their projects.

KL Let's talk a little bit more about becoming F. A. I. A. So what year again?

RM 2015.

KL So just a couple years ago. So 31 years of your own office at that point. The large body of work. Can you talk a little bit more about deciding to pursue it, preparing your application, how you summarize three-plus decades of work?

RM Well, I'm thrilled that A. I. A. Minnesota saw the contribution that I made and encouraged me to apply. Prior to that, I had never ever thought of applying.

29:53

So they came to me and asked if I was interested in attending a meeting which I did, and had the opportunity to find a really good sponsor in another architect who I had never worked with, but he had known me much of my career. So he was very encouraging. And the amount of work going into an application is monumental. That I wouldn't have known ahead of time. Plus I hadn't known anybody personally that had gone through it. So A. I. A. Minnesota has a good support structure for that to help encourage people and to help prod them along in the process.

KL And what's the name of your sponsor?

RM Chuck Liddy, FAIA.

KL Alright. So what area—there are a couple of categories in F. A. I. A. What did you focus on in tuning your message?

RM It was called object two. And that's practice. And then my focus was technical in terms of practice.

KL And where was your ceremony held?

- RM** It was in Atlanta. It was at a church that Martin Luther King had spoke at and was co-pastor at – Ebenezer Baptist Church.
- KL** Possibly. The ceremonies are always in places of significance, so it’s interesting to reflect on that. So can you talk a little bit more about that day and that moment of recognition?
- RM** Yeah, it’s amazing to see your peers from all over the country and recognize all the talent that’s there. And certainly, it’s a moving ceremony. And having never gone to my college graduation, I had heard people say, well, it’s like your college graduation. But I never did go to that, so it felt very nice to be recognized.
- KL** So you’re still practicing, of course. All of our interviews have had this moment where people feel funny addressing the legacy question because they’re not retired. But the elevation to F. A. I. A. starts to suggest that your impact of course on the profession implicitly legacy. Can you talk a little bit about what you want your legacy to be?
- RM** If I had to think of a single word, it would be enduring. And we design beautiful, useful, and long-lasting places where people feel great. Again, I say we because I’m not a sole practitioner and there are talented women and men who have contributed to our projects. And my legacy is also that I have advanced the architecture profession and strengthened its’ image through our project-based research technical innovation and public outreach. And our public outreach has always been a part of the firm. It includes the fact I taught for five years at the University of Minnesota. I’ve given many talks—I think about 160 now, and been published in about 125 articles. Also have helped organize the Minneapolis-St. Paul home tour now in it’s 31st year. And that was really to raise the awareness and diversity about the quality of urban housing and opportunities there. I helped found the A. I. A. Minnesota Homes by Architects Tour, all of which I’d consider part of that public outreach. And the building science quality standards are the technical innovation and the project-based research part of our projects. And testing from those like I’ve shared, you know, has contributed in a lot of different ways, so I feel like that’s part of our legacy too.
- KL** Absolutely. So very tangible between walking through the spaces and tours and then being able to go and reference all of that rigorous research and testing to make these enduring places. So I think we’ve come full circle, but I also want to offer you the opportunity to relate any more anecdotes or—
- RM** I think I’m—
- KL** —content that you feel strongly about sharing that we didn’t get to organically in the conversation.
- RM** I think we covered what we need to.

KL Alright. Thank you very much Rosemary. It's been a delight.

RM Thank you.

[End of Interview]

Total Interview Time: 35:15

Credits

Project Stewards:

Minnesota Architectural Foundation (MAF)

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

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