

The Minnesota  
Women in Architecture  
FAIA Legacy Project

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Sarah Nettleton Oral History Interview

## Introduction

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### Legacy Project

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

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

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

### Sarah Nettleton



Elevated to Fellow in 2016. Through award-winning designs, teaching, and publications, Sarah Nettleton is shaping a new generation of green design. Her practice integrates technology with a deeper understanding of simplicity in architecture and connection to the land.

## Interview

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Sarah Nettleton, Interviewee

Kimberly Long Loken, Lindsey Kieffaber, Heather Whalen, Maureen Coburn, Interviewers

May 29, 2019

Kimberly Long Loken: **KL**

Heather Whalen: **HW**

Lindsey Kieffaber: **LK**

Maureen Colburn: **MC**

Sarah Nettleton: **SN**

Unknown Interviewer: **UI**

*Track 1*

*00:00*

[General discussion]

**KL** Today is the 29<sup>th</sup> of May, 2019 and we are interviewing Sarah Nettleton, F. A. I. A. The interview is being conducted by several members of the A. I. A. Minnesota Women in Architecture committee including Kimberly Loken,

**HW** Heather Whalen

**LK** Lindsey Kieffaber

**MC** Maureen Colburn

**KL** Alright. So to start us off Sarah, will you state your name and date and location of birth please?

**SN** I am Sarah Nettleton and I was born October 1<sup>st</sup> 1950 in New Haven, Connecticut, far, far away.

**KL** Alright, so let's start out talking chronologically. Let's visit how you found architecture or how architecture found you.

- SN** Such a great question. It found me via my grandfather's hobby which was building models of New England houses. I used to love to go and help or get in the way, as it were, as a little girl.
- KL** So where did his interest in building models come from? Was he a carpenter or mill worker? Was he in the building trades or was it pure hobby for him?
- SN** He grew up in New Haven, stayed in New Haven, went to the Yale Law School because Yale did not have an architecture school. So he wanted always to be an architect, but I guess it was just too much for a New England Yankee to go to another school other than Yale. His hobby was architecture.
- KL** And did you always know architecture by the name "architecture"? Did you always understand it as a career that was possible and interesting or did you understand it as more of a hobby?
- SN** You know, that's such a good question. I'm not sure what I understood as a very traditional little girl growing up in New England where girls didn't do things like that. But I grew up in a modern house that was designed by an architect and built by my parents in 1950 which really was quite a wonderful mid-century modern house. And that stayed with me as this was quite a lovely place. And how did it come to be this way. It was so different from every other house—all the New England colonial houses that most people lived in—that I think it just left an impression on me about the spaces more than the career. The career didn't really occur to me until I was in high school at a girl's boarding school for nice young ladies. And the college admissions person said, "You know, you really are not going to get into college. Your daddy's not rich enough to buy somebody a new dormitory. You better think of some [an inspired essay about what you want to do] [unclear]." So I went, oh, how about architecture? 1968—it was a year when the doors opened [for women], and you could go to an architecture school. When actually my mother, who's all for [unclear] stuff, went down to talk to the dean at the architecture school at Yale about where a girl could go to college—not a woman, a girl—he said, "Oh, yeah. Well, there's a couple of places. There's the University Colorado in Boulder. There's Washington University in St. Louis. And there's Tulane in New Orleans. That's it." So Minnesota wasn't on the radar. But I think talking with other people I know who were in the architecture school in that era, that [Minnesota] was a pretty fierce place to be. Anyway—so that is how that began with—let's go to architecture school. And how about writing an essay about why you want to be an architect. And it must have been about working with grandfather and growing up in this house and just liking the idea of spaces and not paying attention in class, but drawing little pictures of houses. Did you guys all do that?

**KL, MC, HW** Oh Yeah.

**SN** Well, there you go.

- KL** On graph paper to scale [laughter].
- SN** As a woman, that would be like the secret code about how you start something.
- KL** So I want to hear more about the house you grew up in and how your parents came to commission an architect and why they chose a contemporary aesthetic and all of that.
- SN** Well, this was land that my father had, that had been in the family. And the architect was, for me—what do you call it—my great-grand uncle or something [Gordon MacMaster]—my father’s cousin. So I don’t know that my father considered anything else, and if he were still alive—he died in 1984—I’d love to ask him that question. As far as I knew, they just decided that’s it, we’re going to do this and there it is. Because my father was not particularly interested in aesthetics, so he probably wouldn’t have minded whatever my cousin was going to design. But, we came out with a very nice house.
- KL** And so [unclear] what were your favorite spaces in the house?
- SN** You know, one of my favorite memories of that house is that it was under a big canopy of large trees and in the summer, you close the house in the day, and at night, you open all the windows and there was a gigantic attic fan that was six feet across. It was so big. And [at night] they turned that fan on and you’d hear the thrumming of that fan as a little child going to sleep and feel the air being pulled through the house. It was amazing.
- HW** Sounds awesome.
- SN** I know. It was a great memory.
- KL** And a sustainable site design choice, something that has clearly informed your career.
- SN** Yes. And, you know, I’ve tried to install one of those in every house I’ve lived in since to no avail. It just is not going to happen in Minnesota I think. Connecticut’s just a little bit milder climate, but there were trap doors that opened that I’m sure weren’t insulated. They just opened up and [sound effect] there. But if you lived in Louisiana or somewhere like that, you know, this would have been magical, [unclear] a sustainability piece.
- KL** Alright. So off to architecture school. Where did you go?
- SN** But before I went to architecture school, the other house that greatly influenced me was summer “camp”, as it’s called in Maine, that has still no utilities in 2019 and was built in 1927, because that’s what you did: you went out camping, but you had a house. And so, it’s full of trophies of deer heads and fish and things and is fabulously bucolic in terms of there are no sounds of mechanical anything. It’s completely quiet. Because the refrigerator is propane, so you don’t hear it. That’s really the only thing that runs in the house. The water

pump that when you start it sounds like the stump grinder [sound effect] pumps the tank full in ten minutes and that's it—turn it off.

But that to me was a sense of living quietly and peacefully that has informed where I've gone, with what I think we ought to build.

**KL** And is the camp still in your family or extended family?

**SN** It is.

**KL** How often do you go back?

**SN** I don't know. It's not a place to go in the winter. And it's a long trip. So I go for a couple of weeks in August. It's nice.

**KL** Alright. So you went off to one of these architecture schools that let the girls in.

**SN** Yes, exactly. So I have to say that a person who greatly influenced my career was my father—was a very conservative New England kind of guy who never really had a career. But he believed his daughter could do this. And he was gone before my F. A. I. A. investiture, but I think he was there in spirit. I loved thinking of him in his bowler hat as we were sitting in that room.

**KL** So what was it like when you started school? Where did you go?

**SN** Oh, my goodness. Well I went to Tulane in New Orleans. So when you—in those days you could fly—it was the beginning of when you could do that. I know, hard to imagine—not take the train all the way to New Orleans. Anyway, so at the airport there you are, a freshman and the arrival area is full of convertibles with fraternity guys sitting up on the back of them with beer going, “Yeah! look! A cute co-ed!”

*10:02*

Welcome to Tulane. So actually, I went to Tulane which was 12,000 men connected with Newcomb Women's University like Radcliffe-Harvard. And I lived in the Newcomb dorms because there weren't women dorms at Tulane. But it was a very schizoid, bizarre world to be a woman in this gigantic university. And there were eight women in Tulane.

**HW** Oh, my gosh.

- SN** Six in the architecture school and two in the engineering school.
- MC** Whoa.
- KL** Wow.
- SN** But I had a wonderful class, and I think that class was to me the most magical part of what I got out of my education, there was this comradery because then you drew at your desk in the lab all night. So you got to know each other very well. And it was a very cohesive class that still is connected and are good friends. The class has a travel fellowship that we give to a student every year at Tulane. But it was pretty wonderful to have that comradery and believe that this was possible when especially like listening to that RBG movie and the harassment that she had at Harvard from everybody, there certainly was a lot of it at Tulane, but our class was just right there behind—the members of the class, not just the women, but it was good.
- KL** So you said there were six women in the school of architecture and they were all in your class. You were the first class with women?
- SN** No. Five were in my class. One was older. And there had been—I think there had been three or four before that in a smattering. My class, 1968—this was quite a year—what happened in 1968? Martin Luther King, the riots in Chicago—(let me look at my notes and see what all the other things were). It was like an amazing year. The world shifted in 1968, and the Tulane Dean said, “We want women in this architecture school. We don’t want just one. We want them to come.” So I’m sure that’s how I got in because I was not a stellar student in high school.
- KL** But it is an interesting question like how much of that comradery of your class may have been reinforced by what a watershed year that was, right? Because both assassinations, it’s the Tet Offensive.
- SN** There were just—I know there’s not the—
- KL** Apollo moon landing, but there were other important benchmarks in the space race that year.
- SN** Yes.
- KL** So how much do you think—I mean, to be 18 in 1968. To— like your first year in adulthood is a year that’s just like, holy crap, this is the world I’m entering as an adult. I wonder how much of that was kind of galvanizing in its own way just among a group of young people, regardless of gender.

**SN** I think it was. And I had no idea how Earth-shattering it was at the time. Those were just the things that happened. I went to the exhibit at the History Center of 1968.

**KL** Yeah, it was an incredible exhibit.

**SN** All those things happened! Yeah, I knew they all happened, but they were all right here. Yeah, that was quite a year, but if you believe in the planet has horoscopes or things, I think it was quite a year—yeah, quite a year. And I think it just opened up, in terms of what college education was, you know, Tulane kept going, but schools like Oberlin closed so that everybody could have riots and do things. It was a time of huge shifts in what is education all about. And the denigration of young people and the denigration of the young men who went and fought in Vietnam was the beginning of that seismic revolution that shifted things. I think it tore things apart that are still torn apart. It wasn't a constructive time. It was a time of destruction.

**KL** So the arc of your time at Tulane—notable projects, professors, experiences—positive or negative?

**SN** You know, the Dean—his name was John Lawrence—he was just extraordinary. What a welcoming, embracing kind of guy he was in terms of the student body and people becoming real people. And he somehow was connected in with the Modern Movement and the Bauhaus [Movement]. You know that—I was—started architecture school with the Bauhaus just disappearing the caboose down the train tracks, and that was still the [expression], the Bauhaus. So we had two professors who actually had been part of that movement. They weren't the luminaries or Mies van der Rohe but they were part of the school, so they were held in great reverence at the school. I didn't really like either one of them, but we had some very excellent professors and Tulane, I remember wondering, is this school a big deal, or is it just like way off, and New Orleans is so far off from everywhere. But then there were groups, like two years ahead of me was a group called Ant Farm that did all sorts of conceptual things including the Cadillac Ranch where they stuffed Cadillacs into the ground so that he tail stuck up which—you know, it was kind of architecture—very free-form. They all had graduated from Tulane. And then the guy in the class right ahead of me won the Rome Prize which I remember thinking, "Wow, that's kind of a big deal." Oh yeah, it is. And our class didn't do anything quite that amazing.

But I think it was a school that had a lot to offer and was culturally very diverse and interesting. What I didn't like about it was it was very focused on historic renovation and I did not want to spend my whole career worrying about the dentals and if that dated the house to 1830 or 1839 based on the nuances of how it is cut —anyway. So I decided I didn't want to stay in New Orleans. Although since looking back on it now, there are several firms there who did very wonderful modern architecture. But it certainly was not that way in 1973 when I graduated.



**KL** So then what happened in 1973? Where did you go next?

**SN** Well, I always wanted to go to California, so I drove out to California. And a friend of mine had rented a house in Bolinas which is the funny little town out in Marin County along the coast that is famous for the people who live there take the sign down on the road so no one can find it. So that was—but it was a wonderful summer of living in costal California. Basically, along the sea coast there, so that was pretty nice. And I thought, I'll look for a job here in CA. Well, there was a serious recession going on in 1973 and there was a building ban in California because of water. So that this was not a place to get a job. So I met my—then—to become husband, and he was from here. So that's how I came here, to Minnesota.

**KL** And that was later in '73 or '74?

**SN** Oh gosh. Let's see. That was late '74. So there was a California year. I still, when I go to California I think, oh my God, luck. I was living in California. What was I thinking?

**KL** So how did your practice begin then?

**SN** Well, I worked for a number of firms and did all sorts of big and little buildings. And I taught at the technical college. And when the technical college was going to reduce me to a nine-month-a-year contract and that was like, well, let's see—my expenses haven't equally reduced, so—.

*19:54*

At the same time, a friend—or really an acquaintance who became a friend had a big piece of property in Wyoming and was going to build a house and said—mentioned that, gosh, she had some plans, but she really didn't like the house all that much. Should she build it? I said, "Oh no. I don't think so. That's a very bad idea. I don't know what else you're going to do, but don't do that." So she said, well, how about if I buy an airplane ticket, and you come out and look at it. And it turned out the architect before had never been to the site, even though his office was half an hour drive away. And you have to go stand on a piece of land to build a project like that. So that was a very good way to start a firm was with a client who had basically quite a bit of money and lots of ideas about well let's also build a .

**KL** So what were the "alsos"? What else went on that property?

**SN** Well, the "alsos". So there was the ranch house, so to speak. And there was the landscape. She wanted a native prairie which in Wyoming, there were no—there weren't even

nurseries that sold geraniums. I don't know if anybody else had plants at all out there. But you could get prairie seeds from the mine reclamation purveyors who collected the seeds and sold them after the strip mining and they'd put the dirt back and put the land back, so to speak. So that's where we got the seeds from to plant her prairies around her house. And her goal of this ranch was sustainable ranching, which in Wyoming was like, "Them's fighting words."

I'll never forget a party that -I happened to be there for- working on something when she had the party- that involved the local rancher's association and the—I think it was the Sierra Club—in the same room. So there was a table in the middle with wine and, you know, people could come and get a wine and then maybe say: "hi" [unclear]. But by the end, after enough wine and beer, people were talking to each other and realizing they had similar goals and aspirations. And I happened to think that was a very important party for changing the culture in that valley.

So, anyway, what other buildings—ranch house, dog kennel, caretaker house, stable, then an equipment shed, but that's a—it's much fancier building than a metal pole shed. So quite a few projects, and then we remodeled a couple of things. So there are not too many clients like that, but I think there were nine or ten projects members altogether.

**KL** So how did you transition then. Like that was the opportunity to start your own firm. How did you transition to having a continuous practice with multiple clients and how did that grow?

**SN** Oh, you know, I remember renting an office space and looking out the window and thinking, oh my God, the people in all these windows of all these offices know what they're doing. I don't know—you just sort of start and then you figure things out. And I think it's—I notice that in talking to a lot of younger women too that it is pretty thrilling to start your own practice, but I just decided I didn't want to be the age I am now and not have tried that. So it was my, "Ok, fine. What is the worst that's going to happen? Well, it might be inconvenient, but it won't be completely horrible." So, I think business prudence is important, and that drove me to try to learn a lot about that. You know, how does this really work? What do I need to know here? How does a business plan work? What's a Chart of Accounts? Those kinds of things are the best platform as a basis for the design, which is really what you want to do.

**KL** And did you seek mentorship from other architects for that or did you go to the business world at large?

**SN** You know, I tried both of those. I remember calling Bill (William) Beyer a number of times—[unclear], to ask like what are the basics here. And he was very helpful about that. And then he was my F. A. I. A. sponsor which was kind of fun and really nice. But I also joined a round table of business mostly men to try to learn how to talk about these things.

And I realized this was really not who I was. I learned a lot from it, but it was—I didn't want to be just a business mind. And I know there are architects, particularly ones who run big firms who's focus is primarily the business side of things, but that was not me. But it was good to learn to talk about this stuff and what's your priority and pay attention to it. Because if you talk about it and think about it, you can do it. If you don't talk about it and you don't think about it, you won't do it.

**KL** Were all of your projects residential or did you dabble in other sectors? And did your firm fluctuate in size? How often did you take on employees?

**LK** Good questions.

**SN** Good question. Well, I did [work]in large firms before my own firm, [designing] hospitals and college buildings and all sorts of institutional-size projects, high-rise elderly, on those buildings—all sorts of things. My own firm was primarily residential and landscape projects. And it was as small as one, as big as six. Maureen was there.

**MC** Yeah, I was there during the large year.

**KL** When was the large year, Maureen?

**MC** 2001 to 2002, I think.

**SN** Yeah it was. Right—the 2000 crash was just really bad. And then it was just something else.

**MC** Yeah, we had a lot of fun. And what I remember about that experience was Jan actually. Jan was—right—that's her name?

**SN** Yes.

**MC** The office manager had a lot to do with keeping everything going and I think a really critical element of the office.

**SN** I'm going to tell her you said that.

**MC** Because she—I mean, you need that glue person, and she was that glue person I think there. We also had this great guy—forgot his name.

**SN** Greg?

**MC** Greg. He was great. I wonder what happened to Greg?

**SN** Greg wanted to not be an architect. He just hated the idea of dealing with clients.

- MC** Because he's more on the design—
- SN** He loved designing and building things. So that's what he does.
- MC** And then we had a woman who had a small dog. There was a (mini?) —we had a lot of fun, basically.
- SN** Maureen was in charge of the fun.
- MC** Right, and there were dogs in the office and that was beautiful and everything in the office was designed, like the furniture, the website, the marketing materials. There were all important features. Much like your house Kim!
- KL** So this is your North Loop office?
- SN** Yes. It was the North Loop office.
- KL** So it seems like a good time to talk about some of your other favorite projects. The ranch was a critical one in shaping your career, but some other favorite projects along the way and what made them successful?
- SN** Well, I think one that we have to talk about here is the famous Tofte cabin that Maureen worked on too. Everybody worked on it.
- MC** A tiny bit
- SN** There were 23 people on the project team for a 948 square foot cabin. At the beginning of building the project, the contractor said, "Well, I hope this isn't going to be one of those projects that nothing gets talked about—you just have to build it." We went, "Oh, no. Don't worry about that." The client for this project, Medora Woods was committed to walking her walk of her Jungianthesis, *Our Disconnect from Place*, which is kind of a heavy burden for this teeny cabin.

29:55

But it was okay as it played out, and she's such a serious person—she's still so serious about everything. But this was this joyful moment in all this seriousness. Anyway, that this led to a far-reaching, tiny, cabin design with a 23-person design and research team and what can be done on each of ten goals. In the beginning, Medora said, "Okay, how do we really make this sustainability happen here not being disconnected from place?" So those

ten goals which talked about energy, water, site, air—you know, very encompassing—gave her the list and said, well here’s what we would do to approach each of those. [I] Expected her to choose three. She said, go for it. That’s really why the project was so amazing. And we were trying to research what do we do about because there weren’t manuals around. There wasn’t any—this is how you do this. And was this a good idea or not? This is this huge effort. Is it going to make a difference? And we’d say, “Gosh Medora, [expression].” And she’d go, “Nope—keep going.” So there are not too many clients like that. It was pretty amazing.

Anyway, she said, “Okay. I want this to get noticed, and I want it to make a big splash.” And I said, “Then we need to win a national design award.” And she said, “Okay.” So that was the beginning of that—at the very start of the process. And I didn’t run a firm where that was the goal of most projects. But it was clear to me what we needed to do to be that ground-breaking to win a national design award. So that’s what we did, and I was more than thrilled when it did work out that way and we won that A. I. A. top ten COTE award for the project. Which then, that was the beginning of the COTE top ten process of awards. And it was the first year that they actually had a jury with awards that you could go and be there. That was pretty fun and do that and sit at the dinner table with the engineers who designed the Oberlin building from McDonough who said that “The building doesn’t work”.

And what I still remember is that the Tofte project does work. And I said to Medora, “You know, we really need to know if this works or not.” And she said, “Oh, I agree. So the Weidt Group, David Eijadi, Mr. Geek went, “Well, if you’re serious about this, we’ll work with you.” So they set up all the data loggers in the structure to monitor the energy use and find out that, yes, indeed, it is a net zero building. It’s one of the very few COTE top-ten buildings that has a monitored result. Which is shocking 25 years later. Anyway, there it is.

**KL** Are there favorite buildings or the project of the book?

**SN** Ah, you know, I think there—I have a lot of favorite projects. I don’t have a one, but I think what I loved about that project was that my design goal was to honor the constraints of sun, wind, sound, and create a space that delights and win a design award, in fact two. So it’s form was defined by light changing, but the time of date and season in the drama of our Northern latitude. And that, so that design, and sustainability-practical and design fit together. And that was very novel. And I remember gigantic arguments about, uh-uh, it’s one or the other. And somebody who shall remain nameless who was the architect in town said, “Oh, that sustainability green slime. [Expression].” So I think, looking back on it, it’s hard to imagine that’s how it was, but that’s how it was.

**KL** So then you got the call to do the book.

**SN** Yeah, and I got the call to do the book. And that was based on having won the national award and that the—Taunton, the publisher was collaborating with A. I. A. So they called A. I. A. when the authors that they had chosen to write the book backed out. And so they went, “Got anybody else?” And they said, “Sure. How about this one.” You get that call—it was a day in October. I remember, “Hello. This is Peter Chapman. I’m the head editor at Taunton. Would you like to write a book?” Oh, dear. So I did give it quite a bit of thought. But think you just say yes, so it was like being in graduate school, to write a book.

**KL** So this would qualify as an unexpected challenge that shaped your career?

**SN** Oh my goodness gracious. Were you still in the office when I was starting to write that book?

**MC** No.

**SN** That was really arduous from a business plan, trying to do that.

**MC** We should probably state the name of the book.

**KL** Yes!

**SN** Oh, that’s a good idea [unclear]. It’s called The Simple Home: The Luxury of Enough Taunton, 2007. And I’m the author along with Frank Martin who took my lumps of clay, as we called them, and turned it into wonderful prose.

**KL** So how did you balance writing the book with your practice?

**SN** Oh my God. Well, I tried. It was very hard to keep both going. It’s a lot to write a 270-page book. It’s a lot.

**KL** But it’s also a tool for sharing a philosophy that’s important to you, and it’s a tool for getting the next client.

**SN** It is. So all of these things—all of these things. Yep. And you know, it’s—I tend to just say yes to things in life and then do them. So I did. It was good.

**KL** And how did you approach the process of writing? How did you select your content?

**SN** Well, Taunton, the publisher is very organized and it’s a very businesslike press, so they had a formula for what they wanted in the book. And I remember some houses they had that hadn’t gotten in their last book, so we had them to put in our book if we wanted them. Some people sent things in. I put out a call to the A. I. A. And then I called people in places that I wanted to have houses from. I wanted some geographic distribution. They never had a house from Louisiana or New Mexico. Where else? Or [unclear] from Maine.

Those are the two that I remember. I wanted one from Texas, but we couldn't find one that fit the mission of the book, because mostly their Taunton books have Vermont, Connecticut, Minnesota and Washington, Oregon in them with a little California thrown in there.

You know, I also want to talk a little about the other half of my design practice which was garden design which is very unusual in a small practice to have both landscape and architecture combined. But I really think they go together, and they complement each other. And like your beautiful back yard is another living room in your house. Is that not—I love it that you started out there with your garden Kim[unclear]. That's my kind of approach. You can always paint stuff later.

**KL** The gardens take time. Just start them early.

**SN** So start.

**KL** So how did your complimentary interest in gardening and landscape come to be? Did you grow up with hands in the soil?

**SN** Not at all. And I actually—my ex-mother-in-law was a great gardener. And she introduced me—I call it her delight[unclear]. She looked up things in the White Flower Farm catalogue every January and ordered them. And I was just amazed at how that all came together. So that's where I learned gardening.

[Interruption.]

**MC** Turn off that noise. Hello.

**KL** We're actively recording, just FYI.

[End of Interruption.]

*39:57*

**KL** So let's talk a little bit more about some of your favorite landscape design projects. There was the prairie. There was the prairie ranch.

**SN** Wyoming. Which was amazing. And actually, this was the bottom land of the creek, so the soil was too rich, so the grass kept invading the flowers, oh well, but anyway, the rocky hillsides—the native grasses did not compete. And that's where the flowers bloomed the

best, so it [the prairie view] was best out the windows looking at the tops of the hills [unclear]. But on another kind of landscape in the City of Minneapolis, I did a garden for—it was the back yard of a house in Kenwood that is called Walled City Garden and won Landscape Design[unclear] awards and various things. This success was in part due to the clients who were very sophisticated folks wanted to build a wall around the property wall of the garden and have this enclosed magical place. Instead of building a cabin on a lake, they have this backyard.

And so, it had two main buildings at the back of the garden. One was a screen porch and one was a little octagonal window-shaped building with a lawn mower because there was no way to get the lawn mower up there. It was land-locked from the street. So that client was not at all interested in green/sustainability, but there was a huge amount of water runoff from the hard surfaces, and it was cheaper to build a retention system in the middle of that very tiny grass area back there than it was to pipe it out to the street. So we call that “secret sustainability”. But that project was particularly amazing, and when the [American] Landscape Architect Association had its—actually we’ll say national convention here in Minneapolis, this project was on the bus tour of landscape projects. I was very honored by that inclusion.

**KL** So how much do you experiment with your own garden? Do you have like one cohesive long-term vision for it? Or is it a place where you’re really prototyping a lot and just swapping things out?

**SN** That was then. This is now. The garden I have now I’ve had for 30 years, and so the trees that I’ve planted now have grown huge. So guess what—there’s not a lot of sun anymore. And I’m not physically able to do as much as I used to. So this is a much more relaxed garden with, well, that looks like that would go there, that’s fine, we’ll leave it right there. It was a very elaborate garden. When I first sort of got going on it, I think there were 175 plants on the plant list.

**HW** Wow.

**SN** That was then. This is now. I remember reading about Gertrude Jekyll’s garden in England. She’s a famous Edwardian landscape gardener. And as she got old, lost her eyesight, things got blurry, so her plantings were much more massed. Like, oh, I wonder what will happen to me?

**KL** Well, last time we talked, I remember you, or a kind of the story of a large, old tree in Paris that you visited every day that you were there. So speaking of the longevity of landscape and one’s relationship to it...

**SN** Yeah, we talked about—



- SN** What because we've just come back from—
- MC** Because you just came back—
- SN** Paris.
- UI** [Unclear].
- SN** I know. Well, I find trees a lot of places I go, so. In Paris planted in the Jardin de Plante which is on the 5<sup>th</sup> arrondissement by the Sorbonne, and it is basically Paris' botanical garden. And it was a lain tree that was planted in 1780-something, so a long time ago— huge tree. And just standing under it, I have this sense that I've known this tree before— just an old friend, this tree. But I feel that way a lot about trees. This year in Japan we went to a cemetery in Koyasan which is on the peninsula south of Kyoto. On this big peninsula there are huge mountains and Mount Koya. And there's a giant grove of cedars which is a cemetery with some graves that are from 1200 and some are modern. It's an amazing hodge-podge of stuff but the trees are gigantic, and I felt like, oh, I had seen old friends here. It was very wonderful.
- KL** What are some garden projects that you admire? Or landscape architects that you admire?
- SN** Oh gosh. Well, I was in awe in Japan of the rock gardens, and they call them dry gardens— the raked gravel. And looking at pictures of those, I thought them unremarkable[unclear], but standing there, they are mesmerizing. And the sense of space and creation is just amazing. So that was a wonderful surprise. In England, the famous gardener Vita Sackville-West that planted Sissinghurst, going to that garden was a life-changing, fabulous couple of days—seeing that garden.
- KL** What did you bring back from that?
- SN** Well, that was—she was an Edwardian gardener with the huge garden beds and six gardeners with wheelbarrows and shovels doing it all, but the combinations of plants and the color schemes that are about the leaves and the flowers and the intricacy of that whole—which is so Edwardian to think about things that way -The curated blending of plants, not just lots of color, but carefully curated color was pretty fun.
- KL** So travel is also very important to your creative practice and your very being, it sounds like.
- SN** It is. I've been very fortunate to go to some wonderful places.
- KL** Let's talk a little bit more about the profession broadly and now your impact on it. What advice do you give to emerging professionals—people coming out of school and starting their careers—do you share with them?

**SN** I love talking to folks that are starting out. I love to say, come on, join us. We need you. I was talking with a young woman this afternoon who—by the way, if anybody needs an intern in their office, she’s wonderful—is looking for a spot. I love the idea of helping particularly young women and minorities who have not imagined themselves succeeding in this world of how can this be you that is going to do this? And having put yourself in that place and dream about it and believe you can do this and talking through those, well what about and consider this, kinds of discussions, I think that’s my wish to give back to the profession. And I see in people who are starting, the same kinds of questions that I had when I was starting off and the same doubts, “is this even possible” kinds of thoughts that, you know, it’s easy to think that in the middle of the night. So it’s good to talk about it—yeah, you can do it.

**KL** Well, even in the last year, you’re an important behind-the-scenes force with Dream the Combine and their MOMA installation. So even when people are achieving a certain level of recognition in their own career, they still benefit from the mentorship.

49:56

**SN** Well, I think there’s always another level to go to and more questions, and it doesn’t suddenly get easy. You don’t suddenly get all the answers. It’s you come around the next corner going, oh no, what’s all this about? So yes, but I loved helping Jennifer And Tom with—what do you say when this foundation calls or how do you do that? And then having a party for them because I think they needed to be celebrated here at home so we had a party.

**KL** I think you need to brag a little bit more about what your role was.

**SN** I made it happen.

**KL** By—

**SN** Oh, gosh. Well, Mac Swackhamer at the architecture school called up and said, “I need you to come over and hear about this project,” which is code for bring your checkbook. And I thought, you know, this is what I said I wanted to help out with. I’m going to bring my checkbook and go over there. So I did. And they had won this award for the MOMA PS1 installation in courtyard there. And MOMA gave them \$100,000 and they needed I think it was \$250,000 to build it. And that was in March, and the thing had to be open for Memorial Day. So they had to figure out how do we raise the money and engineer it and build it- Minnesota to New York. I was just in awe that they figured all of that out, and

there it was. And then, because I had given some money, I got an invitation to the opening, and I thought, oh, what the heck, when's the next time my name is going to be on the wall at MOMA. I've got to go. So that was very fun. And to see them there and to realize that there were only a couple of people from Minnesota there, some colleagues from the school, but I was the one professional colleague that was able to get there. Unfortunately, it opened right almost the perfect time when people from the A. I. A. convention, which was in New York, would have been able to go, but it was like two days after that. So people had gone home. So it was a separate trip. It wasn't—you couldn't combine it. But MOMA being MOMA, of course they would not be flexible about the date.

But it was pretty fun to be there and see the serious awe in terms of the people who were there experiencing, walking in to see this thing, which it was quite wonderful. Because it was very dramatic, very elegant, and very experiential, and fun [unclear]. And people loved it. And it was hugely popular all summer until it was taken apart which is what happens to things in the PS1 courtyard.

**KL** But then you had the party for them here.

**SN** Then we had a party here, yes, to celebrate them in their home town. I think being from far away but being at home is important to celebrate too.

**KL** That's something that has impressed me about becoming a part of the Minnesota A. I. A. just a few years ago is that that kind of cooperative attitude that I think is so present across the Midwest in general, like that's not something that I knew in my own experience before moving here. Like it's not just a food co-op. Like there's just co-ops for everything. And that kind of generosity I think is very present in A. I. A. Minnesota as well. And I think you're sort of—I perceive you as a sort of like part fairy godmother part fixer for all of us.

**SN** Well, whatever I can do to help—money, mentoring [unclear], I'll get my wand out and we'll see if it still works or not. I think that is very much the Minnesota ethos and it's quite wonderful. My brother-in-law's an architect in New York, and he goes, "Oh no. Careful there—you might get jabbed in the back at a meeting with a knife." Louisiana is all about sort of the clubby, chummy, and these are the ones I know, you know, not all of the country, but it's still very competitive. But here, there's this generosity of spirit of willingness to help out which is very cool. It's a nice thing.

**KL** What have some of your other A. I. A. Minnesota involvements been over the years?

**SN** Oh, goodness. What have I done? Well, let's see—lots of committees. I was the chair of the COTE-committee—I don't even know when—I get to look at my resume to see when it was.

**UI** The [Minnesota] Committee on the Environment (COTE)?

**SN** The Committee on the Environment. And actually, the Minnesota Committee on the Environment was started by Bruce Cornwell who works with Maureen and was model for the National Committee on the Environment. Minnesota's that kind of place. So what else? Officer the Chapter Treasurer—various things. What else did I do? I should have my resume to look at. You know, over the years (prompt?) lots of different things. Because I think—you know, people say, “The A. I. A. I have to go to meetings and do things.” I’m going, “Yeah. If you don’t go to meetings and do things, you didn’t do anything. You’re not part of it.” It’s amazing to me to look back now and realize the people I met on a committee when I was—like Ed Sovik, the architect in Northfield [Minnesota] was on a committee with me, and he was so gracious. And I was a little punk. And [unclear] goes, “Wow, I get to meet Ed Sovik.” It was so cool.

**MC** He’s like the grandfather of Minnesota architecture. He was my first architect that I knew.

**SN** So yeah—that’s a good place to practice. [Unclear] A friend who also had a firm here, and I were having lunch and asked [unclear], “So do you ever think you want to move?” And he went, “Well, yeah, I do, because it’s so cold here in the winter. But now I have this established practice. And, oh my God, I wouldn’t want to start this over anywhere else. So here we are.” But it’s a good place to be—it’s a very good place to be.

**HW** And you can always travel.

**SN** Sure. We have this airport that connects you to wherever you want to go.

**KL** So how did you approach fellowship?

**SN** Oh, my goodness. Well, people said to me—I think it was Beverly —wonderful Beverly [Hauschild[-Baron]] said, “You know, you really should apply for fellowship, which was an amazing thing to hear. I have to tell you. And then I thought about it. And I thought, oh, I should look into this. And when I first looked into it, it just was daunting. And then I began the process and then life got complicated, so I set it aside and I remember two colleagues sitting down on either side of me at the design awards, you know, that great celebration of who’s going to win a prize party at the convention. And they both turned to me and said, “You need to apply for the F. A. I. A. this year. I went, “Oh. Okay.”

**HW** Some urgency there.

**SN** Well, it’s about that collegiality of support. And you know, what—yes, you are, and it’s not about showing off. That’s a very Minnesota thing not to show off. But it is about, if you want to be part of the voice of what the A. I. A. is, then speak up and be a part of it, and make the effort. And it is part of defining things, or at least that’s my reason to do it. The person I sat next to at the investiture ceremony, which you’re in alphabetical order, all

these rows. I mean, I overheard a whisper, “I ordered license plates that say F. A. I. A.” So there’s another reason, you know?

**HW** Everybody’s got their reasons.

**SN** So anyway—yep, there’s another one. So then I decided, alright, if we’re going to do this, let’s get serious about it. And so, I hired Frank Martin to write it for me, which was a really good idea because he—his whole—is a writer, so he’s going to knit it all together. And he also has a journalistic ability to craft a story.

*60:03*

So that—when you write your F. A. I. A. —

**KL** She looks at everyone in the eye, [all the interviewers]

**SN** I think it’s about telling your story and getting some help to craft your story so that it makes sense. Because each of you has a story. And what you have each done here for this Women’s Legacy Project or the Women’s Leadership [Convention?] —

**KL** Women’s Leadership Summit, yes.

**SN** —these are the things that are what drives the profession and makes it happen. And fellowship is about recognizing just these kinds of efforts. And it doesn’t seem, oh, well, we did this one project. Well, guess what—there’s way more to the story than this. And if you stop and look at what you each have been doing and are doing and will do, it’s there. Seriously.

**KL** So what does it mean to you to be F. A. I. A.?<sup>1</sup>

**SN** You know, it’s not something that I worry about every day. And it feels like a great honor, and it’s not something that I ever, ever expected, certainly as a young person entering architecture school—would never have occurred to me. But I feel like it’s an honor and an opportunity to give back to the world, and how can it be better because I can be a spokesperson and advance things that I think need to be spoken about and recognized. And it does confer credibility. I can make a call, ask for things and people go, “Oh, okay.” So it’s nice. Maybe it is a magic wand a little bit.

**KL** Tell us about your investiture ceremony.

**SN** Oh, my goodness. Well, that was in Philadelphia. And it was in—I’ll have to look up the name of the hall—it’s a very strange hall that was designed in— at the University of Pennsylvania in I think maybe 1910. So it’s very tall, skinny building with a big, narrow opening. It’s terrible for sound, like a cupola. So Venturi, Scott Brown [and Associates] was hired to redo it in the 60s, so that was a Denise Scott Brown project, and there we were sitting in that room. And the first order of business in the ceremony was to invest her into becoming an honorary F. A. I. A. because she had not been recognized when her husband had got the gold medal—the Architectural Gold Medal. That was just him, not her, and she had never been recognized before. So to me that was a very amazing moment to be in that room. And she was there. She walked up on the stage, very elderly—I think—I’m sure thrilled to be recognized. So that was pretty wonderful. Then the rest of us—the other 103 of us walked up there. And I have to say, by the end of reading everybody’s 35-word statement, they did all sound alike.

**KL** And 35 words wasn’t short enough. So can you talk more about what you see as your legacy to the profession? Your ability to advocate as a fellow— and all of your creative practice as well?

**SN** [Goes through papers.] [Unclear] I wrote some stuff down here. Because I thought about good things after we talked the last time. So I love it that I get to say ahh, I get a second chance. I was talking with this young woman this afternoon about interviewing. And I said, “You and I, we’re going to practice asking these questions so that then later, when “Oh, I should have said—,” then you could have already thought of a great answer[unclear]. So I hope that my legacy will be about both a “me” and a “we” because I think a lot of our world today is all about the ‘me’ and not about the “we”. And as to how architecture is a part of creating that “we” is it’s about community. And we all live in and work in and are taken care of health-care wise in these buildings that we are all creating, and they will be here for decades to come, most of them. Some will get torn down immediately.

I’m interested in and hoping that I’ve created buildings and spaces and landscapes that are experiential, that are not just about a good idea and that don’t just look good in the photograph, but they’re—give back this experience of being in that space. And I tried to create buildings that try to push the envelope on sustainability, not just in terms of measurements, but in terms of the pleasures of living in tune with natural daylight and the sounds of nature. And I hope that my work has built bridges between practical and the delight of living with a passion for implementing sustainable strategies. I have been ahead of my time. So I’ve sought to find a balance building bridges between the real world and the ideal world.

**KL** Lovely.

**SN** Thank you. I’m so glad I wrote that down because those are the things you think of in the middle of the night.

- KL** Do you have a prolific sketchbook habit or thought recording habit.
- SN** I don't. I actually have not but I'm sort of thinking—maybe I'll come back to—. I've had a lot of medical stuff to deal with that has taken up way too much time and attention. So I'm hoping to get beyond that and come back to what's a new way to think and be. It's been the experiences of things like being in Japan, I was thrilled to just be there and be in the place, be in present moment. To me, that was what I loved about Buddhism; it's all about present moment. And that's so not a Western way of being. That was—so I've been kind of doing that which doesn't involve sketchbooks. It's just being.
- KL** Well, you came prepared with many notes, as you did the first time we met which I really appreciate. And I'm looking over my notes as well and all of the themes that our committee identified that we wanted to speak with each of our subjects about, and we have broadly covered them but I also want to open it up and just make sure that you can add anything to our conversation that you want to add and make room for any questions from the others in the room.
- SN** You guys go first.
- LK** Have you visited the Wyoming House again, the compound, maybe, is the better word after hearing how many buildings...
- SN** Ranch.
- UI** Ranch.
- SN** Oh, God.
- UI** Have you build it—visited it recently?
- SN** I have not been there in probably 15 years. So—but I know the client still—well, she's very old now—still is there and goes there every summer. If I were out near that area, I would call her and say, "I'm coming by". And that's been on my radar to go that direction. I usually go east to Maine in the summer. I'd love to go see it again though.
- MC** When I was with your firm, you worked on a home in Maine. Is that home still there?
- SN** Yes—on North Haven Island. Still there with a view of the Penobscot Bay
- MC** I'm too nervous to talk on the— recording
- KL** Now you know what our subjects feel like Maureen
- MC** Yeah—well, I would never do this.

**KL** Your time will come.

69:55

**HW** I think this just has been such an enjoyable experience—conversation, really, so I don't have any more questions to ask you. I just want to say thanks for having us be a part of this.

**MC** And thanks for being the first—and wrap-up for our year.

**HW** Yes.

**SN** I just feel so honored that you guys are doing this whole project. You know, honestly, when I think about where I started as this really sheltered little conservative New England girl—Debutant, by the way—and then to sit here at this other end of the trajectory and to be so honored with, “Yeah, you know this is important. We're going to do this. We're going to talk about it. We're going to record this.” And I was sharing with Kim that some of my projects are now basically just a photograph. You know, the project has changed or whatever has happened. By those photographs are still extant and it's like, oh, okay. But that's a separate different art form than the building and the experience of being there. And this—these videos will be that. They will be this piece of time and this wonderful thing that you guys have created. They will have their own life.

**UI** That's a happy—

**SN** They will persist[unclear].

**HW** And they'll inspire people for years to come and us too, obviously.

**SN** And be a research thing. The University of Minnesota asked for my archives, so I went, oh, okay. So I have to say when they sent a truck—you know, not a huge one, but a truck—they put everything in the truck and closed the door, I kind of went [expression]. But I know people, especially Tofte they want to look stuff up on Tofte. That's the one—I'll bet they want that but they said, “Oh, no. Give us the other stuff too. I love that people can look stuff up. So you're in the archive too, Maureen.

**HW** One of 23 people on that project.

**SN** Everybody's included[unclear].



**MC** Well, people really connect to stories, right? So that's the importance of this.

**SN** It is—yep, it is. When I was giving the talks about the book, that's what made it feasible for a relatively shy person who hadn't done a lot of speaking [expression] was to share stories about these projects. And then you knew the audience would be very interested and engaged [unclear]. Trading stories is good, so you guys—that's a gift you can give. So, when you think about talking about stuff, that's creating an oral history with these stories[unclear].

**KL** Well, thank you for sharing your story with us.

**SN** You're welcome. [applause] Thank you. Well, here's for you guys. [applause]

[End of Interview]

Total Interview Time: 1:13:15

## Credits

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### Project Stewards:

Minnesota Architectural Foundation (MAF)

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

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

### Acknowledgement of support:



This project has been financed in part with funds provided by the State of Minnesota from the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund through the Minnesota Historical Society.

This publication was made possible in part by the people of Minnesota through a grant funded by an appropriation to the Minnesota Historical Society from the Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund. Any views, findings, opinions, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the State of Minnesota, the Minnesota Historical Society, or the Minnesota Historic Resources Advisory Committee.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Nettleton, upon reflecting on her transcript and the question “So what does it mean to you to be F. A. I. A.?”, wished to add the following statement to her response to this question – the statement was sent in an email addressed to Kim Loken on June 30<sup>th</sup> 2019:

*“An irony of this award is that a “fellow” is one of the guys, and tho[ugh] I am a woman, I am now accepted into the fraternity. No questions about did you really earn this honor? That is a change from having to prove myself at every juncture along the way.”*