

The Minnesota  
Women in Architecture  
FAIA Legacy Project

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Susan Blumentals 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.

### Su Blumentals



Elevated to Fellow in 1999, Susan Blumentals was the first woman design professional on the Minnesota Board of Registration and a catalyst for its transformation into a functioning, open regulatory agency.

## Interview

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Su Blumentals, Interviewee

Kimberly Long Loken, Interviewer

November 27, 2018

Kimberly Long Loken: **KL**

Su Blumentals: **SB**

*Track 1*

*00:00*

**KL** Today is the 27<sup>th</sup> of November, 2018. This is Kimberly Loken interviewing Su Blumentals. So Su, would you state your full name and when and where you were born for the archive?

**SB** Susan Blumentals. I was born September 26, 1936.

**KL** Our interview is being conducted in the office of Blumentals Architecture in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Alright, so Su, we'll just start with kind of a chronological conversation, dial it back in time. I am going to scribble down names as we go just so we can double check the spelling of all the names at the end of the interview. So how did you first find architecture or how did it find you?

**SB** Well, I think it found me early in life because I did it in girl scouts. I did it in junior high. I did it in high school and concluded that it took a village to get me there because so many people were involved as prompters in this whole process.

**KL** So what were some of the activities that you did in girl scouts for example like at the youngest age?

**SB** Well, designing houses for badges.

**KL** (Laughter).

**SB** (Laughter). And building towns in sand boxes and raiding my grandmother's moss bed on the north side of her house because it was wonderful sod.

**KL** (Laughter). So even before girl scouts were you—was your creative play a lot of things that were really oriented to the built environment.

**SB** Yes, but at the time I didn't realize it. It was just fun.

**KL** Right. And then the girl scout activities gave it a touch more structure. What kinds of things did you do in high school?

**SB** I had a teacher in my junior year who really took an interest in her students. She let each of us do our thing and, rather than having a set curriculum for the whole class, we each had a niche that she let us have fun with. She really did wonders for my interest in architecture and let me design homes and build models of homes and just become interested. She took me to the university as a junior to see what the school of architecture was like.

**KL** Wow.

**SB** And I thought that's pretty neat for a teacher.

**KL** That's an amazing teacher.

**SB** Well, and she was a first-year teacher who was there because the regular one was on sabbatical, thank goodness.

**KL** (Laughter).

**SB** So that was a huge part of my development into going into architecture. And I wouldn't have gotten into the school if Ralph [Rapson] hadn't been there. The dean before him felt that a woman's place was in the home.

**KL** So what year did you start at the University of Minnesota?

**SB** 1954—the year that Ralph started. (laughter).

**KL** So can we talk a little bit what it was like being a woman in architecture in 1954—in architecture school?

**SB** Well, there weren't that many of us around there. The school I think had about 200 students in it at the time, about 100 in grade one, eighty in grade two and then, for grade three, it dropped down to about 30 and they graduated 24.

**KL** Whoa.

**SB** There was one woman a year ahead of me, and there was another woman in my class. All three of us graduated and I don't think there was another woman in the school for at least ten years.

**KL** Wow.

**SB** There was a real drought. So it's wonderful seeing what's happening now.

**KL** What person or event most greatly influenced your career in architecture?

**SB** That's where I think it's a village because we had the art teacher and then we had Ralph. And I'd say the third one that was probably the biggest influence was my older sister who was—there was enough age difference between the two of us, but she was more like a good friend than a sister that you fight with. She did everything in her power to push this thing forward, and to make sure that I was able to get into the school of architecture.

**KL** Right—so emotional support, financial support, all these things or—?

**SB** Well, no, financially that wasn't there at all, so it was strictly by scholarships, and thank God I found scholarships to—plus, at that time, you started working early in your school

career. And you had to have 800 hours of work in an office to graduate. And that was part of the whole system until the 80s or 90s when they discovered that offices didn't want to hire students because it was becoming much more dog-eat-dog and they didn't want to take time to teach because you really learned more in the offices than you did in school. School was where you'd get—dream. In the office you had to face realities (laughter).

**KL** So your older sister, is she a creative person as well? What was the path that she was on that she gave you—?

**SB** Well she was the first special ed [education] teacher to graduate from the University of Minnesota in 1949. So she was into designing toys for handicapped kids and never patented any. And then would see all these things that she came up with on the market ten years later. Someone said, "Aha. Hey that's a good idea." (laughter).

**KL** What is your sister's name?

**SB** It was Jean Harris.

**KL** So moving into your career, what was the first office that you worked at?

**SB** I started working between grades one and two for Ben Gingold. He was on the faculty—was a grade one crit[ique], and so that was how I knew him. And I was stupid enough and green enough at that point in my life that, when I heard someone was leaving his office to go to work for Ralph, I went trotting over there and applied for a job. And they said, I think we're looking for a little more experience than you have, because I had absolutely no experience. I was designing parade floats and doing renderings of them. So—.

**KL** So Ben Gingold's office was the first office you did ultimately work at.

**SB** Yes. So I stayed there for 17 years—

**KL** Wow.

**SB** —and left there in 1973 and was a VP [Vice President] at the time I left and had married one of the other employees (laughter), and so we both left in '73. And I went to work for Smiley-Glotter and was part of the team that they had with two other architectural firms to do Hennepin County Medical Center. So it was doing a lot of interior packages because it was fast track, which was just becoming of interest to both clients and us.

*10:04*

**KL** So was Gingold's office primarily medical as well, or was it broad-ranging projects?

**SB** Gingold—he was kind of a renaissance man. We did everything from single-family residences that were spectacular to office buildings. We did a lot of theaters around town. I was so sad to see my Southtown Theater get torn down. You know you're getting up there when they start tearing down your buildings. It was just a real varied practice. It was a minority office because, at that time, Minneapolis and St. Paul were very segregated as far as architectural firms and I assume law firms and every other kind of firm. There were the regular firms and then there were the Jewish firms. And I found in both jobs that I had to

interview for that, as a minority firm, they were much more interested in listening to someone that didn't look like them. And so, between the two offices, it really gave me an opportunity to work with the—well, I think he was the only black architect in the state of Minnesota at the time. Worked with him at Gingold-Pink and it was wonderful being able to be part of such a diverse staff. And well, in 1976, then Janis [Blumentals] quit his job and said, "Guess what? We're opening an office!" (Laughter). So I kept my paying job for another year and then joined the firm in '77.

**KL** Right—so we need to back up for a moment and talk about when you met Janis.

**SB** Well, we actually graduated from the U [University of Minnesota] at the same time. He was married at the time, so there wasn't that much go-between between the singles and the married groups. And he was hired by Gingold-Pink in 1967, I believe it was, and newly divorced. And we worked together on a lot of projects and got married in 1969. We found that we worked very well together on grocery stores for Lunds (laughter) and other such things.

**KL** Had it always been an interest of yours to have your own firm, or is it something you sort of grew into as you grew into management in your career?

**SB** I was the larger firm person of the two of us. And I'd say he had a much greater commitment to opening his own firm in which became opening our own firm. We found that 16 people seemed to be the limit that we could—we felt comfortable with as far as employees—that, when it got above that, then we were losing touch because part of our belief was every client has a principal running their project, and that that was where the buck stopped. And when you got beyond the 16 people, then you had to really start loosening the strings a bit. So rather than expand and lose those strings, we said, no, let's keep it small.

**KL** And was there a particular project or client that was the genesis for that moment of starting the firm? Was there like a—kind of a flashpoint of opportunity or just sort of decided it was time and made it happen?

**SB** It was both of those things. When the firm was started, Janis was already working on Earle Brown Farm. He worked for the contractor that did all of the work for the fellow that owned the farm and so, in the time after we both left Gingold-Pink, and before the firm was started, Janis spent a year and a half in Las Vegas as the contractor's architect at the Tropicana Hotel because the contractor didn't trust the architect from Nevada (laughter). And it was the same fellow that owned the Tropicana that also owned Earle Brown Farm. And so first Janis worked for that client and then it became apparent that it would really be smart to just become a tenant over there and open a firm and do his work plus other work.

**KL** Yeah, it's a unique opportunity to be a tenant in the project that you're rehabbing, to always be on-site (laughter).

**SB** Well, the whole block where the farm is was pretty much filled with our work—what had been the old administration building for the farm was turned into the entry lobby for a senior high-rise. Phase one was built and phase two was never built. Another part of the

site has a single-story assisted-living complex on it. And there's tons of buildings in Brooklyn Center where the farm's located that has the offices signature on it. A lot of office warehouse properties because, again, those were sites that the same gentleman owned. And, if he didn't own the property, then we ended up doing the work for whoever did own that property. So we owe an awful lot to Brooklyn Center.

**KL** How long was it till you had a client who wasn't directly or indirectly related to the farm site?

**SB** Well, we ended up with a hotel-motel client from St. Cloud, and I'm not sure how we found him or he found us. But it went on for many years through I think three or four different hotel-motel types all across the country, and including a guest ranch in the mountains in Montana which was probably one of the most fun projects I've ever worked on. They have parties so Peter Fonda can come over and it was a very interesting group. But it led to a varied practice. And, through the years, because we were a woman-owned business, we did a lot of work with Minneapolis Public Housing Authority. And State of Minnesota which I guess you could say is one reason when I became minority stockholder when we sold the farm, that's when I retired. At that point, it was very important having a woman-owned business.

*19:55*

**KL** Can we talk a little bit more about one of your favorite projects, delving into what made the project successful, how it may have changed or enhanced the way that you practice architecture?

**SB** Well, actually one of the most enjoyable ones was—it was before we opened the firm. We were both at Gingold-Pink and it was following Lunds through their very first expansion of their two or three stores they had had since World War II. And so it was a case of really having a super team on one side and on our side and I—it was beyond my imagination at the time that there would actually be a client that would let you design murals about the history of food to go in a grocery store and to be able to do each of the departments as really a boutique store. And being able to do the specific signage for it and the—.

**KL** Yes, environmental graphics is not something you really get trained in in architecture school, and certainly at that time it was not considered an integral part of many of the projects the way that experience design is today, so it does sound like a really fascinating opportunity.

**SB** The original site that they were looking at was actually on highway 100, and Duluth St. in Golden Valley. And the contractor which was Kraus-Anderson—their marketing department did all sorts of studies and said, there just isn't enough traffic at that site. So that was how we ended up at 62<sup>nd</sup> and Penn Ave between Minneapolis and Richfield. Well, it seems that two or three years later, a guy by the name of Don Byerly decided he would leave Cub and start his own business. Guess what site he took? And I now use that grocery

store. But it was unusual finding such a—horrible pun—meat and potatoes sort of business and finding them so wanting to do something that was not the norm. So they ended up as it was the grocery store of the year nationally when it was finished. And they had developed quite a reputation simply because of their willingness to really go out there.

**KL** And were there specific things from that experience that you then tried to bring into future projects or practice—at least when it fit?

**SB** I think it really sealed in my mind how important it was to really get down to the tiniest detail with the client and keep reminding them that they were part of the team and that the way to the best solution was if we all worked together. Very similar sort of thing in the Albinson building. You probably don't even know who the Albinson's were.

**KL** I don't think so.

**SB** They were the biggest blue-printer in the Twin Cities. And they built a new building on Glenwood and Cedar Lake Rd. And it was kind of tough around there. But they felt that the area—it was centrally located—it was something that the community needed there. So planning it, Mr. Albinson was not—oddly enough, he had trouble reading plans even though he printed millions of them. But he understood models and was just a crazy model builder. So we'd sit on his living room carpet moving walls around on his quarter-inch models of his building. And this was how it was planned. And that too, it was a wonderful experience and a reminder that we so often start speaking in architect-ese and nobody knows what we're talking about. And, if we remember to speak, keeping in mind that whoever it is we are talking with doesn't understand what we are saying—keep it simple, stupid. And explain what it really is. And it sure helps the planning process, plus it reminds them again that they are part of the team.

**KL** Was there an expected or unexpected challenge that shaped your career?

**SB** I think that probably was in college because I had no idea what to expect, and I don't think they really had any expectations over at the U either. And I was pleasantly surprised with how totally accepting my classmates were, and it was like having 24 big brothers. And my basis for working with my fellow classmates was, if they have to stay up all night on a project, I have to stay up on an all-night project—that I was going to be one of the boys and, if they had to do it, I had to do it. And I think it was a very good lesson on don't expect people to hand things to you—you have to earn them. And, to this day, the ones that are still alive are such good friends.

**KL** Are there complimentary skills or interests that you have that enhance your architectural practice?

**SB** Well, when I first started, there were a few interior designers, but they strictly did expensive homes on Lake Minnetonka. And so you got to do everything that was involved with the building. You designed the site. You did the landscape planning. If it was a theater, you got to design the carpet. You got to design the toilet stalls, the popcorn stand. And that was so much fun, and it was so exciting when you'd get the stripe off of the carpet back from the mill to see what you needed to change. And it's something you just can't do anymore. So



that's the part of it I now miss because we've become so compartmentalized that I think some of the students now are missing out on part of a wonderful education. I mean, we spent one year in art class learning the makeup of color because the guy teaching it the first day in class said, "You guys haven't a clue. But it was nothing in the curriculum. And it was probably the most valuable part of art that I ever had. The plusses show up in strange places.

**KL** Such as—

*29:55*

**SB** Well, such as Professor Arnest who saw through all of us and decided you guys need an education.

**KL** Another citizen of the village.

**SB** Yes, absolutely, and the architectural history instructor that was also there because of a sabbatical. And one day a week we didn't do architectural history—we did food, we did music, we did theater of whatever period we were working on—

**KL** The context of the architecture.

**SB** Absolutely, and he knew that we weren't getting any form of drawing in—you know, someone teaching us drawing in design—that Ralph didn't believe in it. He said, no, he wanted—rather than turning out 24 Ralphs—he wanted 24 individuals and everyone had to find their own way as far as expressing themselves on paper. So the history instructor would make us do a pen-and-ink drawing. It could be a detail, a town square, what-have-you, of whatever period we were studying at the time. And not only were we really learning better, but we were also learning how to draw with pen-and-ink.

**KL** Yeah—so teaching the way you see and how you focus—

**SB** Oh, absolutely. So I think I was over there at the right time.

**KL** So what advice would you give emerging professionals just beginning their careers? How would you channel your experience to—

**SB** Start giving back early because at the time it may not seem like you're getting something out of it, but even professionally getting something out of it. I know I wish I had started a lot earlier than I did. And I was able to jump into giving back so much because Janis was so willing to sort of cover for me at the office because we both felt it was important to give back both to the profession and the community. And it has just so many plusses that you don't realize until ten years later.

**KL** So what were some of the actions that you took?

**SB** Oh my—started out as the first woman professional on the registration board and also, when I was done with that, then AIA [American Institute of Architects] Minnesota

President in 2001. And Minnesota Architectural Foundation [MAF] after that. And it was funny, between those and some committees and neighborhood groups in our neighborhood and stuff, I found that things seemed to be getting stagnant and something had to be done to get things rolling again and came up with actually something that at the time it was not my intention to make things change so drastically, but it was getting the organizations to put in term limits. And in most of them that hadn't already gone to that sort of thing, instead of everyone being there for 30-40 years such as on the registration board, it was two terms. And so there was constantly new blood rotating in and, if you were doing a job there, you were burned out after two terms anyway. And it seems like it's really helped those organizations, and that was one thing I was very proud of.

**KL** Speaking of things that you're proud of (laughter), what do you hope is your legacy to the architectural profession?

**SB** Oh, my. One that I think has helped through to today is, "Well, she's one of the boys." I have trouble relating to some of the issues that are happening today because I never confronted them when I was coming up through the profession. And so I need some education there, but I think probably the other thing was, "She served well." Because I think we almost do more for our profession by doing things that aren't architecture as much as the buildings that we do. You find that out the first time they tear down one of your buildings. (Laughter).

**KL** But the intangibles can last longer.

**SB** Yes. Oh, and I do have to tell you, my latest challenge that was completed and successful is: I'm a passionate needle-pointer, and I started a rug in 2001 for an octagonal entry hall, and of course we've had two—three other places to live since then, and I finally finished the rug on the fourth of July this year—

**KL** Wow.

**SB** —five foot octagonal needle-point rug, and—

**KL** Do you dare walk on it?

**SB** No, nobody gets to walk on it. And, when I finished it, someone said, "Gosh, you should enter that in the State Fair. And I said, "You've got to be kidding." But I did. In the middle of moving, I gathered the thing and could hardly stand it until they published the lists and the online on a particular morning at 8 am. And I looked and I won the sweepstakes for all the rugs at the fair (laughter), so then I knew for sure no one could walk on it. It's now known as a wall-hanging.

**KL** So you're a true Minnesotan if you've gotten a blue ribbon at the State Fair.

**SB** Oh, absolutely (laughter)—first and last.

**KL** Well, I think we've covered this throughout the other questions, but just one more opportunity to address anything that hasn't been with the nature of our project—how has being a woman influenced your architectural career?

**SB** I think, in general, women are more conciliatory and consequently I think we have a little more ability to arrive at solutions that tend to make everyone happy as opposed to the solution being an edict. And I also think it's part of keeping long-term clients because they find it's easier to work with lemonade than it is to work with lemons (laughter). I know it's stereotypical, but I also think it's provable (laughter).

**KL** Stereotype—archetype, right?

**SB** (Laughter.)

39:57

**KL** It's always a struggle which should—where things fall in the spectrum. Tell me more about what it means to you to be FAIA. When were you elected to the college?

**SB** 1999. I submitted in '98 and didn't make it, had no idea if I would have been accepted but found out five days after the submission date that one of my letter writers was late sending her letter in and, if they don't get the letters, they don't look at your file. So I assumed that I didn't get it because it wasn't up to snuff. So I sent it off to Lenore Lucey who was head of the New York AIA chapter and then went on to be head of NCARB [National Council of Architecture Registration Boards]. And I sent it to her and I got this absolutely bloody copy back and I thought, well, I should listen to her so I did. And so then I got it in '99, and it means the world to me. All I can think of is the Sally Fields line (laughter) and so—.

**KL** Absolutely—recommendation of peers.

**SB** Oh, absolutely. There's—it sort of outshines all the other things. And I was at one of them in the group that didn't get it through design or practice or direct architecture submissions, but it was through service to the profession. I think people forget that that is recognized. It was fun this—a couple years ago to have Gary Demele get it for the same reason. So that was nice.

**KL** Alright, so that's the structure of the topics that we're going to run through in the video as well. Is there anything else that is important for you to address and include on the—

**SB** Actually, yeah. One thing that—and I guess that it fits within our Blumentals Architecture portfolio but, in the early 80s, we had one client that was just totally into energy conservation, daylighting, sustainable products in the—just everything that is happening now, but this was in 1980, and we did the HRA building for Dakota County that had all of those things in it, and bermed earth sides and passive solar. You name it and it was in it. And we also did I believe at the time they called it a demonstration project for Dakota County—two sets of townhouses. One was done the normal way. The other one had all of the bells and whistles of energy conservation in it with the window blankets and I believe they're still operating today. And the hardest part with those units was getting the residents in the energy conserving project to play by the rules.

- KL** Right—that’s always the challenge is that the completion of the design is still human behavior.
- SB** Well and then it was hard to get the HRA [Dakota County Housing and Redevelopment Authority] staff to do what they were supposed to do too because there you have a much larger structure and people didn’t pull the blankets at night and, even though it would be a hundred and some foot candle, someone would—“Oh, but I have to have my desk light.” “No you don’t.” But it was a huge part of our portfolio for a short time and, once those things were done, then it went out of favor. And gosh, we’ve got to really spread our wings, because you can’t make a living doing this. So it remained really dead for about 15 years or so. And the office has not come back into it as much as it really was at that time. But everyone thought we were nuts.
- KL** Reaction to the energy crisis, right?
- SB** Yes. So I know in ’73, ’74 we were so undone by the energy issues at that time and Janis was in Las Vegas at the time—he got rid of the Chrysler convertible with air conditioning. You know, it was like driving a tank and got a Porche 914 which basically has a sewing machine motor in it. We could drive to Las Vegas—or from Las Vegas to San Francisco and back on one tank of gas. So that was nice (laughter). It’s interesting where actual parts of history take you and become some of the fun parts.
- KL** Well, again, it’s like your architectural history class, right?
- SB** Yes!
- KL** It’s all of these issues surrounding the architecture.
- SB** Absolutely.
- KL** Alright, well thank you very much. It’s been a pleasure.
- SB** Thank you.

[End of Interview]

Total Interview Time: 48:21

## Credits

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### Project Stewards:

Minnesota Architectural Foundation (MAF)

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

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