Becoming an Architect

Lee W. Waldrep, Ph.D.

Foreword by Kate Schwennsen, FAIA, 2006 AIA National President
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KATHRYN H. ANTHONY, PH.D.

Professor
School of Architecture
Department of Landscape Architecture
Gender and Women's Studies Program
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Champaign, Illinois

Why and how did you become an architecture professor?
I have had a lifelong fascination with architecture, especially the social and psychological relationships among people, places, and spaces. My father is a retired professor of city planning and also has a degree in architecture. I have early memories of visits to my father's office at Columbia University's Avery Hall, where I was intrigued by all the architectural drawings and models displayed throughout the corridors. I was also fortunate to travel with my family throughout Europe. Several visits were to contemporary urban design projects as well as new towns, topics of my father's university lectures.

Why and how did you choose which school to attend for your architecture degree? What degree(s) do you possess?
I was an undergraduate student in psychology at the University of California, Berkeley. During my final year, I discovered the new field of environmental psychology and enrolled in a course on this subject. After purchasing all three textbooks required for the course, I could not put them down. I read them all during the first week of the term. This had never happened before, and I realized I had found my niche. After I received my B.A. in psychology, I remained at Berkeley to complete my Ph.D. in architecture with a specialty in social and behavioral factors in design.

Why is the topic of diversity important for architects?
Diversity is one of the most important issues for today's architects. The built environment reflects our culture, and vice versa. If our buildings, spaces, and places continue to be designed by a relatively homogeneous group of people, what message does that send about our culture? The lack of diversity in the architectural profession impedes progress not only in that field but also in American society at large.
Discrimination in the architectural profession can lead to discrimination in how we all use the built environment, and it has done so for years. Architects must pay greater attention to the needs of women, persons of color, gays and lesbians, and persons with physical disabilities, all of whom — until recently — have been treated as second-class citizens in the built environment. So-called minorities have already become the majority in many American cities, and that trend will only increase.

You are a faculty member in architecture, landscape architecture, and gender and women's studies. Can you describe the differences among these three disciplines?

I enjoy having academic appointments in all three disciplines, although architecture is my primary affiliation. Architecture has traditionally been a male-oriented model of education; however, that is gradually changing as more women students and faculty enter the field. By comparison, landscape architecture has historically provided greater opportunities for women. Gender and women's studies, a much newer discipline, examines issues that the architecture profession until recently has ignored. Students in all three disciplines differ greatly. While design students excel visually and are attentive to their physical surroundings, gender and women's studies tend to be talented verbally and more widely read.

What do you like about research, teaching, and writing?

By far the most appealing aspect of research, teaching, and writing is creativity. Research and writing offer the opportunity to examine issues previously unexplored. One has a chance to carve out new ground, and this is exciting. For example, while Design Juries on Trial is by no means the final word on this topic, the fact that it is one of the first examples of empirical research on design juries is significant. This is also true for my second book, Designing for Diversity, one of the first books to address how women and persons of color fare in the architectural profession compared to their white male counterparts. It is also based on empirical research.

As a female scholar in architectural education, my writings have a special slant, and I believe I have made a mark in the field. My aim in both books has been to create a more humane environment in both architectural education and practice.

Teaching is another creative endeavor. One of my favorite aspects of teaching is seeing a student flourish outside the university. An idea that started as a casual discussion during office hours germinates into a significant body of work presented at a national venue. It is an amazing metamorphosis, and it is gratifying to watch students discuss their work with leading scholars from around the world. Similarly, I appreciate hearing from alumni long after they graduate and learning about their accomplishments, both professional and personal. It underscores how fortunate we are as educators to cross paths with these individuals in their formative years.