Becoming an Architect

Lee W. Waldrep, Ph.D.

Foreword by Marvin J. Malecha, FAIA, 2009 AIA National President
Becoming an Architect
A Guide to Careers in Design

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Teaches about People and Places

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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 who also studied architecture, and while in France he worked for LeCorbusier. I have early memories of visits to my father’s office in Avery Hall at Columbia University, 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 and new towns, topics of my father’s university lectures.

Why and how did you decide on 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 required textbooks, 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 that I had found my niche. After I received my bachelor of arts in psychology, I remained at Berkeley to complete my Ph.D. in architecture with a specialty in social and behavioral factors in design.

You have written two books that help inform both the education and practice of architecture—Design Juries on Trial: The Renaissance of the Design Studio and Designing for Diversity: Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in the Architectural Profession. How can architecture students learn from your research on design juries?

My research on design juries has much to offer architecture students about both the jury process and, more generally, the design studio. The traditional academic design jury is an outmoded model that is all too often inefficient and ineffective. After reading my book, students will become more empowered to take charge of their academic careers.

By reading about the experiences of over 900 students, faculty, and leading practitioners, students will have greater confidence to prepare and present their design projects both in school and in professional practice. They will learn how to work more efficiently in design studio, and how to use research to better understand the design program at hand. Design Juries on Trial presents students and faculty with several alternate models to evaluate design work that involve greater student participation and higher levels of learning.

How did you first become interested in diversity?

My ethnic heritage is 100 percent Greek. When I was ages three, six, and nine, my family spent
the summers in Greece visiting relatives in Athens and on the island of Skyros. I was struck by the unusual ways that Greeks used time and space. For example, mid-day siestas allowed young children to play outside late at night in busy plateias (plazas) while their parents dined with friends and neighbors at the local taverna. Small-scale private spaces encouraged greater use of the public realm.

As a graduate student I spent three years in the International House at the University of California, Berkeley, where over 600 students, half American, half from all over the world, ate three meals a day together and lived under one roof. Short of living abroad, it is hard to imagine a more immersive environment to learn about cultural and ethnic diversity. Even today, some of my best friends are those I met at I House.

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 homogenous 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 historically 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.

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 that have been previously unexplored. One has a chance to carve out new ground, and this is exciting. For example, while Design Juries on Trial is not the final word on this topic, it was one of the first examples of empirical research on design juries, and for this it remains 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, and it too is based on empirical research.
As a female scholar in architectural education, my writings have had a special slant, and I believe that 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 to see 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 them during their most formative years.

**How has architecture and design impacted your everyday life?**

- My historic 1924 Dutch Colonial house, where I have lived for almost 25 years, always had plenty of character, charm, and curb appeal. Yet it also had two major drawbacks: a tiny apartment-sized galley kitchen and only one bathroom. Together with URBANWorks Ltd., a Chicago architectural firm that promotes diversity, we designed an unusual “21st century octagon,” a kitchen/bath addition that received an award from our local Preservation and Conservation Association. Top priority throughout the design process was to integrate with and enhance the architectural integrity of the original structure. With sun streaming in from all directions...
and gorgeous views of nature, the new space totally transformed my home. Some of my favorite design surprises: a full moon shining from the clerestory windows, reflecting prisms along the walls when the sun shines on my milestone countertops, and, on a wintry day, feeling like I’m in the middle of a snow globe. At its best, architecture can work magic.

Who or what experience has been a major influence on your career?

No doubt that my father’s career as a professor of city planning and a principal in a city planning consulting office was a major influence. Without it, I may have chosen a career in healthcare, as a counselor or therapist, or in journalism—but probably not in architecture. My mother taught me the value of listening and understanding.

My mentors in graduate school also had a strong influence. Robert Sommer, a psychologist at the University of California at Davis, taught me the importance of writing scholarly research for a wide variety of audiences along with the value of writing in a style that the average layperson could understand.

Clare Cooper Marcus, a retired professor of architecture and landscape architecture at the University of California at Berkeley, taught me the need to examine environment-behavior research topics that could have far-reaching psychological impacts. Galen Cranz, a professor of architecture at Berkeley, provided thoughtful critiques of my student work and helped me become a much better writer than before.

After I joined the faculty of the University of Illinois, my colleagues James Anderson and Sue Weidemann provided excellent role models as scholars who engaged in high-caliber environment-behavior research and who interacted well with their students and colleagues.

My late husband, Barry Riccio, a historian, was an excellent wordsmith and a top-notch writer who often critiqued my manuscripts. He helped me come up with the title for Design Juries on Trial and other publications. Several have alliteration in their titles—a favorite trademark of his. My personal experiences with Barry’s seven-year long battle with a rare form of cancer also had an impact on my career.