

# Leave a Legacy

## SAH Development Update: Beverly Willis Architecture Foundation

Beverly Willis responds to questions about her life and work posed by Nina Botting Herbst and Pauline Saliga.

*Following my interview with Kathe Henry about the Scott Opler Endowment for New Scholars, for this edition of the SAH Newsletter Pauline Saliga and I were lucky to be able to correspond with Beverly Willis, founder of the Beverly Willis Architecture Foundation (2002). The Foundation has recently created a new fellowship for SAH, the Beverly Willis Architectural Foundation Travel Fellowship, which will be awarded to the individual whose paper, to be presented at SAH's Annual Meeting, 'best advances the status of women in architecture'. The first Willis Architecture Foundation Award will be granted in conjunction with the Society's upcoming Annual Meeting in Vancouver.*

*Ms. Willis has had a long and very successful career in architecture based, for the most part in San Francisco, and has been a great champion for, and example to, women in this area. Also, in 1972, her firm was one of three which pioneered the development of computer software for architectural use.*

*In the first of a two-part response to our questions Ms. Willis talks about her career and the challenges of being a woman working as an architect in the 1950s:*

In 1977, the national president of AIA – a fellow San Franciscan architect named Elmer Botsai – declared to the press that he would never hire a woman architect. Fortunately, I didn't need a job at the time since I already had my own firm with about 35 employees.

This is just one example of the gender divide within architecture, especially during the 1970s, spurred in great part by the debate over the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), the constitutional amendment proposed in 1972 which would have guaranteed women's equal rights. Such debate spilled onto the floor at the 1979 convention of AIA – where the membership was going to vote whether or not to support the ERA. As president of the California



Beverly Willis [photographs Holly Hinman]

Council of AIA (the first woman to hold that position), I was the spokesperson for the California delegation, and gave a short, passionate, non-divisive speech in favor of the ERA. The audience was moved. We won the architects' vote. Despite that victory, nationally, the amendment fell short.

In some ways, not much has changed — at least in the world of architecture. To be sure, great strides have been made. Zaha Hadid has broken through architecture's glass ceiling by winning the coveted, prestigious Pritzker Award, while Maya Lin is a household name. Approximately half of the students enrolled in architecture studies are women — but then why is there such a staggering dropout rate? Why are only 11% of the current AIA members women? What's going on within the culture of architecture?

The case of my grand goddaughter is illuminating. Her ambition is to be both an architect and an engineer, and she wants to attend a west coast school. During one of the on-campus interviews last fall, the male interviewer informed her that architecture studies were known around campus as "archi-torture" and explained why. He never once suggested that architecture could be a noble and fulfilling profession,

nor did he offer encouragement. I was stunned. I thought the tactics of discouragement, demeaning the possibilities of women's contributions had ended.

Why have I established the BWAF? Well, there is obviously a need. BWAF is based on the belief that women should be full players in all aspects of the architecture profession. Simply put, the equality of women extends to the field of architecture.

Though it sounds paradoxical, I had the advantage of establishing my practice prior to the women's movement — and all the acrimony that came with it. Before the women's movement, I, like many, forged ahead without realizing the degree to which women architects had been sidestepped, overlooked, ignored and — to use a word from the civil rights movement — whitewashed.

Let me give another personal example. By the late seventies, my office was located in a downtown office

Beverly Willis



building we owned. Nearby stood a 24-acre parcel — bulldozed flat during the 50s urban redevelopment efforts with an ugly story of displacement and lawsuits. I sensed that it was timely to develop the site. Collaborating with the San Francisco Redevelopment official in charge, I solicited the interest of major developers across the nation. One, Olympia and York, was interested. Concurrently, I asked Ziedler-Roberts Partnership to be the lead Joint Venture architect, as the firm had designed similar projects. I also became a developer-partner with Olympia and York and Marriott Hotels. We entered the international design-build competition conducted by the Redevelopment Agency in 1980 and won. Three years later, when the final conceptual site plans and building concepts were completed for Yerba Buena Gardens, they were exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Art, including a companion catalogue.

It was a matter of policy, really, that all drawings, renderings and models be labeled with the both names of the joint venture architects. Yet just prior to the exhibition opening and catalogue publication, by some mysterious hand, "Willis and Associates Architects — Joint Venture Architects" was airbrushed off the documents. It still remains a mystery. Meanwhile, the museum belatedly published an errata — an attempt to correct the injustice. This is why few know of my work on the Yerba Buena Gardens. And, this is one example of how women have been written out of architectural history.

*Learn more about the Beverly Willis Architecture Foundation at [www.bwaf.org](http://www.bwaf.org).*