

# 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.

*In the last edition of the SAH Newsletter Beverly Willis talked about her earlier career and work in San Francisco. Now in the second part of her response to questions posed by Nina Botting Herbst and Pauline Saliga she covers her involvement in civic projects – such as The National Building Museum and the redevelopment of Lower Manhattan post 2001; the Beverly Willis Architecture Foundation (BAAF); and how she thinks SAH and other organizations can help to promote and support women in architecture.*

My best-known building, the San Francisco Ballet Building (1982), designed as part of the city's Civic Center, was widely celebrated. It's hard to believe that this work occurred only 16 years after my first AIA award, in 1966, for the Union Street Stores, originally Victorian Buildings that we converted to commercial use.

I've been asked what building influenced my design work. Rather than refining one particular style, my designs have always been governed by the opportunities as well as the constraints of the type of building and its location. For example, prior to the national preservation movement, I wanted to preserve and restore three Victorian, two-and-three story buildings, known as the "Union Street Stores" with their intricate detailing and fish-scale shingles. But the buildings needed to be one-third larger; so I decided to jack up the building and build a floor below.

I've often been asked why I donate so much time to civic affairs. Architecture, I believe, involves more than just design. I've looked to the past for my role models. As a student, I was impressed by the active leadership roles that Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and Brunelleschi had within civic life, conferring on urban affairs, even combat defense. With this as a model, I have continually volunteered my time to assist in urban affairs, to providing professional expertise for a range of issues from restoring

community property in San Francisco after the civil rights riots, lobbying for Union Street amenities, working to save San Francisco's cable cars, preventing construction in Golden Gate Park. These activities earned me the Phoebe Hearst Gold Medal Award as one of San Francisco's ten most distinguished citizens. In the 1970s, I successfully worked to create the National Building Museum, I served as chair of the Federal Construction Council of the National Academy of Science, and I was one of two architects representing the US at Habitat 1. I believe that the experiences gained from such activities enrich the architectural knowledge needed for a successful career in planning and design.

Sometimes the call to civic duty is urgent and essential. Immediately after 9/11, Susan Szenasy, editor of *Metropolis*, and I formed what became a 500-participant organization, named Rebuild Downtown Our Town (R.Dot). Among the participants were well-known architects, industrial designers, economists, attorneys, residents, as well as representatives from local colleges and small businesses. R.Dot published a series of working papers that have influenced the redevelopment of New York's downtown. We pooled together our professional talents and knowledge to help the city after the horrific attack. My ability to move quickly, understand urban complexities, and to make the necessary recommendations were the result of my years of diverse experience in large-scale projects and development.

Back to why I wanted to establish the Beverly Willis Architecture Foundation (BAAF). I firmly believe that until full parity exists in the architecture professions, until the culture of architecture veers away from its male bias, there will always be a need to acknowledge the many contributions women have made and continue to make in the production of architecture, whether as practitioners of design and urbanism, or as historians and critics.

BAAF is committed to promoting research that focuses on the contributions of women to the fields of architectural design, the building arts and urban planning, as well as architectural history and criticism, with particular emphasis on the middle years of the

twentieth century. For example, around 1960 there were 184 women members of AIA\*, in addition to an unknown number of licensed women architects. I know of perhaps ten of them. Who were all the others? What are their stories? How will the new histories of twentieth-century architecture read, when women's work is given equal attention?

For this reason, BAAF seeks grantees willing to unearth and revisit all this material that has been overlooked, or airbrushed from the records. To this end, the foundation supports innovative projects that expand the knowledge and advance the recognition of women's contributions in the production of architecture. These projects can include scholarly study, publication, exhibition, even film.

BAAF hopes that SAH members will encourage other

teachers, students as well as practitioners to continue to investigate women's place in architectural history, and evaluating it within a culture of equality.

\* I got this figure from my 1992 notes, and have not been able to verify the statistic. If one of your readers has this information at their fingertips, please contact us at bwaf.org. Here is an example of the kind of research that's needed, and that BAAF seeks to support through its newly developed Fellowship Program - the next deadline for applications for BAAF Fellowships and Grants is 15 September 2005.

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



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