

Interview Log

[00:00] Mary speaks about her current position as a partner at John Milner Architects, a firm that was formed in 1989, following a split with four former partners. She describes growing up in a small, very walkable “really sweet small town outside of Buffalo, New York” founded by the Ebenezers, a German religious sect. Her awareness of the built environment was awakened when, as a result of the FederalAid Highway Act, most of the town was demolished including the house where she grew up. That and other demolitions of historic buildings familiar to her, including the Larken Building by Frank Lloyd Wright in Buffalo, New York, troubled her deeply. Since her grandfather owned much local real estate, Mary also grew up working on building projects, including painting and tarring roofs, thus learning a lot about buildings. And then she entered college at the University of Detroit to study architecture.

[05:00] It was during this time that the worst piece of demolition in the United States occurred - the demolition of the Pennsylvania Station in New York City. While a student, Mary visited Cranbrook, the Saarinen schools in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan where she was fascinated by the building arts and architecture training. After that a class trip to Egypt to work on documenting historic structures scheduled to be dismantled or submerged with the construction of the Aswan Dam and flooding of the Nile River Valley to create Lake Nasser forever changed her mind about modern architecture and reinforced her appreciation of classical architecture. She currently lectures all over the world about classical architecture in the different regions. Mary then left Detroit, met her husband and moved to Pennsylvania where she focused on raising her family for about five years before completing her architecture education at Drexel University in Philadelphia.

[10:00] Mary attended the evening program at Drexel while working during the day as a draftsman in West Chester, Pennsylvania. Her professional inspirations were Ann Capron, a mentor, and Jane Jacobs, Julia Morgan and Louise Bethune, all women architects. While in school she mustered the courage to ask John Milner, a visiting class lecturer and architect whose preservation work fascinated her, for a job. That was in 1977 and she began working for John Milner then. She graduated from Drexel in 1979. In 1984 she was promoted to partner. In 1989 she and John formed a new partnership which continues to this day - a wonderful collaboration based on mutual respect and trust.

[15:00] Mary discusses the reasons that the firm split up in 1989, not an easy decision. She and John subsequently formed their partnership. At the newly established practice her focus as Director of Architecture was doing historic preservation commercial and tax credit work on many urban industrial buildings. John continues to do a lot of eighteenth century preservation work having started his career working on Independence Hall in Philadelphia with his office in the First Bank Building. Coming full circle, the firm was just awarded the contract for the First Bank Building, the bank founded by Alexander Hamilton, to convert it to a museum on the history of finance in the US.

Women Architects, afc2019/031
Mary Werner DeNadia

[20:00] Mary discusses some of the projects she has worked on including: courthouses, the Perelman Wing of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Barnes Museum, and the Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill in Kentucky. She discusses her daily schedule managing family and the architecture program at Drexel University commitments. With her drafting table in the bedroom and balancing cooking, cleaning and schoolwork and work at architectural firms, she always felt a huge responsibility to be home when her two children were home. They are now grown with children of their own who live nearby and who all have developed an appreciation for architecture.

[25:00] Mary describes her volunteer work with the National Trust for Historic Preservation on the Board of Advisors and eventually the Board of Trustees when asked by Richard Moe, President of the National Trust. This resulted in preservation work on Ernest Hemingway's home in Havana, Cuba. With respect to balancing work, school and home obligations, Mary talks about attending her children's soccer games and events. She graduated from the architecture program at Drexel University, second in her class while balancing her many responsibilities. She also talks about her volunteer work as chair of the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia focused on legislative changes and the payoff of debt incurred by the organization.

[30:00] Mary talks about her work in Philadelphia, last year named a National Treasure by the National Trust. Through the efforts of the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Philadelphia's Mayor Kenney and the City Council have been focused on legislative changes that support historic preservation in the city. One disappointment was the loss of Jewelers Row which was visible in the final scene of the *Silver Linings Playbook* movie. Mary discusses her successful application to the American Institute of Architects College of Fellows and her many lectures including one on the history of women in architecture.

[35:00] The Beverly Willis Foundation and the Virginia Tech International Archives for Women in Architecture will also receive copies of the oral histories on architects who are women prepared for the Library of Congress. The Governor of Pennsylvania named Mary a Distinguished Daughter of Pennsylvania, an honor that recognizes the accomplishments of women in the state. In reference to gender equity in the architecture profession, Mary discusses her experiences in architecture school, the construction site and as chair of Preservation Action.

[40:00] While representing Preservation Action and attending a luncheon on Capitol Hill, Mary notes her MeToo moment with a Senator sitting next to her. She summarizes her experiences during the '80s as men in power thinking they have the right to do anything they wish with no accountability given women's reluctance to say anything. Noting that things are changing Mary talks about the deference and respect she has earned in the construction arena. She discusses that she thinks women can visualize spacial volumes better than men and make better architects than men. Thirty-three percent of the architecture employees at John Milner Architects are women and the firm would never discriminate in hiring.

Women Architects, afc2019/031
Mary Werner DeNadia

[45:00] In lectures to young women in architecture Mary encourages them to discover their skill set, determine their passion, what they are good at, and what they like doing in order to succeed. She feels lucky that she discovered that the built environment through architecture is both her vocation and avocation. Mary loves doing plans for projects and has ever since she was a child. While neither she nor John Milner do their work on computers they have excellent staff members who transfer their drawings to computer using CAD. What she likes most about her role in architecture is the big picture - organizing a project and meetings to streamline the process seeing all the way to the end before starting the project.

[50:00] In terms of her future career goals she is now very focused on preservation efforts in Philadelphia to make it a model of preservation for the entire country. She is very goal oriented and focused. She also travels and gives lectures frequently - visiting Athens, Greece and the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum in Spain are several highlights. Turning over more day-to-day management responsibilities to staff members such as Christopher Miller, managing partner, allows both her and John Milner to focus on design and projects. She loves coming into work each day. She discusses encouraging more women to enter the field and improving benefits for maternity leave and flexibility for parents with children.

[55:00] Mary discusses her mentoring of the women in her firm and her love of her work despite the challenges. When asked what she would like to do if she wasn't an architect, she responded first - a philanthropist, second - a blues singer, and third - an architect. Her greatest legacy she hopes will be making a huge difference in Philadelphia. The work on the Ernest Hemingway House in Havana, Cuba is her most memorable project. Working within the sanction constraints imposed by the United States, a team of preservation experts including Robert Silman, Michael Henry, Sandra Spanier, and Mary DeNadai was assembled to begin to work on stabilizing the structures, evaluating the building systems and restoring the house to the Hemingway time period.

[1:00:00] The preservation work on the Havana, Cuba Hemingway home purchased when Hemingway sold the movie rights to *As the Bell Tolls* is discussed. In order to attempt the work on the horrific condition of the structures the American consultants took a back seat to the Cubans in order to build trust and respect. Because of the sanctions the American team could not transport any equipment to Cuba. The house, tower, swimming pool and pilar were restored and a studio almost completed, the process flourishing under the Obama administration.

[1:05:00] However under the current administration's [Donald Trump] policies to curtail tourism to Cuba the work has stopped due to financial constraints that has required food rationing in Cuba. The house was stabilized but Mary's biggest concern for the project is the amount of traffic on the site. They were able to get an exception to bring in equipment to conserve the 6,000 books or works on paper and make digital copies. Due to a travel ban imposed on US travel agencies, no rooms in Cuban hotels may be booked. In Cuba, all of the hotels are owned by the Cuban government so tourists are restricted to staying overnight on their ships docked in port. Mary had previously given tours for the National Trust for Historic Preservation's larger

Women Architects, afc2019/031
Mary Werner DeNadia

donors. Mary notes that the Cuban people were wonderful people, hosts, architects, engineers and conservators. The American team taught them a lot of preservation technology which they had never had the opportunity to learn and which they are now using to save Havana's buildings.

[1:10:00] Mary once again lamented the destruction of Pennsylvania Station in New York City. She notes that she had been so fortunate to work on great buildings such as the New York Public Library, Kykuit, the National Trust for Historic Preservation Building on Dupont Circle, Skya, the Cotton Exchange and the design guidelines for Beaufort, South Carolina.

[1:15:00] Mary discusses the challenges ahead for historic preservation such as a robust economy, gentrification, and climate change. She is currently working on an Albert Frey house in Palm Springs, California

[1:20:00] Mary discusses her experiences taking the architectural registration exam in Philadelphia.

[1:22:00] End of Interview.