

Women Who Are Architects

Cho, Diane ~ Oral History Interview

Date of Interview: July 31, 2020

Interviewer: Sarah K Filkins

Cho, Diane. Interview by Sarah K. Filkins. *Women Who Are Architects*. Home of the architect in Stevenson, MD. Date of the interview: July 31, 2020

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Diane Cho Interview, July 31, 2020

Background

Interviewer: Sarah K Filkins

Interviewee: Diane Cho, AIA
Cho Benn Holback, A Quinn Evans Company
100 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21201

Date of Birth: 1951

Date of Interview: July 31, 2020

Place: Interview at Home Office of Diane Cho, Stevenson, Maryland

Other People Present: None

Background Noise: Office in Country Setting

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audio-technica AT899 Subminiature Omnidirectional Condenser Lavalier
Microphones

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Transcriber: Sarah K Filkins

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Interview

Sarah Filkins: This is Sarah Filkins, Interviewer, speaking with Diane Cho, AIA, on Friday, July 31, 2020. Ms. Cho and I were originally scheduled to meet in the spring at the Baltimore offices of Cho Benn Holback, a Quinn Evans Company. Due to the covid pandemic, we are now recording today, safely distancing, from Ms. Cho's home office in Stevenson, Maryland.

SF: Good morning Diane.

Diane Cho: Good morning Sarah.

SF: Thank you for agreeing to share your story with us as part of the Library of Congress, American Folklife Center, Occupation Folklife Project funded by an Archie Green Fellowship. So let's start. Please state your name, year of birth and place of birth for archival reference.

DC: So my name is Diane Cho. I was born [REDACTED] 1951, in Honolulu Hawaii.

SF: What is your current work position and what are your current job responsibilities?

DC: So currently I am a principal with Quinn Evans, an architecture firm with five offices located around the Mid-Atlantic and Midwest. I'm one of the design principals at the Baltimore office. I used to have my own firm, Cho Benn Holback which we sold to Quinn Evans three years ago. But as principal now, I'm just in charge of overall project design and management of projects mainly in the arts field. I do a lot of museum work and I do a lot of arts education K-12 for higher ed. So I've kind of moved my career in the last twenty years or so into the arts. So that's my focus.

SF: Well, let's take a look back a little bit, looking at growing up. When did you first become aware of architecture and the built environment?

DC: Okay well, so being born in Hawaii and then growing up as a little girl in Boulder, Colorado and Los Alamos, New Mexico—so those three places back in the fifties were not very urban and way more about outdoors. And as a little girl it was great growing up, I had a really nice childhood and it wasn't until we moved east to a suburb of Washington, DC that my father took me to—first to art museums and musicals and he would take us to New York and DC and introduce the family to these kinds of things. And I just remember, just being totally struck by all of those kinds of things. And that might have planted a little bit the seed for cities and architecture but when I was younger I loved to draw and he knew I was kind of on the artistic side so I think, is why he would take me to museums and things like that.

SF: Well did you take drafting or anything like that in high school.

DC: No, drafting and in fact architecture was not on my mind. Back in those days being a girl especially, I don't think you would go, "Oh, I want to be an architect". I didn't know any architects. I didn't know any women architects. But I remember it was during the sixties and the resulting urban upheaval and riots. And after they were over, my father planting the seed for architecture in my head said, "You should become an architect because someone needs to help rebuild the cities." And that was my first like—architect oooh—that's an interesting idea. So he planted the seed. I think he was a very hard driving kind of father and so if you said you wanted to be an artist, he would say, "Why not architect?" And my sister—you wouldn't be a nurse, you'd be a doctor. And the other one—you wouldn't be a teacher, you would be a professor. So you know, I give him credit for setting the high ambitions for women in the family. He had three daughters. And then I give my mother credit for being just totally supportive, no matter what you did. She would have been fine if you'd just been anything, just always gave you that kind of support.

SF: So when you applied to Cornell or when you were applying for colleges it was with the intention of going into architecture at that point?

DC: So this is kind of weird. So I kind of had two loves—one being the more art, architecture

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and then the other one being more biology. So I applied to two architecture schools: University of Maryland which was the very first year I think they had the architecture school, maybe second year; Cornell for architecture because it was a five year program, professional. You went in and you were in the architecture school. And then I think Duke and a couple other schools but with more just liberal arts, thinking I would do that. And then so I got into all of the places so I just—so Cornell having been to the campus it was kind of a dream. So that's where I ended up. I could have gone the other way and maybe I'd be something else but...

SF: So if someone had asked you during high school, what do you want to be, you would have said architect?

DC: No, I was still kind of on the fence. I didn't know enough about it really. So it's a little bit fate.

SF: So what was it like starting at Cornell and in a program that was specifically architecture.

DC: Yeah, it was really, really kind of jolting to go to such a professional program straight out of high school. There were sixty kids/students in the architecture program that freshman year. There were four women out of the sixty—Barbara [Wilks] my friend being one of the other women. And there was one Black guy but then he dropped out fairly soon so I was the only

person of color in the class which is kind of amazing to think—and was one of the four women. And in five years of architecture school, I never had a woman professor and also outside of the architecture school, taking a lot of electives—and I took, I took fun things like Russian literature, the romantic poets, you know these kind of things that you think might have been—nope never. I never had in five years at Cornell, a single woman professor. It didn't even bother me. I just thought—I didn't think anything of it. I just thought that was the way things were. Anyway, so Cornell was really tough, I mean, it was kind of a hurdle to get through. But it's one of the strongest design programs in the country to this day and so I'm glad I went there because you come out strong.

SF: Absolutely. Well, were your professors supportive of women in architecture when you were in the program?

DC: I don't—I think there was a lot of sexism. I think they thought we might have been in it just for the fun of it and there was that part—I don't know if any of the other women discussed this sort of “starchitect” kind of mentality—and that was very much going on then—I mean they would sort of—they would choose their little pets and tended to be men. Well, number one, that was mostly who was around but—and kind of nurture them. Thinking back, no I don't think I was nurtured particularly by them. You just had to fight just to be—kind of stay in the program, actually.

SF: It was very rigorous.

DC: Very rigorous, very rigorous but a lot of support from your fellow students though, male or female. I don't remember them thinking—you just became part of the group and you were all fighting the same issues, just trying to get through the program successfully.

SF: So when you graduated then did you, what was your vision for—you knew about architecture no—did you want to...

DC: So we knew—so Barbara and I, you know, we'd become friends then and we knew that Cornell was very much of a design focused program, not a lot of technical classes and we knew, we really didn't know how to put a building together. And so we thought, Well let's move somewhere and get some jobs and then try to get some hands-on experience and try to fill that part of our education out. Which is required anyway, as you know being an architect, that you have to do the apprenticeship as well. And so we read this article about Baltimore—it was during the Mayor [William Donald] Schaefer days when he had a program for the dollar houses and all of that. And we went I think on a spring break, maybe—we drove down to Baltimore and we drove around, not being very familiar with the city and said, “Oh, this looks like kind of a cool place”. And then we just on a total lark

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moved to Baltimore, after school, after we graduated.

SF: Did you have jobs when you...

DC: No, and we came out in a total recession. At my age now, I think I've been through four of them and as you know, it's really hard on the architecture profession. So no one was hiring but eventually we found jobs. I remember like after six months finally finding a job in a small architecture firm, like I think he hired me just on an hourly basis. There were only five of us and I remember sitting next to this guy named Bud you know, with a—he was always smoking a cigarette. And just one of these old guys—and he taught me how to draft and he taught me how to do working drawings which was totally, totally divorced from anything I'd learned at Cornell but you know, totally needed so it was great. And then eventually I got another job at the city with public works. They had an in-house design studio and they actually used to do work within the department of public works—community centers and renovations and so I worked there to finish out my apprenticeship.

SF: And did you always have the idea that you wanted to open your own firm?

DC: No not really, no not when you start. You just wonder, Oh you're just so lucky to have a job and then you go on to the next one. It was Barbara who had the ambition to open a firm and I can't remember what came first but we entered—the AIA [American Institute of Architects], the local chapter, had a competition for an empty site in an urban block in Baltimore to design a row house. And it was open to anybody and it was a blind competition so know one knew who—you didn't open up the envelope of who did the project until you decided who won. And we won it. Barbara and I won. And they were like, "Oh my God, who are these two women?" And blah, blah, blah. So I think that was when we thought, You know what, I think we're pretty good. Why don't we do this? Well, we could start a firm. So she quit her job and by that point she might have been married to Bill Struever, who was a developer and he could feed us some work. But we also found some really small renovation kind of row house type work. So then she started and then like about four or five months in, she asked me to quit my job and I did. And we were so young, twenty-eight, twenty-nine or something like that. We had just passed the exam and we didn't have much to lose. We were so young—what—no mortgage, no kids, nothing. You know, so what would be the worst that would happen—it would fold and you'd go get a real job so...

SF: Right. What about—were you able to purchase one of the dollar houses?

DC: No, we never, we never got one. And so we just kept growing and then we hired a couple of people locally—men cuz, you know, there weren't a lot of women. And we had maintained relationships with David Benn who's now my husband but he was teaching at Cornell at the time and we started seeing each other. And then we brought him into the firm and another local person, George Holback, who was—came in to help us work on a competition and we realized how talented he was, so he joined the firm. And then we just kept growing it from then.

SF: What were some of your early projects that you worked on? You worked on a lot of house renovations maybe as a result of the dollar houses?

DC: Yeah, I can't even kind of remember. Somebody's outdoor deck, they were really small. And we always wanted to do bigger, more serious work and so I would say the—kind of the watershed moment might have been in the mid-eighties when we were hired by both Bryn Mawr School, an all-girls school and we were hired by Goucher College which was a women's school at the time. And I think they were willing to take a risk on women because they had women—they were encouraging women at the schools that they were at. So we

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did a dance studio at Bryn Mawr and like a science building renovation and some other things and then we did a dance studio at Goucher and eventually a fine arts building. And so those were the original kind of really great clients that helped us. So that was in the institutional realm. Meanwhile, as you recall, Barbara had married Bill who was a developer and I don't think he had any qualms about women doing architecture. And so we started doing some of his larger work and I think as you know some of it—Tindeco [Wharf Apartments], and Canton Cove [Condominium] and eventually some of that kind of large work. I have to give him credit for giving us a start there. So then you need some lucky breaks but then a lot of persistence.

SF: But you were really leaders in the renaissance of Baltimore and

DC: Yeah, that has a lot to do with being on Bill's coattails because he was the first to go into Federal Hill really and say, you know, let's redo this and then I remember going into Canton and he had his eye on this old tin can factory. And I remember going there and standing on the roof and looking around and not really being familiar—I mean it sounds so ridiculous today—and going, when he called us and he said, "It's in Canton." And I went, "Where's Canton?" And it's now one of the thriving neighborhoods. So that was really quite something. So to be on his coattails as part of the renaissance and then once you've done some projects, then other people will of course hire you. And once we had those projects from Bryn Mawr and Goucher then we were hired by you know Rebecca Hoffberger at American Visionary Arts [Museum] and we did the Eubie Blake Cultural Center—Camay Murphy who's the granddaughter or daughter of Cab Calloway. And we just started building. It sounds so easy though talking about it now but for every job you have to kind of fight for and it's the one thing that is still grueling about the profession. It's really hard. When you're small you're with the small guys competing, then you grow, you're medium and then you're with all the medium firms competing and then when you're big, you're with all the big firms competing so it never gets easy. You just have to learn marketing skills along the way and we were very green when we started. But eventually you sort of learn to be more confident and you learn to find a niche and you learn how to talk about the client in interviews and how to win. It's hard.

SF: Did you divide up the work in the office according to projects or was one person more responsible for design, another for marketing, another for...

DC: In our firm, even when we brought the guys in and—we always had the notion that you fished for your own work and then you did your own work, which was a great thing because it brought a lot of diversity of work in. You had control over your projects and didn't have to answer to anyone. What we did have was in-house design critiques where we would invite a group in, usually the principals but other good designers in the firm, just to talk, to get an outside view on the project you were working on—totally helpful. So we would go to each other for design critiques but we would always go in with the notion that you pursued your own work and won it and then did that project. Now if someone was a little slow and didn't have something, yeah, you could share but I can't think of anything where we really worked together on the same project. Mostly, we were separate.

SF: So you found that you all kind of gravitated to different areas

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or did you make sure that—because you gravitated towards cultural—what about ...

DC: Eventually I gravitated towards cultural but I would do a school. Back in the day, I would do a school or development work. I still do a little bit of that. David drifted towards campus planning and programming. Barbara liked urban planning and revitalization. So, George liked housing, mostly affordable housing as well as adaptive re-use. Well, we all—that was kind of a common denominator with the adaptive re-use because we were all interested in Baltimore. I think I didn't say this earlier, by the building stock that we spotted and the idea that you could turn some of these vacant buildings over, create a whole new use and actually revitalize the neighborhood. That was kind of our common thread that ran through all of the work in that, a lot of the downtown icons, say the American Visionary Art Museum, that also—it's recycling buildings. It's still doing the same thing even though it might be more in an institutional arts realm, we're still doing that today. And there's still so much historic fabric that's left, that's still deteriorating that still needs help. You keep thinking, Well we're going to run out of buildings but there's still so much.

SF: Well that must have been fun working with Rebecca Hoffberger on the Visionary Art Museum.

DC: Oh, totally, totally—one of our most amazing clients who totally thinks out of the box. I think a lot of people think she's a little cooky or whatever, but actually she turns out to be a really smart pragmatic woman. She had a way of knowing what would make a project work and so when we did the whiskey barrel warehouse when I worked with her on that, she was adamant about the top floor being rentable and being able to seat five hundred people. She wanted that project to be sort of a very different way of meeting from those hotel rooms where there's no

daylight, and you pull the partition across. And she goes, “I’m going to offer this new way of conferences having a place to meet.” And I went, “Okay,” and we just went along with it and she just was adamant about it. And of course it’s turned out to be a huge asset for her and I think they rent it like four times a week, well pre-covid, but it’s just this little money machine for her and she—so beyond the visionary parts that we did and that other draw that she has, she’s got this pragmatic side. It’s great.

SF: She understood what it took to keep a nonprofit going.

DC: Exactly, and again had no qualms about women. That actually was—that project was literally given to us by Rebecca Swanston, another woman architect who had done her first building. And Rebecca Swanston was starting to pullback her own practice and she didn’t want to take on another big project. She was moving back into more residential homes and so she literally asked us, and talked to Rebecca about it—if it would be okay to transfer the project to us so I give another woman credit for helping.

SF: Did you have some strong mentors either in college or once you got out...

DC: None, I can’t think of having an older mentor. Certainly there were no women architects, that we knew, certainly they existed but like I’d said before none in school, zero, no woman professor existed in the architecture program. There was one in fine arts. I don’t think there was any in planning—Architecture, Art and Planning, the name of the school. So, no and there were no business owners. I think at one point Barbara and I had the largest women owned architecture firm in the State of Maryland which today, well now that I’ve sold the firm and then she doesn’t live in Maryland, you know there are lots of women owned firms but they were not common. And then of course, the other thing that we took advantage of was affirmative action and the set-asides for women-owned. In fact, I know a lot of my male competitors were always grumbling, was that was how we got our work, like it was an advantage. But trust me, no one came to us you know, and handed us some of the big commissions like they do at the male architects back in the day. So we used it but I wouldn’t say—it helped us get some work—maybe twenty percent but it was not the dominating factor.

SF: How about your experiences in the field dealing with contractors as women or even with certain clients or...

DC: So um, clients, if they’re going to hire you and you’re a woman, they pretty much accept you—in fact, maybe being kind of a cheerleader for you. Contractors I sort of learned going along that—this is my way of handling it was to not get confrontational. I don’t remember a lot of real sexism.

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I mean would you get a “wolf” whistle or something on a site, maybe way back in the early days but if you’re trying to establish some clout on a project, I just remember if you were able to complement them when they had done something great and kind of use that because there would be a point when maybe you had kind of screwed up. And it just seemed to work so I chose to be their friend instead of trying to act like somehow you were smarter and it seemed to work, for me.

SF: How about the architectural registration exam—what was that experience like?

DC: Oh, it was horrible. When we took it, I think they only gave it once a year and it was like three or four days long and you had to pass all parts or like wait a whole year. And I remember coming out of one of the exams, one of the multiple choice ones and going to the bar with all my fellow architects and we’re going, “What did you put for that question about vinyl tile?” And one person said, “I answered A.” And the next person said, “B”. And none of us—but all we had to do was pass. So we did and it was great. So that brings us forward to today where it is a seven part exam or maybe it’s changed but then you go in and you can take it at any time and you take it in pieces. There was a point where you had to still do your apprenticeship before you could start this process. It was a real drawback for women architects and they could be thirty-five right in the midst of their child-bearing age before they could take this exam and we had women in the firm that were struggling to complete the seven year—they had had kids. Once you have kids, as you know, you can’t concentrate on taking this exam. You know, these parts. And so I was chair of the Maryland Board of Architects for twelve years and I remember kind of focusing on—let’s try to get that exam changed in terms of timing. And I think the AIA has heard, and NCARB, actually it’s NCARB [National Council of Architectural Registration Boards] to make it a little easier. I think now you can take, start taking, it at any time, the seven parts. And I have always insisted with the women in the firm, the young women, get that out of the way. I mean, do it even before you’re married, just get it out of the way, I beg you. Some listen, some don’t but it’s the advice. It’s just not something you want hanging over your head because I do know forty years old and there are still some women that they never quite passed. Too many life issues came into focus and they just found it hard. And then there was this time frame by which you had to complete the seven parts or you would start again. So you see, so you can just make it. But sorry, I digress.

SF: No, no it’s important. How about balancing family and children with—career is one thing — but then architecture is such a demanding career.

DC: It is. It is. So when I had my son, I remember thinking about, How am I going to balance all of this? And but the amazing thing was I learned to compartmentalize. So you went to the office and you worked really hard. You came home and I was totally able to take that office hat off and become a mother and totally focus on the child. And also having a child kind of gave you optimism about, things will work out in the end. I don’t know why. But that’s how it kind of worked for me. I didn’t worry as much. So when I didn’t have a child and you could bring the office home with you say and you were competing for a job and you lost it—you know five firms

competing for this one project and you lost it. So I would come home and I would obsess and like lose sleep over it and think about it for two or three more days and I should have said this or we should have done that. And once I had that kid, I never went there again and so in a way it kind of helped me. But I do say, If I'd had more than one child, and had been a business owner, I think I would have found it hard. I know other women have managed to do it and kudos to them but I personally would have found it

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difficult because who's going to all the events, which parent, now you've got two and all of that but with one it was doable, for me.

SF: What about with two architects as parents, was your son interested in architecture?

DC: Zero interest. He's in healthcare but also the other thing that we had to learn to do in our marriage, because not only were we both architects, we were both in the same firm. And we learned to do this pretty well, is to say as soon as we leave the office, no office talk. We can talk about any other thing, no office talk. If the office were to creep in, sure but we both pretty much stick to that rule ninety percent of the time and it worked. Yeah.

SF: That's good. Well, were there some challenges early on? You've established your firm and you're growing. What were some of the challenges that you had to face that were maybe unexpected?

DC: Well, I think when you're a firm owner—when you're first starting out and it's just you and a couple of people you're da-da-ta-da, we're doing fine and isn't this fun kind of. But once you become a firm owner and you've got like fifteen people and a recession hits then you realize, these people have kids, they have mortgages, their fate is in our hands, this kind of very wrenching business decision no one's ever trained us to have to deal with those, were challenges and no one's ever trained us to have to deal with those were challenges. And we've been through four recessions and the very bad one of 2008—we had to—we laid a few people off and then we chose, as a firm to kind of hold the family together, took a ten percent salary cut across the board. And that people could go home by noon on Friday so that they gained something too. There wasn't as much work to do and that kind of worked for that recession but you have to be creative and view each one as it comes and I'm so glad that now I'm not—I sold all my shares off to Quinn Evans, I'm a principal but I'm not a firm owner. And the kinds of decisions they're having to make in covid, in a shrinking economy, and I am totally, totally relieved that now I do not have to consider those things because it's you know, people. I don't know if women tend to care more or not. I am sure the men do too but it's hard. So those are challenges that are not fun.

SF: Because you had started a firm and so at some point you are thinking about where is this firm going ultimately for, not only for yourselves, but for the people working for you as you...

DC: Exactly, so that's one of the reasons we sold the firm to Quinn Evans three years ago. Well, how many were we, around twenty-seven people. We had a tendency for people to really want to stay with us for a long time. We had kind of a design ethos that they really enjoyed and a kind of a caring atmosphere. So they'd been with us a really long time and they were ready to be principals. At this point Barbara had already left so it's George, me and David. And then we had four to six really strong people coming up behind us and we said, "How can we—we need to really grow so they have a place to grow". And there's people coming behind them and then they can aspire to be principals. And so we did start to, about five years before the Quinn Evans purchase, start making some inquiries and thinking about a firm transition, with the okay by four of these key younger principals to make sure that they were okay with us—because they could also see the future. Like, oh my gosh we can't win that kind of work constantly and they didn't want it to be completely on their shoulders and so that was one of the reasons that we sold so that they could have a place to grow and people behind them could have a place to grow. And Quinn Evans has a really strong shareholding plan. They had it in place already and so now total office, all the five offices combined, it's about two hundred and six employees. So there's a lot of cross marketing and help. And if one office is a little short on work, the other one can pitch in. And also marketing

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for work, so you can pluck different expertise out of the offices and so it's good and we're happy we did it. We don't regret it.

SF: That's great. That's great. So now it enables you to step back from the daily operation.

DC: Exactly and so we—David has really stepped back and he's just working hourly now. And then I've cut back to a thirty-two hour week and am slowly trying to step back so that we,—yeah the whole family (a family of deer run by the window in the meadow outside the dining room where we are sitting for the interview) can you know retire, I guess. But we always want to keep a little bit of a foot in there for some of our long term clients because we would certainly keep working if there's a really exciting job. Like right now I'm working at the Baltimore Museum of Art on a really exciting project, the Center for Matisse Studies and the Center for Prints, Drawings and Photographs since the renovation, the original John Russell Pope building. And we just finished the construction documents, ready to go into construction and I will stick with that client until the project is done. And I have a couple of others so that that's more why we continue to work hourly but we certainly mostly try to help the firm market and boost those other younger people up and they're doing a great job.

SF: Well, how was the transition too when Barbara [Wilks] left? Or she went and got her degree in landscape architecture and then decided to move to New York and start a firm there? So that must have been a little bit difficult because you two had been in it since the very beginning.

DC: Right, that was a little jolting when she announced that she wanted to leave. At that point—and she was a very strong marketer, very strong in marketing, and so that was also—you know you are going to be losing one of your key people that can bring work in. At that point George was not a principal but we had noticed that he had a lot of local connections. He'd grown up in Baltimore and a wonderful person, a warm, engaging person. He seemed to be able to get his own work and bring in work and so we said how about we make you a principal but you've got to bring in more work. And he said, "Great," and he just did his part. He became great at marketing, brought in a third of the work and then you know, there was a little bit of rockiness but I would say in a years time we were reinvented.

SF: Which is good for all firms.

DC: Which is good. For all firms, yeah, exactly. And everyone needs to grow in their own way. And so we did and that was around the time we got very good at marketing for more institutional work and not counting on the Bill Struever's of the world to help us although we still to this day work with Bill Struever on development work. We really branched out and now some of our younger principals, they have these developer connections and so yeah, we've held our own. We continue to win design awards.

SF: Over two hundred awards, is that right?

DC: Yeah, we—I forgot to mention George also—a very strong designer. We just kept going.

SF: So would you say that's what your firm was noted for, was [design]

DC: Yeah, for sure. And I think even within Quinn Evans, the Baltimore firm is know for that kind of expertise. Whereas maybe some of the other firm's technical—offices within the firm—more technical expertise. There's a sustainability director. There's a guy who just focuses on building envelope. There are people who are pure historians. You know, a large firm gives you all of these in-house assets that you didn't have in the less than thirty firm. There's a director of human resources. So those kinds of other people is really like a luxury—it's nice and you can share expertise.

SF: Well, what are some of your favorite

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projects that you've worked on?

DC: You know, every time people ask me that, it's usually the last art related project that I worked on. There's something about arts clients because I think you're in the same—you have the same passions, you have the same kind of motivations. They tend to think out of the box. They're creative. They're willing to look at new ideas. So all of the arts—I mentioned the BMA

working with Chris Bedford, who's the new, very dynamic director there; working with Rebecca Hoffberger at the American Visionary Arts Museum; Leslie Shephard at the Baltimore School for the Arts which was a project. Now it's about fifteen years old but we renovated the entire school plus put an addition on and just fell in love with the whole mission of the school, being around those kids, being around the arts. Just—those are some of the highlights but...

SF: Right. How about Everyman Theatre?

DC: Oh, Everyman. Oh, I forgot, Everyman Theatre! Vinny Lancisi—what a—that was just wonderful. And Center Stage with Del Risberg and Michael Ross. Everyman was fun—another one where they just totally took a chance. We had never done a professional theatre of that caliber before. And Vinny Lancisi just loved our interview and said, “You’re the ones.” And to this day is such a good friend. But that project is great because the other side of the arts equation that I forgot to mention, that I also love, is urban revitalization—when we can do a project, an adaptive re-use of a ruin or a forgotten building that can completely transform a neighborhood. And so Everyman on a very edgy part of town, being able to get that theatre going and then see restaurants spring up around it. And you know, there have been some setbacks with the Freddie Gray and the covid now but Lexington Market, which is not too far away, is getting ready to revitalize. And Everyman is across the street from the Hippodrome so getting that synergy of a more theater district. And the same with Center Stage. It's in Mt. Vernon but it's on the edge and just going to get a whole new vibe. We worked with Kwame Kwei-Armah who now is the artistic director at the Young Vic [theatre] in London. He's from London so we knew he would go back but another really dynamic person, totally willing to hire us and totally drove some of the design aspects of that project. Really pushed us and it was great. Yeah, so any one of those arts projects, I would say would be my favorite.

SF: Well, do you ever just step back and look at all you've been involved in, in Baltimore and what a huge difference you made, not only in what's tangible and what you did but in the whole attitude that you brought to the city at that point?

DC: No, not until I'm talking today. I don't really stop to think back. You know, you're always worried about the ones that you're working on right now, are they going to come—oh, that's something as a woman, I'll have to admit. I am terrified at the start of every project. No one knows it but I'm—I'm really scared. I'm thinking, Oh, we could screw up or you know, oh, get sued or maybe we'll make a big mistake—it's crazy but...

SF: So what do you do to move forward?

DC: Just start working on it and then that fear though, it actually comes in handy because it makes you really start thinking about every issue that, you know—I'm tirelessly getting the teams to measure and re-measure these existing buildings. And they go, “Oh, we can just get it laser scanned.” And I'm like, “That's fine for a start but we've got to go back and re-check cuz...” So when you start these ruins of buildings, it may seem fine in the end and everything

looks so figured out but in the beginning, they're very hard to document. They're ruins. There's no light in there. There's stuff all over the floor. It can be hard. So you know worrying about flood plains and codes and just constantly, I don't know—having depth in all this expertise but I have enough experience to know what kind of can kill the project or make it difficult or what reviews we need and tell the team, “Go look at this, go look at that. Let's check this.”

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So maybe it's good. I'm just saying, so you think that would go away. It's like that fear of being a bag lady like a lot of women have. That's finally gone away, but I used to have that too.

SF: Well what do you see as your career milestones?

DC: Oh any project where we've made a difference in terms of being able to take a forgotten building or one that was in ruins and change a neighborhood. That kind of encapsulates where I can feel really good.

SF: For example, Everyman? You've seen that neighborhood respond to Everyman's...

DC: Right exactly, but it could even be at the—a place like the Baltimore Museum of Art because where we're working now is this place that's been blocked off. It's being used for storage and the impact when we open this new center will be amazing and be open to the public. And we're going to re-establish some of the axial connections that John Russell Pope had originally established. And we're going to have a lot of transparency for back-of-house where you can see the curators at work and that kind of thing. So it doesn't necessarily have to be in a challenging neighborhood but just when you can take something that's forgotten or forlorn and just through design completely transform. That kind of interests me more than a “starchitect” new building, bold on a new site where you're—that may be somebody else's, you know, where they're totally excited—but I'm more for that knitting that whole existing fabric together. It's also to me more sustainable, anytime you can recycle things that already exist and also tap into the history and fabric of a place that already exists, I think is more dynamic.

SF: How have you seen climate change impact your conversations with your clients or your scope of work?

DC: Now, that is not a kind of an add-on, especially at Quinn Evans. That is something that design now from the get-go, you're immediately doing an energy model which before you didn't think to do or a client would have to pay extra for you to do or only if it's required. Now it's just standard and again, like I said, one of our mantras is, “The greenest building is one that already exists,” because you've already got something to work with and more to recycle. It's just become so much a part of our DNA now, that it's standard. And what's nice about why I think it's important for older architects to pass the baton down to younger people, is the youngest people coming into the firm now, that is their “A number 1”. Not just that but resilient buildings,

wellness, sustainability, climate change, even the Black Lives Matter, even the—all of that kind of—all of those issues are very big on their minds and they will bring that energy to the firm that makes some of these things number one. So I think that's important, why it's important for people to pass the baton down to the younger generation.

SF: What do you see as the challenges that they'll have to deal with in the profession?

DC: Well, this covid pandemic thing has reminded me that distance learning, online education could be here for the future. Just like we saw all of the retail start disappearing with Amazon and now all of the little shops and even bigger things, bigger anchor stores are going bankrupt and not being able to exist. So I worry that a lot of that moving online for everything is going to hurt cities, hurt the built environment. It's definitely going to change the built environment. So the challenge for them is how to find ways to bring design innovation to some of those aspects of sort of shrinking square feet—that maybe better ways of designing what's left. I think it's a big change. I mean we always used to say in a mixed use project that had office,

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housing and retail mixed—we'd all go—put the housing up top and throw retail down on the bottom and then da, da, da - there's no retail anymore. It's hard. So those are challenges for them.

SF: Well, you're on a number of boards and so I guess Everyman Theater is one of them.

DC: I stepped off that board. Currently now I am only on the boards of MICA, Maryland Institute College of Art Board of Trustees and then the Board of Visitors at Towson [University]. But I had been a BMA [Baltimore Museum of Art] Board Member before and I also was an Everyman [Theatre] Board Member so seeing—it's kind of interesting, because you're a little bit ahead of the curve on the issues that museums and theaters are dealing with before you bring them into the work that we do. And so the benefit of being on those boards is learning how to talk like those clients talk and know what the issues are and then being able to inform your design when you're working on those kinds of projects.

SF: How are theatres now thinking how to deal with covid?

DC: I know. Um-it's difficult. I'm really, really worried for them. I think that a few of them have put things on virtually and say, "Here's a thing we filmed for you. You've got season tickets, and watch this and..." It's a nice try but you know, the whole reason that we have live theatre is cuz it's live and you're in the audience with live people that are laughing with you and seeing the same thing together. Because if I want to see something on line, I'd rather do Netflix. It's been scripted, it's been formatted for that. It's very challenging and then when you think about them and then how much they mean to the cities in general, that's kind of what I'm—a big issue, a big thing to worry about. Because I don't think covid will be the only pandemic that we see. We're such a global world now. We've had some close calls before—SARS and other ones

—and we just stopped them. So thinking about things like that I'm just, I'm more—I think there's this whole movement of people now to move to the suburbs, I mean, I'm worried.

SF: Well, if you could change the profession, what would you change?

DC: Wow, that's a hard one. Um, I'm not sure because I used to think, my answer would have been pre-covid, more flexibility, allowing more people to work from home, like mothers, but now everybody's working from home and it's actually working out really well. I'm astounded. We did it [transitioned] in a weekend and...

SF: Suddenly your IT person becomes so important.

DC: So important. Oh, I know, I wish—so two things I wish people, like the American Institute of Architects, AIA, could work on is generally informing the public how important design is and how it can actually benefit you, thereby leading to better fees. Because frankly, we—as you know, you're an architect—I mean, the amount of hours it takes and the precision from the zoning of the whole site down to where the light switches are, and the architect's putting that whole thing together—takes hours and hours and you're constantly being cut down on fees. So if I could change it, better fees and more public awareness of the importance of design, which I think in Europe, in some countries in Europe, that mantra is a little more important. They recognize the value of design and America, not so much.

SF: The arts in general. They're so much more supportive.

DC: Yes, I mean, they get a lot of public support, government. A lot of those major museums that we all know and love in Europe are during this covid time, are getting subsidized by the federal government.

SF: Well, what do you see as your legacy?

DC: I would say being one of the first women owned firms probably in the country

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and definitely in Maryland. And then being able to change Baltimore physically and not just the buildings but the whole neighborhood. I think, is there a lot of work left to do, yes there is, and is it going backwards in some ways? Yes, but just having made that try and having established some of the communities that we did and helping—some of our best work are in some of the most challenging neighborhoods. No one knows about them. No one goes to these neighborhoods but I feel those projects are just as important. And I'm proud of those.

SF: Well are there some things that you wish you had know before you started that—maybe some tips for...

DC: So this was one lesson that I've never forgotten and it's really helped me. This is when Barbara was still with the firm and we would go interview for projects and not win. It could be because we were women but you can't blame it on that. You can't say, "Oh, they never hire women. It's just so." So we hired—we thought, You know, we really don't know anything about this, let's hire a consultant, a marketing consultant. So we hired this woman named Carol McConaghy, who happened to be married to [John] Rauch of Venturi—what was it called then, Venturi and Rauch, before he left, Rauch—and then Brown was [Robert] Venturi and [Denise Scott] Brown. She [Carol McConaghy] was such a smart woman, just brilliant. And she said, she told us that, "Ninety percent of architecture is people. Ten percent bricks and mortar, ninety percent people. If you understand that you will—it will kind of change the way you look at things." And so instead of going into an interview and talking about the bricks and mortar and we would do this and this is the way it would look and blah, blah, blah, blah, you try to find out what that client's hot buttons are. What are they worried about, could be not necessarily the bricks and mortar but their curriculum or their students or whatever. Find out what those hot buttons are and talk more people issues and you will win. And it's—she's totally right to this day. That's why I served on all those boards, why it's so interesting. It's just you hear issues that are not architecture related. I've also come to realize in those interviews, ninety percent of the people that are watching your slides are looking at these photographs and they're not going in—they have no visual memory—they have a word memory, what you say, and word memory but they don't have visual memory. So this is like a big thing that she taught us to think about. And certainly when you're designing you kind of design for the people, with them in mind, and you kind of sneak your design ideas in the back door. But you wouldn't come to your client and say, "Well the big idea behind this building is we're going to have an egg within a box," or you know what I mean. They don't understand that talk but I think we might have talked like that at the beginning. It just wasn't smart and now it's people.

SF: Stories.

DC: It's stories, tell stories, focus on them, focus on how it would be better for their constituent groups—and not so much about design.

SF: So where are you now in your career? You kind of talked a little bit about it...

DC: Twilight. Twilight which is, you know, I'm kind of in this struggle between, oh, I want to get that job and then if you win it, like oh, I want to work on it. So I'm between that and turning the reins over to these younger people and it's a little bit of a struggle but I think I'm getting better at turning the reins over because you want them to be able to experience the whole thing without somebody lording it over them, as well as recognizing your own changes. I'm not mentally as quick as I was. It's just, you age and I just think it's time to start slipping out so that's where I am—twilight.

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Diane Cho Interview, July 31, 2020

SF Travel plans?

DC: Oh, we had big travel plans until covid because we were thinking, Wouldn't it be fun to just like live in Amsterdam for a month and instead of these quick two week vacations and then you're hitting three cities in Europe at one time or we did this whirlwind—our last big trip was a whirlwind of Japan given by the AIA. It was great but you know this whirlwind—but wouldn't it be fun to just kind of plop down one place for a month and really get into the local scene and see places that way but its all been tabled. I don't know when we'll be able to do some of these things.

SF: Hopefully...well are there any stories or projects that you'd like to add as we wrap up?

DC: No, I think we've covered everything.

SF: Well one last question. What do you see as your greatest accomplishment?

DC: Oh gosh—establishing the fact that women cannot only have a firm but have a leading design firm. I know it sounds kind of silly today when there are fifty-four percent of women in our firm now and over fifty percent in the schools, but back in the day when we started, I think people thought, Ah, they're women and they can work in the firm but so maybe that.

SF: That's a great—a great accomplishment. Well, thank you very much.

DC: Thank you, thank you for asking me.

SF: I wish you well with your being acquired by Quinn Evans but then also as you transition to other things, hopefully travel down the road.

DC: Yeah, thank you.

SF: And congratulations on also, all of your wonderful, wonderful work in Baltimore. You made such a huge difference to this city. So thank you.

DC: Thank you so much. Enjoyed it.

End of Interview

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