BY BENJAMIN-ÉMILE LE HAY

Recently, over lunch at Kellari Taverna in Midtown Manhattan, Educated Observer had the opportunity to talk with Jill Lerner, Managing Principal at Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates (KPF), about the role architecture and design plays in the world of higher learning today. Ms. Lerner's 30-year career in design and management at KPF has seen her at the helm of many award-winning projects for academic institutions across the globe. She and her KPF team oversee the conceptual design through construction and project close-out. In doing so, they establish a dialogue with their client's higher learning community, ensuring that a building’s functionality is optimized for a variety of end-users and inhabitants. From the Newman Vertical Campus mixed-use academic complex at City University of New York's Baruch College, to Huntsman Hall at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Business, to a new multi-use facility for New York University’s School of Law, Ms. Lerner is innovating ways to maximize the potential of buildings, as well as ways that students can learn in a world of globalized technology. Her experiences on the Cornell University Board of Trustees (2004–2009) and as a parent of a recent college student have benefited her career as an architect for institutions of higher learning.

Here, Ms. Lerner discusses exactly what she's been up to.

Q: First of all, tell us about how you began your career.
A: After graduating from Cornell with a Bachelor of Architecture in 1976, one of 12 women in a class of 65, I worked as a designer on a range of building types for a series of great firms in New York, Philadelphia, and then in Chicago. Upon moving back to the East Coast in 1985, I began to focus primarily on academic, medical, and research work for both public and private institutional clients, working with a number of wonderfully talented and supportive designers and mentors. The history of every great institution is tightly bound with its specific place and the buildings that embody its mission. I was drawn to the unique challenges, variety, and design opportunities inherent in these projects. I joined KPF in 1994 and became a partner in 1999, working with Gene Kohn and Bill Pedersen to diversify the firm’s practice in these areas.

Q: KPF has an impressive portfolio of higher learning facilities. What makes the firm and its leaders so attractive to educational institutions?
A: The approach to our institutional work has been consistent with KPF’s guiding philosophy: for each plan or building, to create a design that addresses its specific context and climate, meets the functional needs and requirements of the program or brief. One that aligns with both the owner’s and users’ aspirations. Each building is a unique response to its context and each is also directly connected to the mission of the institution. We always try multiple solutions along the way and help to guide the institution through the possibilities that will shape its identity, its culture, and its internal programmatic and working relationships.

Q: What are some of your most challenging academic projects to date?
A: Projects are challenging for different reasons—sometimes budget or schedule, site or climate, regulatory or neighborhood challenges, working in a foreign culture, or perhaps a particularly daunting or complex internal program. But great challenges often require truly innovative thinking.
and can yield outstanding results. The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia was exceptionally challenging, with a complicated, phased program on a tight urban site; the Chapman Graduate School of Business at Florida International University had a remarkably tight budget; the W. P. Carey School of Business at Arizona State University deals with an intense climate in a sustainable building; Furman Hall at NYU Law School had to address extreme neighborhood opposition. All of these challenges required exceptional design solutions.

Q: Do you have a favorite KPF project?

A: My favorite projects are transformative. I enjoy being able to work with an institution as it seeks to improve its culture. Often our buildings are key in that process.

Baruch College’s Vertical Campus was my first major project at KPF and will always be special to me. It had a major impact on an important institution in the city and was significant for the firm as well, launching us into a new arena. The 780,000-square-foot building occupies almost a full city block in Manhattan’s historic Gramercy Park neighborhood and won an AIA National Honor Award in 2003. We pursued innovative planning concepts with vertical interlocking “quads,” utilized new materials, worked within a tight budget, and designed something unique. The students are proud to be there, and the quality of their experience is affected every day by the building. CUNY had very high aspirations and challenged us to create a “Village in the City.” It is always rewarding to work with a client with these sensibilities. It was a fabulous opportunity to remake a major institution in the city and result in an internationally recognized, award-winning design.

Q: Part of what you do is enhance and curate better learning experiences and spaces for your clients. What wasn't working? Tell us about some innovations you've discovered in the way students, faculty and communities interact and learn in classrooms and academic spaces?

A: In designing the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan, we responded to the extremely competitive climate facing universities today, the impact of rankings by students, importance of alumni and donor participation, desire to decrease energy costs, concern with changing models of education, active learning, globalization as well as student and faculty recruitment. The first phase of the project changed the culture of the school, giving students and faculty a central hub which enabled events to take place on campus, for students to continue dialogue outside the classroom, to work in teams, and to communicate globally. Our next phase will now focus on needs of new faculty, an increasing diversity of programs, and increased use of technology in flexible learning environments. Less than four years after the first phase was completed, we are helping the client to rethink the best models for teaching, learning, and research again as the rapid pace of change continues. While the building itself contributes dramatically to the quality of the campus and will be there for many decades, the interior will, no doubt, change over time.

Q: How do you facilitate a collaborative planning and building process with your projects? Who gets involved?

A: Our philosophy is firmly rooted in the belief that success is the result of collaboration and dialogue. A creative process stresses an open exchange of ideas both within the firm and, more importantly, between the client and the design team throughout the development of a project. Clients for our academic projects have many decision-makers and multiple stakeholders. Often, everyone has input into the design—faculty, students, staff, administrators, donors, alumni, funding agencies, community groups, and even taxpayers. Addressing multiple perspectives in our process creates a rich overlay of ideas from which a great solution can be derived. Our clients have consistently challenged our thinking, but supported the creativity of our solutions. Often they become enthusiastic advocates of the power of architecture to transform campus experience or even the institutional culture.

Q: What’s next in classroom and academic building innovation?

A: The biggest trend is incorporating technology into universities. The global communication and integration of technology has become much more prevalent in the way people teach and leverage distance learning and integrating commentary from classes around the world. Some have asked if the academic campus will still even be necessary in the future. But despite the promise of technology, there is no substitute for personal interaction in a new environment. The blend of program, planning, and architecture must serve to inspire the building's
users with elegant and functional solutions that make human interaction even easier and, more important, personalizing the way people work, study, meet, and exchange ideas.

Q: Tell us about your international academic projects. How do they differ, and how is the American model of learning and campus design— in higher educational settings—being embraced abroad?

A: New projects for the School of Transnational Law for Peking University in Shenzhen, China, and at NYU’s first urban campus in Shanghai are both based on the principles our practice has developed over time. They point to a wider, more robust and varied practice in the future. Working with NYU’s Shanghai Campus, now under construction, has provided our first opportunity to do an academic building in China for a U.S. institution, so we feel we are part of the experiment—bringing liberal arts education into the heart of Shanghai’s commercial center and furthering the cross-cultural dialogue.

In this age of globalization, American universities seek to engage the world more fully and directly, while universities worldwide share the aspiration to work to a high bar for academic standards, user satisfaction, and quality of student life. The role of the built environment to foster cultural connections and intellectual exchange is even more critical now than before. Our goal is to create campus environments that enable students to learn effectively across cultural borders, in buildings that inspire the next generation of great thinkers and leaders worldwide.

Q: How did being the only architect on the Cornell University Board of Trustees affect your tenure on the board? Did it influence you professionally at all?

A: It was a wonderful opportunity to both give back to my alma mater, as well as to learn about how a large research institution can be governed both efficiently and effectively. As the only Architect on a 64-person Board, I had an opportunity to play a unique role during a period of major campus expansion. Everyone at Cornell greatly appreciates and values the virtues of the Ithaca campus, but it can be a challenge to integrate and prioritize the many college goals, diverse programs, and funding needs. Having spent over 30 years designing academic buildings myself, I understood what was happening at other universities and had expertise in relevant building types, technical issues, and campus master planning, which I believe was helpful to others on the board. The balance required between academics, student life, scholarships, facility issues, climate concerns, fundraising, state support, and alumni interests greatly enhanced my own understanding of the complex environment in which major universities operate today. I am still involved as an Advisory Committee member for the Atkinson Center for a Sustainable Future, so my commitment continues! My Cornell experience also led me to involvement with other Universities, including the Asian University for Women in Bangladesh, where there is an opportunity to make an enormous impact through the education of women in South Asia. It’s been a fascinating, multicultural experience.

Q: How has being a woman influenced your career—if at all?

A: Over my career (since 1976), there has been a vast change in the number of women graduates from architecture programs, and in their acceptance within the architectural profession. There are still too few at the top, but it’s truly been a sea change.

During my professional career, I have often been the most senior or first woman in a particular role. As has been written by others, this position comes with greater visibility—more scrutiny, sometimes skepticism, but also more visibility for one’s talents. And, of course, the work/life balance was a challenge.

When I first started and was sent to a construction site at the age of 23, there was huge resistance from the client. It was very clear that I wasn’t welcome. It’s not like that anymore. I think women have proven themselves in all aspects of the profession—from design to management, to team and project leadership, to construction, as well as in teaching and architectural theory in the academy.

As our clients have become more diverse in all areas—in both the corporate and academic worlds—I think it’s been easier because there are women on both sides of the table.
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