

NATALIE de BLOIS Memorial at Cliff Dwellers 11.05.13 by Kim Haig

As many of our members know, our dear friend and one of the founders of Chicago Women in Architecture, Natalie de Blois, passed on in July of this year. She was an iconic member of the Chicago architectural community, and the tributes from friends, colleagues and family members underscored just how much she achieved in life, despite the challenges she (and most other women architects of her generation) faced in her career. Nancy Abshire, a long-time friend of Natalie's presented a slideshow of her work which featured a number of well-known buildings that she helped design at SOM in New York before moving to Chicago and becoming the first woman Associate Partner at SOM. Her work alone guarantees her a spot in the pantheon of distinguished architects, regardless of gender. But, ultimately she did gain some professional recognition in being awarded a fellowship in the AIA, and in 2010 an AIA lifetime achievement award. But it was the personal recollections and anecdotes of her friends and family that were so touching and revealed the character behind everything she accomplished.

Carol Ross Barney was 23 when she met Natalie at the first meeting of Chicago Women in Architecture. As she recalled, most of the women architects in Chicago were at that meeting, looking for mentors and companions in a still male-dominated field. Carol said, "Though Natalie suffered many slights and indignities, she rarely talked about it. She felt that CWA was payback." Carol knew her for decades, and saw her mentor reinvent herself, particularly when she moved to Texas and took up teaching architecture, with such success that she eventually was

awarded a prestigious teaching award by the State of Texas, an award likened to winning an Academy Award. As Carol pointed out, Natalie could be "sometimes blunt but insightful. Her accessibility, candor and advice for (her students') careers helped many young architects."

Several of Natalie's colleagues at SOM spoke about her design ability, flexibility in working with others and no-nonsense character. John Sills said she would, "look at a problem and get at the essence of it. She reinforced collaborative thinking." He said it was a tribute to her flexibility that she could work equally well with both Bruce Graham and Myron Goldsmith, very different people.

Natalie moved to Austin, Texas in 1980 when her son was planning to attend the University of Texas. The head of the architecture department reached out to her and offered her a position teaching "whatever and whenever she wanted." She was a demanding professor, but her course on tall buildings was especially popular and some students reportedly took it three or four times. Despite her formidable persona at school, she was very accessible and friendly to students after hours. One of her former students, Craig Dykers of Snohetta, first met her in one of his friend's studios. When he ran into her in the grocery store and found out that they were neighbors, she invited him over and he became a frequent visitor to her house, bringing along his friends to dance and talk design. He described her life as "a long chain of exceptional moments".

Finally, her son Robert spoke about adventures he had with his mother traveling around the world. Her usual mode of transportation was on foot, or some form of public transportation, typically with one small bag in tow. Carol Barney once received a call to pick Natalie up at O'Hare. When Carol arrived at the curb and asked Natalie where her luggage was she pulled out her toothbrush from her pocket. Traveling light is an art form at which Natalie excelled, but her life left an indelible imprint on the world.

Speakers for Natalie de Blois, left to right: John Zils, SOM; Nancy Abshire, SOM; Nichole Wiedemann, University of Texas; Elaine Molinar, Snohetta



COMMUNITY DESIGN: trend or change? by Kim Haig

On September 24, Charlene Andreas, CWA President, led a thought-provoking panel discussion about the field of community design. After introducing the impressive panelists she gave each woman an opportunity to describe their involvement with community design. Betsy Williams, the Managing Director for Architecture for Humanity in Chicago described her task as helping people find a voice in the design of their community, and then help find funding and architecture to fulfill their needs. Nootan Bharani, an Architect at CB&I and Managing Director at Shaw Sustainable Design Solutions, talked about helping create a knowledge community to raise the visibility of community design issues and the architects working to solve these issues. Roberta Feldman, a self-described "architectural activist, researcher and educator committed to democratic design" has been active in the arena of public interest architecture since high school. She and her colleagues received the 2011 AIA Latrobe Prize to "research and elaborate upon public interest strategies in architecture." And Catherine Baker is a partner at Landon Bone Baker, an architecture firm that focuses on affordable housing and community based design. Catherine has developed lab programs for high school students, such as documenting tree coverage in their neighborhood. She recently celebrated 25 years working with a local community development group.

When Charlene asked, "What is community design, and how do you get the general public to think about design in the context of solving their neighborhood problems?", Roberta described her efforts serving people who can't afford

design services and helping to democratize design. Her exposure to the issues of the Civil Rights movement inspired her to become an architect and help community designers meet the needs of residents more effectively. She also described how, when provided with design options, the residents would often choose options that they weren't aware existed, even different options from what they were accustomed to seeing. Catherine interjected that there needs to be an honest and open discussion of budget in the process, so that reasonable options can be put forth that will keep the residents engaged in the process rather than getting disenchanted with the final outcome. Nootan stated that if a person can advocate for themselves then they can advocate for good design. If they can listen then they can recognize good design as well as anyone. She said that design skills are learned, but given a voice, residents can determine what's best in any given situation. Betsy emphasized that she's not as interested in "high design" as providing tools so that the community can become involved intelligently in the design and arrive at realistically possible options.

Charlene next asked if design has a social cost and how they manage to get financing for their community development work. All four women discussed the difficulty of funding projects. Nootan described how when she works with bankers and policy mak-

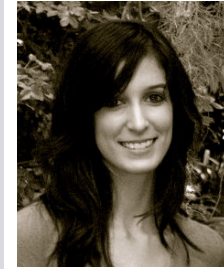
ers she's often the only architect in the group, and has to try to quantify the assets a project would bring to the community: will this project make residents happier, healthier, or safer with a better design? Roberta agreed that it's very difficult to assign social and economic value to design. But she suggested somehow creating a statistical matrix to assign value- how many people were kept out of prison, or out of the hospital because this design provided for their needs better?

The group also discussed the need for including more and different professions in the effort. Betsy suggested that an inter-professional or interdisciplinary effort would help, for example joining forces between engineers, architects and sociologists. The formula for successful community design is somewhat elusive, but the need for it is growing. Catherine pointed out that something as little as a neighborhood stabilization program can really change a block, just keeping properties maintained to stem the tide of decline. And, she pointed out, "small changes lead to big changes." And in communities with little funding or influence these changes can make a world of difference.



Community Design Forum left to right: Catherine Baker, Roberta Feldman, Nootan Bharani, and Betsy Williams with Charlene Andreas moderating

Chicago Design Education Symposium by Erin Reddy



The SAIC Chapter of the American Institute of Architecture Students hosted a daylong event – The Chicago Design Education Symposium (CDES)– on November 2, 2013 at the School of the Art Institute. The event gathered design students, educators, and professionals from across the Midwest to spur an in-depth conversation on the current and future course of design education.

How can the academy remain nimble in its methodologies - and keep pace with a radically changing industry - while at the same time ensure design education remains relevant and effective? The symposium attempted to answer this question by hosting lively panel discussions on four major topics: community service and public interest design; civic engagement and leadership experience; contemporary issues in studio culture; and emerging technologies in design education.

A major theme focused on the importance of advocacy in the architectural profession, both through civic causes and through policy. Many students support the notion of citizen-led design, and developing leadership and civic responsibility through their education is crucial to fulfilling the citizen-architect role. Too, it is crucial for architects to "sit at the table" and advocate for important legislative issues in the building industry; students need to be engaged with these same issues while still in school.

A screening of the documentary, "Archiculture," and a subsequent panel discussion rounded out the day, with some provocative questions brought to the forefront: "Does studio culture work?" "Do we need more studio culture in practice or more practice in studio culture?" "Is studio culture a privileged environment?" "Does studio present a narrow vision of what architects actually do and is this model still relevant?" "Do you need studio culture to be a good architect?"

All proceeds from CDES will support the newly established Freedom by Design Chicago, a collaborative effort among the four Chicago schools of architecture.

MEMBER NEWS. UPCOMING EVENTS + MORE...

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| Dec 11 | CWA Holiday Party & Silent Auction - at Hafele, 154 W Hubbard. Members and non-members are welcome to attend. \$20 for non-members, \$10 for members - 6:00 p.m. |
| Dec 30 | CWA 40th Anniversary Committee Meeting - Organizational meeting- location to be announced. Members welcome to attend and help in planning for 40th Anniv. celebration in June, 2014. |

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