

ALYSON STEELE

FAIA | LEED AP



Steele is widely known for her work in museum design and the revitalization of cultural institutions and landmarks across the nation. Under her leadership, Quinn Evans has pioneered inclusive design concepts that promote accessibility and engagement for diverse audiences, including the innovative use of sensory mapping. Her work has also emphasized the long-term stewardship of cultural resources and significant historic properties.

“Be optimistic, embrace the messy problems, and think beyond your comfort zone.”

DISCOVERY AND REVELATION OVER TIME

HOW DID YOU DECIDE TO BECOME AN ARCHITECT?

Interested in many things, over time I decided that architecture could be a way to continue learning about and contribute to the lives of people and places throughout my career.

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR CAREER PATH AND THE POSITIONS YOU HAVE HELD?

Born Baltimore Maryland 1967; Graduated James Madison High School Madison, WI 1985, Graduated from Stanford University 1989 - Bachelor's degree in Urban studies with concentrations in Japanese and music; Taught English in Japan 1989-90; Worked for a non-profit concert series in San Francisco 1990-91; Graduated from University of Virginia 1994 - Master of Architecture; Worked as a project development consultant helping non-profits meet requirements of the CA Unreinforced Masonry Building Ordinance 1994-1997, Moved to DC for fiancé 1997, worked at Quinn Evans 1997-present [at QE, became an Associate in 2003, Shareholder in 2006, Principal in 2009, DC Office Director 2014, Executive VP and Chief Design Officer 2017].

HAVE YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO BE IN A LEADERSHIP POSITION?

I've always wanted to contribute to the lives of people and places. Early on, I thought that was by understanding the needs of clients and stakeholders and designing great places for them. I did not see that as requiring a titled leadership role. Over time, I saw that a formal leadership position means I can create that impact in a broader way.

HOW HAVE YOU WEATHERED THE CHANGING ECONOMIC CYCLES AND RECESSIONS WITHIN THE INDUSTRY?

Staying connected through strong relationships with colleagues and clients, and being adaptable to serve in different capacities has sustained me and my teams through thick and thin. Being willing to try and follow through at something different from what might have been expected, we continue to learn about the world and ourselves.

WHO MENTORED YOU?

Architecture is a team sport and I have learned something from just about every client, boss, and colleague along the way. Different people had influence in different ways. My thesis advisor Terry Vaughan helped me work out how I think about designing for multisensory experiences with rigor and why that matters.

When I was fresh out of school, I worked closely with Rich Lowry a senior technical architect who helped shore up my technical understanding, immersed me in San Francisco architectural history, and showed how to enjoy life as an architect. Rich is now 86!

Early in my tenure at Quinn Evans, Bill Dreher gave me the chance to advance my design ideas and help manage our museum and visitor center projects, and we collaborated our museum design philosophy. Bill died in 2010.

Carl Elefante has been an inspiration in paying attention to why the work matters in the larger world. Larry Barr, my predecessor CEO at Quinn Evans brought me fully into firm management and changed the trajectory of my career.

IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WOULD HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY?

I find this kind of question hard to answer. It's fundamentally important to get up every day and do your best, knowing the outcome will never be perfect.

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT QUALITIES AN ARCHITECT SHOULD HAVE?

Curiosity, rigor, service-orientation, and the ability to navigate ambiguous situations to positive outcomes.

WHO DO YOU LOOK UP TO AS A LEADER AND WHY?

Anyone who does the right thing when no one is looking, and those who are willing to grapple with complex situations with no easy answers.

ARE THERE ANY RESOURCES THAT YOU FOUND USEFUL?

History and biography are great sources of lessons in change over time, how people adapt, and the repercussions of decisions. Understanding those types of dynamics and being able to act with that understanding for the benefit of a group is inherent to leadership.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU WANT TO GIVE TO FUTURE LEADERS?

Be optimistic, embrace the messy problems, and think beyond your comfort zone.

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IS THE RECIPE FOR SUCCESS?

1. Maintaining your own personal understanding of what is important and how it realistically applies to each situation;
2. Working with people you respect and care about.
3. Living and working with curiosity about places, people, and the profession;
4. Finding enjoyment and meaning in many aspects of the work - to sustain long-term efforts toward excellence and impact.

TIMELINE

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