

# ANGELA WATSON

FAIA | LEED AP



*Modern architecture first caught my eye as a child in Germany. I noticed from a young age that these iconic buildings were too often torn down to make way for "new and improved" architecture. Finding a way to reimagine and save the modern designs of my youth impassioned me to become a designer.*

***"It is important to recognize change as an opportunity to evolve as a profession."***

## FOLLOWING NEW AND INTERESTING OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN AND GROW

### **HOW DID YOU DECIDE TO BECOME AN ARCHITECT?**

At first, I wanted to be a stage set designer. I was always interested in theatre - I used to dance and had an uncle who was a theatrical lighting designer for the Coliseum in London. The opportunity to create a visual story and make a scene come to life was really interesting to me. Family friends encouraged me to not restrict myself to the stage as they understood it to be a very narrow and specific path of education.

They suggested I study architecture, which would give me broader opportunities and still let me come back to stage set design. Needless to say, I loved architecture and never looked back.

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

After graduating with a MArch from MIT in 1993, my husband and I worked with friends to design a house for them. I still look back at this great experience that taught me how to work with clients.

The following year, I received a call from the career center at MIT about a position with a Boston architecture firm, HDS. They were looking for someone who spoke German to manage a project they were working on in Berlin. We were working with a German developer and a local architect on a large office building after the wall fell and Berlin was going through a huge construction surge.

Being the only German speaker in our firm, I had some amazing opportunities to be in the room during key meetings as the primary contact for our client. Being in the deep end of the pool made me learn really fast. I worked at HDS on a number of projects and a series of feasibility studies in Berlin and was named an Associate. During this time, the internet became a "thing," and I designed the HDS website in addition to building their computer network.

In 1997, I joined Cambridge Seven Associates (C7A), working on the pedestrian bridges at Logan Airport in Boston, followed by work at the Museum of Science and a number of feasibility studies for aquaria and environmental education Centers.

# *Each of my “mistakes” was a learning experience and growth opportunity.*

My favorite was a plan to redevelop a failed wastewater treatment plant in Jacksonville, North Carolina, into an environmental Education Center. My last project at C7A pointed me in the direction of healthcare design. I was the project architect for the Yawkey Center for Outpatient Care Center at Massachusetts General Hospital, an incredibly complex building and design process. We collaborated with four other architecture firms, creating a new building and underground garage next to and under part of the historic Charles Street Jail.

In 2002, I was recruited to join Shepley Bulfinch as a Senior Associate to help transform the design practice. I still remember my first day where I joined our healthcare team for the pre-proposal tour of a large healthcare project in New York, which again put me in the deep end of the pool, learning how to pursue projects.

In 2005 I was named a Principal and continued to work on large and complex projects in higher education and healthcare as a design leader. Two years later, in 2007, I was elected to the Board of Directors and was named Chair of the Board in 2016.

During my time serving on the board Shepley Bulfinch expanded from one to five offices and I gained valuable experience in governance and firm leadership. It was this experience that paved the way for me to be named President and CEO, as well as Chair of the Board in 2021.

## **HAVE YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO BE IN A LEADERSHIP POSITION?**

Leadership has usually found me, manifesting itself in different ways. I was interested in a seat at the table, so that I could participate in shaping, creating, and changing whatever organization I was part of. Over time, having a seat at the table has changed from focusing on design and projects to people and organizational structure.

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

There is no one person I look up to, but I look at and admire individual qualities of almost everyone around me.

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

I was lucky. I had some unique skills, which created opportunities for me when there were few available. I was also interested in trying new things and taking on different responsibilities. That helped me stay current and grow.

## **WHO MENTORED YOU?**

There were so many people who were mentors at different times, and each played quite different roles. In many ways, I learned by observing others and by learning from my mistakes. Two of my professors stand out: Jan Wampler and Shun Kanda. Each was instrumental in helping me find my design voice and gave me opportunities to teach. Those experiences were important in shaping who I am today.

## IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WOULD HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY?

That is a hard question to answer. Each of my “mistakes” was a learning experience and growth opportunity. Had I known how much I would invest and how hard some of these opportunities were, I might not have taken them. So, it is probably a good thing that I did not know ahead of time.

I truly believe that the journey is an important part of growth and can't be prescribed. It also needs to be flexible. One can usually adjust after having made a decision that did not work out as well as imagined.

**Survey conducted by Dezeen Magazine found, “only three of the world's 100 biggest architecture firms are headed by women, only 2 firms have management teams that are more than 50% female. Women occupy just 10% of the highest-ranking jobs at the world's leading architecture firms. The percentage of women falls at each ascending management tier, 16 of the top 100 firms have no women at all in senior positions.” (Dezeen, 2017)**

[https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/around-year-2222-equalize-women-leadership-200-more-years-chohan?trk=articles\\_directory](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/around-year-2222-equalize-women-leadership-200-more-years-chohan?trk=articles_directory)

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

- Curiosity.
- The ability to communicate ideas.
- An open mind.
- An understanding of the impact space has on humans.

I'm inspired by the environment within the firm where we cultivate opportunities to grow and learn from one another.

## ARE THERE ANY RESOURCES THAT YOU FOUND USEFUL REGARDING LEADERSHIP?

- Conversations about almost anything help me be creative.
- I have found Adam Grant's podcast quite thought provoking.
- Being in the deep end of the pool has helped me grow much faster.
- A leadership development program at the Center for Creative Leadership was transformative for me and helped me decide to take on my current role.

## WHAT ADVICE DO YOU WANT TO GIVE TO FUTURE LEADERS?

Architecture is going to change a great deal in the coming years. It is important to recognize change as an opportunity to evolve as a profession.

## WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IS THE RECIPE FOR SUCCESS?

Be curious and seize opportunities.  
Be you!

## TIMELINE

1993  
M. Arch  
MIT

1993  
Designed friend's  
house

1994  
Joined HDS  
Managed a  
project in Berlin

1996  
Associate  
HDS

1997  
Joined Cambridge  
Seven Associates  
CTA

2002  
Senior Associate  
Shepley Bulfinch

2005  
Principal  
Shepley Bulfinch

2007  
Elected to Board  
of Directors  
Shepley Bulfinch

2016  
Named Chair of  
the Directors  
Shepley Bulfinch

2021  
President and CEO  
Shepley Bulfinch