

LISA FERRETTO

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PASSIONATE PERSISTENCE



Lisa M. Ferretto has been committed to sustainability throughout her life, from her first "eco-city" designed at 8 years old, to her time in Portland, Oregon, back to her hometown of Baltimore. She is the Senior Director of Climate Action and Design Excellence at AIA, the American Institute of Architects, where she helps architects across the nation improve our built environment and work for climate action and equity.

"Architecture and sustainability is my path and my calling."

HOW DID YOU DECIDE TO BECOME AN ARCHITECT?

It feels more like architecture and sustainability is my path and my calling. I have always been drawn to art and science, and it was my physics teacher in high school who suggested I might like architecture. I then took a weekend class, and when applying to colleges, wrote "architecture" as my major for undergrad and was directly admitted to the school. Later in my adult life, my father found a childhood drawing of mine - an Eco-City, showing people interacting with nature, buildings, food, and transportation. It was then I realized I had been talking about sustainable architecture since I was 8 years old.

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

After earning my Bachelor of Science in Architecture, I worked for a small-to-mid-size firm doing adaptive reuse in DC. I loved the work I was doing, but I knew to achieve licensure, I needed to attend graduate school. I also knew I wanted to focus on sustainability, and since none of the schools on the East Coast

provided that specialization, I enrolled at the University of Oregon. UO housed professors who authored many of the sustainability books I had, and I was able to take courses, such as passive cooling, daylighting, passive heating, and vernacular architecture. They also had an Urban Design Center in Portland, and I earned my Master of Architecture with a focus in Urban and Environmental Design.

Although Portland is recognized as one of the most sustainable urban cities, after being there for about 6 years, I knew I had to come back to Baltimore. I didn't want to just build green buildings in a green city. It was more than that to me - and rooted in environmental justice. How do you implement sustainability in cities that face social and equity issues? I came back to Baltimore and responded to a project architect position. During the interview, I emphasized that I didn't want to just do "architecture," and that I wanted to integrate sustainability into the design process. I spent 17 years there, gradually advancing to a Principal and the Sustainability Director. I also became involved in supporting local green building advocacy and joined the MD Green Building Council and the Baltimore Sustainability Commission.

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HAVE YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO BE IN A LEADERSHIP POSITION?

I didn't necessarily aim to ascend to a leadership position in a firm, my focus, rather, was on how I can maximize positive impact across the profession through design. I naturally assumed more responsibility as I progressed along my career path, and I always wanted to integrate sustainability.

In Portland, I worked for a small to mid-sized firm, but upon moving to Baltimore, I wanted to work for a large firm, with larger projects and impact. With the transition to the Sustainability Director role, I was able to consult on projects across the whole firm and all market sectors and promote the integration of sustainability throughout the design process.

Through my time there, I continued to volunteer with advocacy and again wanted to broaden my impact. I accepted a position at the AIA as the Sr. Director of Climate

Action and Design Excellence, to not only help one firm - but to help architects across the country improve our built environment. What evolved was my desire to affect change and the level of impact I could have through design on the built environment.

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

I was at a large multidisciplinary firm working in the housing market sector before the 2008 recession. During the slowdown, I transitioned to the education market and that remained a focus for the remainder of my time there. What I loved about working on schools was the long-term perspective - of 20-30-year life cycles, a different mindset than housing developers. Additionally, it was deeply fulfilling to aspire to inspire the next generation - to support the school as a learning environment and help connect the students to their site, building, and each other.

WHO MENTORED YOU?

My early mentors include my third-grade teacher who assigned me the project of my first eco-city, my physics teacher who introduced me to architecture, and my father who allowed me the opportunity to explore. Another high school teacher assigned the book "Our Common Future," the 1987 Brundtland Report by the UN's World Commission on Environment and Development, which introduced me (and the world) to a definition of sustainable development.

This was pivotal for me - why would design and development compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs - with our needs of the present? As someone who has deviated from the traditional architect path, there were certainly times when I had to advocate for myself - and for the value of integrative sustainable design. But throughout my career, I also have been fortunate at times to have a more senior woman mentor, and now try to do my best to be a mentor in return to young professionals.

IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WOULD HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY?

No, I believe at any given moment, you will make the best decision with the information available. Even if you veer off from your path, if it's meant to be, you will find your way back. I think even if I had not been directly admitted to Architecture School- I would still have found my way back to environmental design for climate action and equity.

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

People often say - there are two types of people in the world, and you could also say there are two types of architects as well: those who view architecture as a public service field, designing for the community and environment, and those who focus on personal expression or recognition. I'm firmly in the public service camp. The project isn't about the architect, it's about the users and the purpose. The architect's job is to listen to all stakeholders, to synthesize input, to ask the right questions, and to propose creative solutions, that are well-designed and beautiful - and that are balanced with functionality. Architects also have a responsibility to the health, safety, and welfare of people, our communities, and the planet. This means designing and building in an environmentally responsible way that is also adaptable to future needs and climate.

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

I admire and am inspired by other changemakers advocating for the enhancement of the health of our planet, communities, and people. There are so many dedicated, passionate people and organizations working for positive change in Baltimore and our world. I also look up to those who inspire people to make change. I once heard Wangari Maathai, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, share a story her father told her about a huge forest fire. All the animals were standing around watching, except for one hummingbird who was going over to a pond, taking one drop, coming back, putting it on the fire, and repeating. Meanwhile, the elephant is laughing at the hummingbird and says - what are you doing- you are too small, and the hummingbird replies - "I'm doing what I can." That resonated with me, as it reinforces my belief in the power of small actions and one person can impact meaningful change. There are moments when the enormity of climate change can be overwhelming, but we must keep doing what we can - which goes back to my "passionate persistence." If architects can incorporate climate action and justice into what we do as architects, then the design of our built environment can have positive impacts across our communities and planet.

"Love what you do. Do what you can."

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

Regarding climate advocacy leadership, it is always useful to connect and network with other people and organizations doing similar work and that share similar goals. AIA has a Committee on the Environment, (COTE), a Knowledge Community that architects can join, and a national COTE Leadership Group. There is also a network that connects the COTE committees from the local AIA Chapters across the country. Groups like USGBC and Passive House also have similar networks and local chapters. AIA also has a Women's Leadership Summit to empower women in leadership and architecture.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU WANT TO GIVE TO FUTURE LEADERS OF THE INDUSTRY?

Don't be afraid to ask questions. Remember that nothing exists in isolation and things do not have to be done the way they have always been done.

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IS THE RECIPE FOR SUCCESS?

Love what you do. Do what you can. Stay positive.

TIMELINE

