

# Marcia Feuerstein

PhD | RA | AIA



Marcia Feuerstein received her PhD at University of Pennsylvania, is a registered architect and an associate professor at Virginia Tech's Washington Alexandria Architecture Center teaching in the Masters and PhD programs. She considers architecture through the lens of the body, embodiment, performance, and theater having focused on Oskar Schlemmer, iconic architectural projects, and drawing from her early work with disabled populations. Recent publications include *Expanding Field of Architecture: Women in Practice Across the Globe* (2022), *Confabulations: Storytelling in Architecture* (2016), *Architecture as a Performing Art* (2013), and *Changing Places: ReMaking Institutional Buildings* as well as contributions to a number of edited volumes and journals (*The Routledge Companion to Drawings and Models* (2022), *Ceilings and Dreams* (2018), *Body and Building* (2002), *ARQ*, *Montreal Research Quarterly*, and others. She started her architectural career in Buffalo, NY and has continued to practice when the spirit moves her.

*"If I could go back, I would have just ignored what I was told and gone ahead."*

## A Crooked Road

### DESCRIBE YOUR PATH TO LEADERSHIP IN ONE WORD OR PHRASE.

I didn't start out in architecture at all. I grew up in a time and with a family where I was the only girl of three boys. My mother gave up her career to get married. She was studying to become a concert pianist and she gave it up. When it came time for me to go to college, my high school advisor suggested that I become a secretary and my father thought I should just either study piano and get married and teach piano at home or become a dental hygienist and work in his office - he was a dentist. Those were my two choices. My father didn't think I should go to college and he definitely didn't think I should become an artist which is what I wanted to do. I wanted to study art. I didn't know what I was going to do for a few years.

My mother prevailed, and I went away to college. I was there for a few years studying a mixture of subjects, but I still didn't know what I wanted to do so I took a test to see what I was suited for. And I was suited for art - to become an artist. But of course I couldn't do that because my parents were supporting me.

I told the advisor discussing the results of my test that I could only do something in medicine. The advisor then suggested occupational therapy. They said, "okay, why don't you become an occupational therapist (OT)."

I studied anatomy, physiology, and kinesiology. I went on internships and volunteered with kids who were autistic and others with cerebral palsy.

I transferred into another school - Tufts University - to study to become an OT. I became a registered OT (OTR) and I worked for a year and half and said I can't do this. I primarily worked with physically handicapped kids in various rehabilitation and school settings and interned in a psych hospital and a adult rehabilitation center, and I was miserable, except when I designed and built adaptive equipment for my patients.

I said, "OK, I'm going to get a master's in architecture." I went back to school at Buffalo and got my master's. I was able to do it for no money because I had gotten a scholarship in New York state. I graduated from the first accredited class at University of Buffalo [UB, State University of New York Buffalo]. We had fabulous people there. Peter Reyner Banham taught history. Ed Steinfeld, who was very well known, researched human factors, accessibility, and the developing ADA standards. Michael Brill taught Performance Programming, studios that researched the the built environment and people's relationship to it. Ulrich Flemming taught design studios based on generative design principles. Also George Anselevicius led the program and was a wonderful mentor.

It was hard, there weren't very many women in the program. This didn't happen to me, but to a good friend. She went to get a job that she knew was available and she was told, "we *already have one of you.*" They already had one woman and it happened to be the secretary. They didn't want to have any other women in their office.

Another friend, who has since passed away, worked for the only female architect in Buffalo. My friend was fabulous, but as soon as they found out she could type, they had her do all the specs and typing. She refused. That's how my experience in practice began.

I had a really great mentor in Buffalo. At that time there was no work. It was very difficult to get a job. It was in the early 80's and I was hired as a consultant. I would be hired by a firm to do a project but not on a long-term basis. My first full-time job was in Niagara Falls, New York, only to be laid off because they lost some projects. Ted Lownie of Hamilton Houston and Lownie (now HHL), one of my mentors, hired me. He also urged me to move to New York City.

I was interested in working for SITE (Sculpture in the Environment). They were very famous in their time. It's a group of artists and architects working together - they did a series of showroom buildings for BEST Products around the country. They developed a number of art / architecture projects, such as BEST, which reconceived large suburban box building types through playful and serious sculptural explorations developed through the facades, entry spaces, etc. They were quite outrageous.

This was in the 80s and I was fascinated by their projects as serious explorations of the interplay between art and architecture. The Italians loved them, there's a little book that the Italians wrote about their BEST Products "indeterminate facade" showroom in Texas. While I was curious about SITE's work, my background in the body and human anatomy, movement, and spatial perception and integration (from my OT background) remained an important aspect of my architectural knowledge. I did some interesting projects with them for a few years.

I returned to Buffalo to teach and work on a project with Edward Steinfeld who was working on some new ADA research and design guidelines for the US Architectural & Transportation Barriers Compliance Board. Our hand anthropometrics research studied how people with handicaps and disabilities could use their upper extremities and hands. The research considered touching and reaching, which was a specialty of Occupational Therapists. Also, as an OT, I had studied and treated children with perceptual and spatial organization limitations - how we develop our ability to move around and understand spatial positioning - sensori-integration.

Our research gathered data to create new standards for ANSI, specifically related to objects that we grasp, such as handrails, door knobs, including movement, reach, and power. We also developed guidelines and designs based on the hand anthropometrics research.

I also began teaching design studios and performance programming at UB and was made a visiting faculty in the OT department. That was another turn, when I began teaching.

After a few years of teaching and research, I realized that I enjoyed both and wanted to continue. But I also believed that I needed to be licensed and have a PhD to continue in academia. I got my PhD at the University of Pennsylvania and started teaching while I was there. I taught at Penn and Temple University. Then I was hired in a tenure track position at Virginia Tech, where I've been since 1996 (I'm now an emerita faculty). That's the twisted road.

My PhD research combined my various interests: the body, art and architecture, performance, as well as feminist practice, into a dissertation exploring Oskar Schlemmer's theater workshop in the Bauhaus. Schlemmer's work was all about the body. He also taught theater that was related to exploring architecture, space, and movement.

I've been teaching theory seminars and design studios on the body, performance, theater, and architecture to graduate, undergraduate, and PhD students. I was also the Chair of the International Archive of Women in Architecture Board of Advisors and a member of the board for a number of years. Our book, ***Expanding Field of Architecture: Women in Practice Across the Globe***, was published in 2022. We have also been planning an exhibition at the National Building Museum, related to the book.

### **IS THERE ANYTHING THAT YOU WOULD HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY IF YOU COULD GO BACK AND REDO IT?**

I would have just ignored what I was advised and told in high school and gone ahead with what I loved. I was supposed to go to RISD for art and I think that if I'd had just done that, I would have eventually ended up where I am now. I probably would be practicing more. I probably would have eventually ended up in design, but I don't know.

Ignoring negativity - if I was strong enough to do that. I was a very introverted quiet kid who didn't know how to stand up for myself. I have to say going through everything that I did gave me more confidence but at that time I wasn't a confident person.

If I had been able to, I probably would have gotten into design because I was taking a series of design and art classes during my senior year of high school. At that time, they [RISD] didn't have an architecture program, only product design, which I really loved.

I did a lot of design when I was an OT. I designed and built all sorts of adaptive equipment for my patients. I loved it. I may have ended up in the same place. Maybe. Who knows?

***“There are some people who are born to be great leaders, but I think you can learn to be a great leader too.”***

### **HAS IT GOTTEN EASIER FOR WOMEN IN THE INDUSTRY?**

I really don't know. I'm clearly in academia. I think that it's interesting, there are a lot of women now who are studying architecture. The last few years that I was teaching studio, two or three of my studio classes I had only two men and all the rest were women. It was primarily a graduate program, the women said the reason they wanted to come to the Washington Alexandria Architecture Center was because, at that time, there were three female and one male faculty - a majority of women. In most schools there are a majority of men. Women want to be taught by women. Our book attempts to show that there is no difference between how and what men and women design. Typically others have tried to describe or show how women design differently than men. We disagree with that assumption.

In the past it was difficult for women to be given leadership roles in the university or in the architecture program. It's slowly changing - it depends on who is in charge. It's still a problem when it comes to salary and getting leadership and responsibility. You have to really fight for it. When I first was in Blacksburg, a group of people ran everything and if you weren't part of their group you were ignored - the only option for women faculty was to be part of the IAWA. Few were considered for awards and recognition.

They just wanted you to leave so they could hire their own. It does wear on you, but then things change. We had some new leadership, that group was forced from the top and more women were given leadership roles. I think that's hard to shake - the pressure to show that you know what you're doing. Especially putting yourself out there and just trusting that you know what you know. It's a curse.

## **CHANGING ECONOMIC CYCLES AND RECESSIONS?**

I was invited to teach by my ex-teachers at UB. One of the reasons I went into academia was because of all the problems I tried to maintain a job in New York. It was tough and I was worried I wouldn't get enough experience to take the exam. I realized that academia allowed me to contribute to the profession by training new architects, while pursuing my research that expanded architectural knowledge, and still be involved with design.

I moved to New York City because I found an affordable sublet apartment on the upper west side. The day I moved there, in the early 80s, the *New York Times* published an article about mass layoffs from the largest architecture firms in NYC. It was bad timing, but I told myself, "well, I've got a place to stay now all I need is a job." I had also been told by SITE that, if you're here we'll give you a job. I found temporary a job to wait and see. Then as soon as SITE called me I quit the other temporary job. But even at SITE work was tenuous. Most of the office staff were 'consultants' and, as an intern, I was paid very little. This was one reason I eventually returned to Buffalo. New York was expensive. The invitation from UB drew me back to my hometown, where I became a full-time research architect/coordinator and visiting professor.

## **WHO MENTORED YOU ON YOUR PATH TO SUCCESS?**

**George Anselevicius:** I worked for him as a student. He was the head of the program. He brought me under his wing. He went on to be the dean at University of New Mexico. He's passed away.

**Ted Lownie:** Ted Lownie was a great mentor as one of my design teachers.

**David Leatherbarrow:** When I was working on my PhD I had great mentor who was the chair of my committee - David Leatherbarrow. He was always very kind. He and Lauren, his wife, and I had a very short-lived practice while I was working on my PhD in Philadelphia.

**Marco Frascari:** Marco was one of my PhD advisors and began the PhD program at VT's WAAC in Alexandria. He helped my transfer to WAAC from Blacksburg and was a wonderful mentor both at Penn and at WAAC.

**Milka Bliznakov:** I have to say all my mentors have been men except for one remarkable woman - Milka Bliznakov. She founded the IAWA. She was a very interesting woman from Bulgaria. She escaped when it was still communist and made her way to the US and ended up at Virginia Tech and started the women's archive. She was a wonderful mentor.

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### **ARE THERE ANY RESOURCES YOU'VE FOUND USEFUL REGARDING LEADERSHIP?**

That's a good question. I don't know. I think I've had a lot of experiences with different variety of leadership styles, but I don't know of any books or blogs or podcasts that I can talk about. During the pandemic, my worst experience was after Virginia Tech hired a new dean who fired everybody who had been leading the school for a very long time. He had to find new people and found people who had never been leaders. We didn't know how anything had been done and the people who had been in charge were so angry that they had difficulty helping us move forward. So, it was tough, but we learned from each other. We shared responsibilities, met often, and strategized how to move ahead during the pandemic. We also supported each other. The new chair of the upper level architecture program, Margarita McGrath, was key to our success during these times.

I also discovered coaching. My dear friend is a professional coach. She used to be the CEO of a national organization. After she retired, she became an executive coach. She helped me work through issues of confidence and organization. Executive coaching is an incredible profession that helps leaders learn how to be leaders. You have to find the right coach who you trust like a mentor. It's almost like going to a therapist. You work with the coach, addressing issues and problems, while attempting to resolve them. Very empowering.

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

I think honesty and authenticity and not only knowledge. I mean, you need to know things, but you need to know where to look for knowledge. Don't be over-confident but maintain a sense of strength in what you believe and think. Be able to accept differences of opinion. It's very important to seek advice from others who may know much more than you. They are invaluable resources. Don't be shy about asking questions in order to seek more expertise.

Trust. I'm thinking back at some of the people I know that are really wonderful architects. They were very caring and understanding and patient. That's so important.

## **WHAT DO YOU LOOK UP TO IN A LEADER AND WHY?**

Look for a leader that you can really trust. I keep coming back to honesty and authenticity. You trust that they're going to be honest with you and they're there for you. I know that many times leaders have a difficult road. I always look for someone who is able to lead in a way that is positive and generous. A good leader is there to help you grow as a leader.

I'm the kind of leader who shares my leadership. I try to give others an opportunity to contribute to whatever it is we're trying to do. Whether it's a design or moving a program or project forward or writing a book together. If I'm in charge I really want other people to have the ability to feel that they are also co-leaders. You don't look at someone and say, they're the ones that make all the decisions and they tell me what to do. It's important to be collaborative. That's the way I am. Which some don't like - especially students. They say, "tell me what to do"!

I had a design teacher, Bill Huff, who became a colleague. He was the kind of teacher who was very prescriptive. "You do this, then this, then that." For the design studios, Bill would have the students first and then we'd switch. All the students would come to me next and they had beautifully drawn projects that all looked the same and I'd say, "so, what were you doing, why is it like this"? And they'd say, "I don't know". Then they'd have me and it would be opposite. I had to get them to unlearn this don't-think-for-yourself mentality.

## **ARE PEOPLE BORN GREAT LEADERS OR CAN YOU LEARN TO BECOME A GREAT LEADER?**

There are some people who are born to be great leaders, but I think you can learn to be a great leader too. I've always been an introvert, so I'm not a typical leader. I will lead if no one else will and I'm a great leader if no one else wants to do it. But if somebody is there and starts speaking up, I'll just let them talk. I sometimes wonder about people who always want to be leaders because often they only want to be in charge for themselves rather than for the common good. I know some who just want power.

## **WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO PEOPLE WHO WANT TO BECOME FUTURE LEADERS IN THE INDUSTRY?**

Don't be afraid to step into a leadership role.. I wasn't given leadership opportunities until the IAWA and I just decided that I could and would work with the advisors for the IAWA. And we had a wonderful board. But it's important to take on some responsibility. They just jump into the position.

*Just jump.*

Like you're jumping into cold water. Find your way. You don't have to become a leader, but get on committees so you can start taking responsibilities. Then gradually move into leadership roles. I think it's possible for anyone, especially if you have the passion to do it. That's my advice.

## YOU RECENTLY PUBLISHED A BOOK, RIGHT?

I've published a number of books, but my favorite and most recent one is about women in architecture. It's called, *Expanding Fields: Women in Practice Across the Globe*. We introduce forty built projects from the 21st century built all around the world. We have beautiful photographs and identify everybody who worked on the project, political and cultural context. We wrote the book for the educated public - to reach non architects who might study the drawings and photographs, and then read our short discussions about each project. We hope they learn that architecture is more complex than how it looks. We also never mention that the projects were designed by women (except in the title and the introduction).

We're working on an exhibit that includes 12 projects from the book. The book is available on Amazon. Another more academic / theory book on Finishing in Architecture is about to be published (Routledge, 2025).

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

I have no idea.

I don't even know if I'm successful. The thing about me, and a lot of people, you never quite think that you've succeeded. You always have self-doubt. I think the recipe for success is not to think that you've succeeded but to keep going. Keep working towards being the best you can. And also to never believe you've failed if you don't reach it. You reach something.

Many of my colleagues lost their jobs. I saw this when I was practicing -- they were successfully employed today and the next day they were unemployed. It's especially happening now, here in DC. You have to constantly be ready to keep redefining and remaking yourself. Don't listen to what you think other people are saying.

I have a good recipe for cake. But a recipe for success is really tough. A good recipe for success is to have really good colleagues and cohorts, people who support you and who you can go to and who help build you up and never abandon you. That's the real recipe. Colleagues and friends who are helping you along.

