

SARAH ALEXANDER

AIA | LEED AP BD+C

A Set of Fortunate Circumstances



Sarah has extensive experience in the crafting of complex mixed-use urban infill projects through all phases of design. She is a leader in the firm's DC area entitlement work, specializing in creating value for the client through innovative design solutions that maximize the allowable density for the site. Her projects have received numerous national awards, attesting to her ability to craft beautiful buildings that weave seamlessly into their context.

"I love our field. It's not going to make you rich most likely, but I think it will keep you interested for life, which is probably more important and you will have created things that are tangible."

DESCRIBE YOUR PATH TO LEADERSHIP IN ONE WORD OR PHRASE.

I was very fortunate. I think it would have to be a "Set of Fortunate Circumstances". I've had some great mentors. Some of those mentors left, creating opportunities. It was just a lot of hard work and good luck.

HOW DID YOU DECIDE TO BECOME AN ARCHITECT?

I do feel strongly that to be an architect, it has to be something that you just know you want to do from a young age or are otherwise very convinced about - it's very difficult in school and in general life. I think it's something you have to be drawn to.

So luckily, I guess I was 12 or 13 when my parents decided they wanted to buy a new house. I didn't even know what an architect was, I had no reference point to that. But they bought a book of sample house plans because they were considering maybe building a house, and then we went to look at a bunch of old historic houses. I would just sit and look at the book of plans in my spare time, and then I would remember all the details of all the houses we went to see.

I just loved going on house tours as a kid, which now with my own children I find hilarious since they think it is boring. My parents just thought that was normal, so wherever we would go on vacations we would go on house tours and I just loved it.

Architecture was something I was drawn to very early on and I never waived. I did have a high school guidance counselor who told me I should be a real estate agent instead of an architect because girls can't be an architect... but luckily I didn't listen to him. I remember that him saying that really pissed off my mom.

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

I went straight through school, which I think is somewhat common. I did four years at University of Maryland followed by two years at Notre Dame. I didn't have to rediscover my career or go back to school or any of those things.

I worked at a smaller mom and pop architecture firm from my sophomore year to my senior year at Maryland. And I loved that firm - I loved the people, but the work they did I wasn't as intrigued by.

“In hindsight I think it worked out fine, but I think sometimes I might have been more concerned about what leadership thought, and not necessarily as cognizant of some of the peer things as I could have been. So I think that’s just an area I grew up a little bit and realized. I mean you’re young, you don’t know everything.”

I ended up getting an internship here (Torti Gallas + Partners) the summer between my two years at Notre Dame. I was asked to come back, so I came back the following year and just really always loved the work that we did. I think it was incredibly interesting, a great puzzle. The scale, the complexity, the urban infill, the range of styles, all of that, I loved it. So I never left. And as I said, I was fortunate, I had several very good mentors.

John Torti has always been an excellent design mentor. I was fortunate to also have as my first mentor, Maurice Walters, who ended up leaving the firm in 2008 to start his own firm. I started here in 2002 as an intern, then 2003 full time. I had been working directly under him.

He was the lead designer and all of the projects that we had worked on together I then became the only person that kind of knew about them, which is an excellent place to be at 28.

When leadership asked him, “well what are we gonna do, you’re leaving,” he said something like “well Sarah’s got it,” which was a huge vote of confidence. We stumbled through and made it. I had other people in the firm that helped me in that process, but it was a huge opportunity that came out of that. And then the firm was very good, I think, about rewarding my progress over time.

I say the only thing that possibly held me up, which I think happened to everyone, was the 2008 recession. We didn’t do any large scale kind of projects for a few years, but we made it through. There was plenty of interesting work we were still able to find.

Then I became a partner in 2017. And I was one of two female partners at that time.

Since then we’ve been able to bring on more people, but that’s something we continually try to work on. I really had an incredibly positive experience at the firm and with the trajectory of my career and what I’ve gotten to work on.

After partnership, now I’m on the Board, that happened this year. I am the first woman to ever be on the board.

HAVE YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO BE IN A LEADERSHIP POSITION OR HAS THAT CHANGED OVER TIME?

I think I am just naturally prone to it - I like leading things. From a young age I probably took more of the role of leadership in activities. I was a manager at Taco Bell at 18, telling people what to do who were way older than me, but they saw that I could do that.

I became a project manager on a project and was leading client meetings and teams at your age (late 20s-early 30s), because when Maurice left, there was a void that needed to be filled. I made some stupid mistakes looking back, I didn’t know everything I didn’t know, but at least having the confidence to show up and try and learn.

YOU MENTIONED A FEW MENTORS - HAVE THERE BEEN ANY OTHERS, ESPECIALLY FEMALE, ALONG THE WAY?

So Cheryl O'Neill was the second female partner in our firm history. She was a very quiet mentor, but I think she was a champion. She quietly pushed from the ownership room for things that are for the women/female perspective.

I've had, I'm sure, a series of other mentors, my first boss actually - Judith Capan. She was technically the 51 percent ownership of the mom-and-pop shop so it was a female owned business. She was the first woman I met who was just gung-ho feminist. It's not necessarily something I grew up with. She was a die-hard urbanist. She was a die-hard feminist. And a brilliant person. So it was wonderful to meet her, yes she was definitely a mentor.

IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WOULD HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY?

In hindsight I think it worked out fine, but I think sometimes I might have been more concerned about what leadership thought, and not necessarily as cognizant of some of the peer things as I could have been. So I think that's just an area I grew up a little bit and realized. I mean you're young, you don't know everything.

"You need an opportunity, you need the environment that will allow you to take that opportunity, and you need to be brave enough to take it yourself."

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

Communication is actually incredibly key. I have many people that I work with that are very smart but they can't communicate.

I think it limits their leadership potential. But whether that be language barriers or confidence barriers, that's definitely a key thing in leadership. You can become an excellent architect, but if you can't talk, you're just going to be a nice quiet part of the team. And if that's all that you want, that's fine, but if we're talking leadership, that's probably the key.

Also, being always open to learning. There's nothing more frustrating than someone leading who doesn't know what they're talking about. So learning as much as you can about what your subject is and asking the right questions and being okay with asking the questions is very important.

I would say another thing in our industry specifically, you have to understand space in 3D and how things go together. I think that's just fundamental, but I have met some people who just can't visualize it and that's just challenging.

A skill I would love to have, that I think would definitely be helpful, is a better ability with names. Working on that one.

“Architecture was just something I was drawn to very early on and I never waivered.”

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR PEOPLE WHO WANT TO BE LEADERS IN THE INDUSTRY?

So I've gotten advice from other people when I went to some young-leadership things, and it wasn't what I would offer. They told me you have to not just be good at your job, but to do other things which is true, but I think fundamentally you do have to be good at your job.

So being a good designer, being a good architect, I think is the most important way to get ahead in our business. Yes, you can do the sustainability initiative or you can do the other things and that's important, but if you're not fundamentally a good architect first, I don't think you're going to get very far.

DO YOU HAVE ANYONE IN PARTICULAR THAT YOU CURRENTLY LOOK UP TO AS A LEADER?

John Torti. His ability to show enthusiasm, spread energy, be 100 percent convinced of what he's saying in a way that people follow him and believe in everything he believes, I think is incredible. As a leader that is very appealing, people enjoy that.

I would say that I'm often more reflective and I like to consider different positions and different thoughts on a subject and so sometimes it takes me a little more time to be 100 percent convinced. Some things I know right off the bat, like some things are just ugly, but sometimes I'm not sure if that's ugly or not. Whereas, I think he's very good at just knowing and maybe when I'm 80 I will feel that convinced on everything as well. I'm more sure of what I think now than in my twenties. So I say he's definitely been a strong mentor in my life.

ARE THERE ANY RESOURCES THAT YOU HAVE FOUND HELPFUL ALONG THE WAY?

I did recently read that book - *How to Make Friends and Influence People*, it was originally written in the 1930's. So many helpful concepts, I should have read that in my twenties, I recommend doing more of that kind of self-help book reading earlier. I didn't. I was just trying to get my AIA's done, I was trying to have a family, trying to do everything else and I didn't have time for too much self-reflection. Just kind of like learning everything you already have to learn.

Other than that - Urban Land Institute (ULI), especially their Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) group - I've enjoyed that, getting to meet other women in the industry, it's a smaller group of people across multi-disciplinary fields.

IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WOULD CHANGE ABOUT HOW YOU BECAME A LEADER? IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WOULD CHANGE ABOUT YOUR LEADERSHIP STYLE?

I'm not a poker face kind of leader. Most people probably know how I feel and that's okay, but sometimes it would maybe be better if I didn't telegraph my thoughts as easily.

DO YOU THINK IT IS IMPORTANT TO KEEP THE POWER FACE, OR IS IT OKAY TO ALLOW EMOTION TO COME THROUGH?

I'm sure it's a balance like everything but if your leader is freaking out it's not gonna help. There's got to be balance, but you don't want to be false or untrue. Trying to express that, yes, I am also understanding how you feel and I'm also stressing about this, but we can get through it and somehow this will all get done is something everyone can work on.

YOU SAID WHEN YOU WERE YOUNGER AND TAKING ON LEADERSHIP ROLES, YOU MADE SOME STUPID MISTAKES. HOW DID YOU RECOVER FROM THOSE?

Don't kick yourself in the head when you think about it. I mean there were a few things I said. We were in an interview for a job and they asked me if I was the lead designer and I don't even know if I understood what a lead designer was at that point, truly understood, so I said yes cause I had worked on the design, but in truth at that point I should have said no.

Another time, in my late 20s, I was leading a team and I didn't really know the process. I did what I could, but I think you learn quickly when you're in that kind of situation.

Trying to learn not to beat yourself up when you fail. That's something John Torti is huge on. He consistently talks about how he's failed multiple times in his life, and you should just embrace your failure, and move on. I think that's very hard to learn to do.

DO YOU THINK IT IS EASIER FOR A WOMAN IN THE INDUSTRY NOW VERSUS WHEN YOU WERE FIRST STARTING?

Good question. I don't know, I mean, it'd probably be easier. I didn't have a huge amount of mentors, but when I graduated there was the same amount 50% men, 50% women. It wasn't bad.

There were less leadership examples for sure, but not actually that much less. It's not that different unfortunately. Our segment now has two women principals, when I was starting that was not the case. So there are key differences there. More of our clients are women now too. I think that's great. For sure when I was leading that first project, I was the only woman in the room for many of the meetings. That's less often the case now. Though it still happens, and I did recently have at least one team that was entirely women (Client, Interior Designer, Landscape, and Architecture). That was fun - we all remarked on it.

So there are more opportunities to see people that look like you, but I don't think it was necessarily harder for me. I don't think there was any chauvinism or attempts to not listen to me. I was fortunate that wasn't something I really ever encountered.

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IS THE RECIPE FOR SUCCESS?

You need an opportunity, you need the environment that will allow you to take that opportunity, and you need to be brave enough to take it yourself. Opportunity, confidence, knowledge, and insight.

DO YOU HAVE ANY CLOSING THOUGHTS?

I love our field. It may be stressful and not always be the most financially rewarding decision, but I think it will keep you interested and learning for life, which is more important. And there's nothing cooler than seeing your creation become real - to be built and positively impact its community!

TIMELINE

- **2001**
Bachelor of Science
in Architecture
University of Maryland
- **2003**
M.Arch
University of
Notre Dame
- **2003**
Began at
Torti Gallas + Partners
- **2008**
Promoted to Associate
Torti Gallas + Partners
- **2012**
Promoted to
Senior Associate
Torti Gallas + Partners
- **2013**
Promoted to
Associate Principal
Torti Gallas + Partners
- **2014**
Had First Child,
Brooklyn
- **2017**
Promoted to
Principal
Torti Gallas + Partners
- **2018**
Had Second Child,
William
- **2022**
Promoted to
Senior Principal
Torti Gallas + Partners
- **2024**
Joined the Board
Torti Gallas + Partners