

Connection

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This issue:

Practice Innovation:

In a rapidly changing industry young architects and designers grapple with new business models, alternate career paths, tools to advance design analysis, and unique ways to facilitate collaboration.

Becoming an architect whisperer:

An alternative career story

Time called us The Unemployed Generation. The Great Recession disrupted the traditional path for many architecture students as design firms downsized, furloughed, and laid off staff. When my job search in Cleveland ran dry, I followed my now husband to D.C. with just a few hundred dollars to find a design firm to take my first steps into this profession.



Above: The imaginative building of Skynear Designs, which nurtured the first steps to a non-traditional path.

I visited nearly 20 offices in the D.C. metro area on foot. All were architecture firms except one—Skynear and Company, a fantastically eclectic furnishings and fashion boutique in a three-story Victorian townhome with an oversized Egyptian cat crawling up the facade. In its prime, it furnished the homes and flats of D.C.'s elite and eccentric. This strange, imaginative place was not the polished, high-gloss design firm that students intrinsically crave, the default example for industry success. Lynn Skynear had been a journalist covering the Vietnam War. She traveled the world as a stewardess. She started a business, restored the Iraqi Embassy after a fire, furnished clubs and movie sets, and became a known art dealer and philanthropist. No one told her to take all these paths—she took risks, explored fearlessly, and did what made her happy.

I worked at Skynear for two years as creative director, which placed me far outside my comfort zone. I walked runways to

promote the clothes we sold, appeared on local news channels, planned industry events, and networked with influencers. I discovered my love for business and people—and previously I was terrified of both.

I returned to Ohio, back to Bialosky, the design firm of my traditional internships. I entered a traditional role as architectural designer with some marketing responsibilities. I sat at my workstation and felt so differently than I had in D.C. For years, it was very difficult for me to reconcile because, again, the most glorified models of success in our industry are working at (and eventually owning) a premier design firm. Despite being at a respected practice like Bialosky, I was unhappy.

Then came a moment of confirmation. A single moment inspired me to take a risk, to reject licensure, and to define my own trajectory. In 2016, I met Françoise Mouly, art editor of *The New Yorker*, at a symposium at The Cleveland Museum of Art. I did not know of her, but I needed to meet her after learning her story. Born in Paris, she studied architecture at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts and quickly became disenchanted with the idea of a career in architecture—citing the lack of creative freedom. She moved to New York with pocket change at a time of economic downturn—a familiar story. I told her I was in knots over “turning my back” on a traditional path, and she said, “Everyone should study architecture, but not practice it.” Imagine if scientists, educators, and artists had an architecture education rooted in design thinking. I was intrigued, but more so, I was motivated. I needed courage to invent a position that didn't yet exist for me—and build the trust and support of leadership at Bialosky that it was right for both me and the firm. I was an unhappy under-performer about to negotiate a (completely overhead, unbillable) role change. In the moment, it seemed like a long shot, but for firm partners Jack Alan Bialosky Jr., FAIA, and David Craun, AIA, the shift to marketing and strategy was the outcome they expected all along. It was my choice, but they are the ones who made that choice possible.

So, what does a director of strategy do? I know peers who have

also created this role at their design firms across the country. It is always fascinating to hear how others define the scope of this role. For me, at a midsize Midwest design firm, this role stretches beyond the traditional marketer. When introducing myself, I say I am an Architect Whisperer. I am described as a “trusted advisor and a moral compass,” which allows me to work on many aspects of the practice, including business development, strategic planning, HR, brand identity, firm culture, and professional development for our team. Rewarding work in this role includes leading our Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Action Plan, building new and improved policies and programs, coaching win strategies for new clients, advising on Fellowship applications, and authoring our mission, values, and vision statement. While there is a large range to my assignments and my responsibilities, they all point to the two things I mentioned earlier: business and people.

Sharing this story matters to me because it is my hope that students and practitioners of any age do not immediately accept the default definition of success in architecture. I have shared my story to students with a mountain of real-life examples of colleagues who also took nontraditional paths, such as city architect, exhibit designer, architect for a nonprofit, architect for the GSA, project manager for a park system, architect-artist, or design researcher. “Everyone should study architecture, but not practice it” fills up an entire slide, and the students soak it in. They ask, “Why weren’t we told about these paths sooner?” This article has the same mission.

Actions + Resources

If you are at the edge of a career change or at an uncertain moment, there are resources for you. Nontraditional careers are not for everyone, but I know that those who have made the switch cannot imagine doing anything else.

- Seek them out. Find the nontraditional practitioners in your network through your natural project channels (city, county, nonprofits, AIA components) and through one- or two-degree connections on LinkedIn. Ask them the hard questions. Shadow them. Ask to e-meet them.
- If you are hitting a wall, contact me through LinkedIn, and I’d be happy to make a connection.
- Attend events and seminars in an adjacent field that overlaps with architecture, such as IIDA, SMPS, AIGA, and ULI. Browse the titles and roles of speakers and attendees to see what piques your interest as a dream job. What dialogues at these events bring a spark of joy and motivation?
- Read and listen to diverse career journeys, even if they are outside of the profession.

I recommend:

- o Build Boldly, Bolanle Williams-Olley (2021)
- o More Than Enough: Claiming Space for Who You Are, Elaine Welteroth (2019)
- o Architecture is Political: A Podcast Where Black and Brown Folks Have a Conversation About Architecture, by Melissa R. Daniel, Associate AIA. You will find conversations with nontraditional practitioners in architecture such as writers, entrepreneurs, activists, marketers, critics, and reporters. www.archispollyonline
- o Coffee with the Fellows, a podcast-like archive of conversations in which AIA Fellows and emerging professionals interview each other. The series features diverse practitioners and stories. <https://www.aiacleveland.com/coffee-with-fellows>¹
- o Lean on your mentors. My traditional-path architect mentors were, and still are, my loudest cheerleaders and closest confidants.² Mentors know your strengths and can help you build self-awareness that is crucial to career decision-making.
- o Talk to your managers and leaders. Once you know your strengths and interests, creatively consider the value-add or value-shift you can propose at your current firm or organization. This may be related to marketing, business development, social media/communication, graphic design, practice management, talent management, human resources, strategy, community engagement, or specialty consulting such as a building envelope specialist. For the leaders who may be reading this piece: I encourage you to actively calibrate positions or shift talent to mutually benefit your people and practice.

Footnote

1- Full disclosure: I helped launch Coffee with the Fellows under AIA Cleveland and continue to organize this series.

2- Gratitude to my traditional-path and non-traditional-path mentors in alphabetical order: Jack Alan Bialosky Jr., FAIA; David Craun, AIA; Ruth Gless, FAIA; Tim Hawk, FAIA; Aaron Hill, AIA; Bruce Horton, AIA; Steve Kordalski, AIA; Angela Miklich, Diane Davis-Sikora; Doug Steidl, FAIA; Greg Stroh; and Jodi van der Wiel, AIA.



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Crouch is an associate principal at Bialosky and the first nontraditional practitioner to hold the title. She serves as director of strategy and is often called the Architect Whisperer. She has presented on equity and alternative careers at design schools and architecture conferences nationwide.