

**Orchestrating Better  
Spaces through  
Interdisciplinary  
Design**

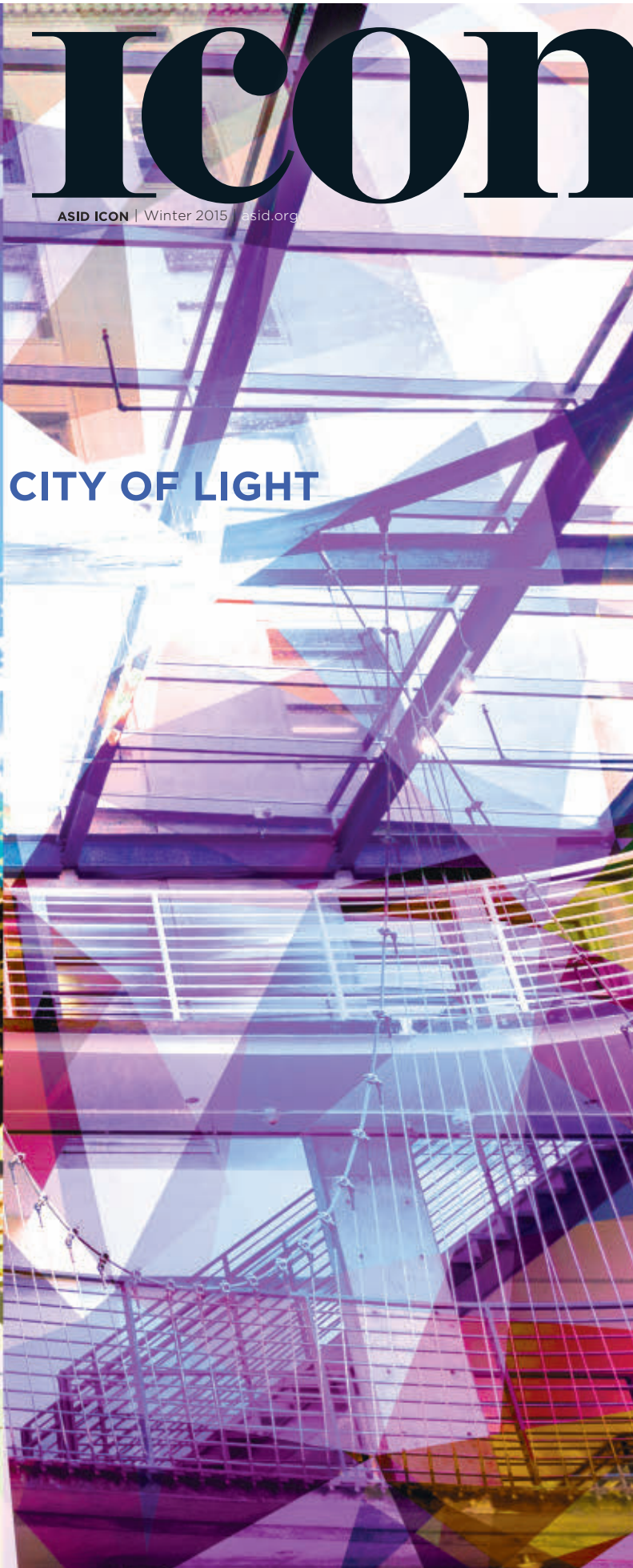
**ICONic Profile:  
Allison Williams**

**4 X 4 for 40  
Iconic Designers Today  
and Tomorrow**

# Icon

ASID ICON | Winter 2015 | [asid.org](http://asid.org)

THE OTHER CITY OF LIGHT







# ICONic Profile Allison Williams

Over the past 35 years, **ALLISON WILLIAMS** has produced one of the most significant bodies of work of any international architect and designer. Previously in leadership roles at design studios in San Francisco, with both Skidmore Owings & Merrill and Perkins+Will, she joined AECOM in 2013 to head the San Francisco Metro Regional Design Practice and, now, is strategically involved in commissions with AECOM in all aspects of the firm. A Loeb Fellow at Harvard Graduate School of Design, Williams was educated at the University of California, Berkeley; elevated to Fellowship in The American Institute of Architects in 1997; and honored as the UC Berkeley's College of Environmental Design Distinguished Alumnus for 2015. Some of her projects, among many others, include a terminal at San Francisco International Airport; the Health Science campus for the Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; and the August Wilson Center for African American Culture in Pittsburgh. Williams lives in San Francisco with her husband, Walter Cohen.

Recently, **ICON** had an opportunity to speak to Williams about her experiences and perspectives.

**ICON:** You were born in Cleveland, but moved to the Bay Area when you were in high school.

**AW:** San Francisco is home, but having my formative years in a place as different from San Francisco as Cleveland, I remember the snow, I remember the leaves falling from the trees. Even now, I wish I could have that sometimes.

**ICON:** What did you first design or build?

**AW:** I used to take things apart as a child and put

them back together, from umbrellas to any kind of mechanical thing.

**ICON:** Isn't that more of a boy thing?

**AW:** Oh, don't say that.

**ICON:** What's the difference between creating an airport facility or the Wilson Center in Pittsburgh?

**AW:** The scale of a project isn't necessarily what distinguishes the approach. The nature of the site and the specific response from the site are primary.

**ICON:** In Pittsburgh, what did you have to work with?

**AW:** A small site on a triangular downtown block. The long edge of the triangle is along a street and faces due north. So, the opportunity to take that long side and treat it as a giant picture window was there. It could be entirely glazed without having to be protected from the sun in a major way. That was the "aha!" moment.

**ICON:** Your first job was...?

**AW:** A lifeguard and then, after I graduated from high school, I spent summers working for Pfizer Engineers. A clerical position. My father helped. Today you'd call him an urban planner. He's an important part of why I see the world the way I do.

**ICON:** As an African American woman in your profession, have you ever had the feeling you have to be better than the next person?

**AW:** No. But we're still under-represented. That said, I'm extremely proud and encouraged at the increase in the number of people choosing architecture and design. I just came from the Harvard School of Design where I was on its

visiting committee and piggybacked with an exciting conference called "Black in Design"—a gathering of 400 people to talk about the responsibility of design in advocating for social justice.

**ICON:** How does that work?

**AW:** Understanding they're not two separate things. Architecture and design are about providing for humanity in the built environment. One must ask, as professionals, "How can we take a place around the table to talk about social justice in the framework of our roles as architects, planners, and designers?" It's not just about buildings. It's about the things that impact the environment in which those buildings are built.

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**ICON:** What do you expect from colleagues?

**AW:** In a studio with a strong design culture, it's

important that everyone is contributing to the fodder of the discussion. It's aggravating when someone is in a critique mode and not a discovery mode.

**ICON:** Do you travel a lot?

**AW:** Excessively.

**ICON:** For business or...?

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**ICON:** Tips on staying sane when traveling?

**AW:** I multitask on planes, working on something while watching a movie, or having a glass or two of wine. Set your watch to the place you're going at the minute you get on the plane and sleep when you're supposed to.

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**ICON:** Grown and gone?

**AW:** Not gone. No, not gone. They're just not here right now. ①

**Ambrose Clancy**, the editor of the *Shelter Island Report* is a novelist (*Blind Pilot*), a nonfiction book author (*The Night Line*), and a journalist who specializes in profiles of business leaders, writers, and other people of accomplishment.





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