
SUCCESS BY DESIGN

REVEALING PROFILES OF CALIFORNIA ARCHITECTS

JENN KENNEDY



Allison Williams



(Jenn Kennedy)

ALLISON WILLIAMS, FAIA, Principal Perkins + Will

Allison Williams commands your attention. Upon introduction, it's apparent that she has ideas about everything. Modern and precise, she moves between directing and partnering in the design of our interview and photo shoot.

A California child of the 1960s, Williams earned both an undergraduate degree in art and her master's in architecture from UC Berkeley, which was a very charged place to be at the time. She remembers the spark of the Black Panthers efforts and says, "You needed to know who you were, as it was a really easy time to get lost." Furthermore, her father, who held a degree in engineering and urban planning, was very design oriented, and she remembers him watercoloring regularly, and he taught her to draw and notice the use of color, texture, and daylight in a space.

Williams started her career in 1976 at San Francisco's McCue Boone Tomsick, where she worked for four years. She was identified early on as someone who had design talent, but she actively sought technical development as well. As soon as she qualified, Williams sat for the licensing exam and passed it.

Next, she worked at a large firm, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), which tracked everyone into one of three disciplines: technical, design, or management. Referred to as the three-legged stool, she believes all parts are necessary to run a successful project. She remembers wanting to touch on all areas, but she was slotted into design.

Williams recalls paying her dues by drafting and doing the grunt work. "If you're young in your career," she says, "be a sponge and be willing to learn all you can." Facile and able to both draw well and build models quickly, she gained traction internally. She was invited to participate in higher-level design discussions, which proved to be a critical career boost.

Her time at SOM was hands-on. "You can't be this elite, effete designer, just drawing whatever you want and expecting somebody to clean it up for you," she says. "It's not just about the design component, it's about how it's put together, how you have to interface with the rest of the entities in the construction process, and understanding what a set of construction documents really do." She recalls going to building sites and watching contractors actually lay floor tile or set the joints that she designed in order to feel the connection between the documentation process and the execution in the field.

A career designer, Williams acknowledges the importance of the entire team. She says, "You can't live in a cocoon where all you're doing is designing and satisfying your own personal stuff." From 1980 to 1997, she worked for SOM in San Francisco, eventually becoming a senior associate partner. For a myriad of reasons, she realized she was probably never going to make partner, and knowing she wanted to lead and become well-rounded professionally, she began to consider other options.

A Washington, DC-based firm, Ai, approached her to open a San Francisco office—it was the perfect opportunity for her to take on a more encompassing role. Initially, she started working out of her husband Walter's closet with an old computer and some marketing counsel from her

DC partners. They told her to make a list of all her business contacts and break them down into classifications: the people who need to know you've moved on, the people who could bring business in the next five years, and those with immediate potential for work. She then began to reach out to these prospects.

With a reputation as a designer, Williams now had to learn management. And while she had colleagues in Washington, DC, who could help answer questions, she explains that California culture is very different from the Eastern seaboard. She learned how to develop fees, write contracts, staff an office, and even use Microsoft Excel, which is necessary for fee negotiations.

Williams found it was hard to wear both design and management hats because the shift from her left brain to right brain was tricky at times. During this period, Williams and Walter were raising two young boys. "I took work home or brought them to the office on weekends because I had a commitment to my family but also to make sure the company was profitable and that the work we were doing was as good as it could be," she says. "I had to do both, I had to figure out how to juggle it all!"

When the dot-com bust occurred, it became more difficult to get projects. Williams noticed however that the jobs coming through the door were bigger, more durable projects as opposed to simple facilities for companies that might not be around tomorrow.

Perkins + Will, a large firm with a seventy-five-year history, approached Williams and her partners about an acquisition, which caused them to take pause. They had created a profitable company, but the world was changing, and medium-size firms—in her opinion—were in jeopardy. Williams and her partners were also in their fifties and liked the security a buyout would provide. Regardless, "the idea of retiring at sixty-five is ludicrous, because architecture is not the sort of thing you just turn off. It's something that is part of you forever," she says. "We had this great firm but it had reached a point where it needed something more, and we needed to make sure that we were part of something that had the potential for longevity."

They decided to sell. All lock, stock, and barrel. In fact, everything became the property of Perkins and Will, including the projects, the rights to the work, even the liabilities. All partners signed employment agreements and had to stay with the new firm for three years. Williams has happily stayed longer—going on five years.

When asked if she considers herself a good businessperson now, Williams says simply, "I do." She doesn't want business as her daily responsibility, but she acknowledges that her experience running a company affects how she now approaches the design process. Elements such as knowledge of the client's background, the financial atmosphere in which you're trying to negotiate a contract, and the fees that you've decided on are all part of the information that impacts the relationship. "I want to see the fees even though I'm not responsible for negotiating," she says. "I want to make sure there's a compatible attitude about funding design. If a client doesn't want to pay for design, it's a red flag that it may not be a client you want to work with because we're a design firm and we want to make sure we're being invited to the table for projects where design is as high on the list of desirable outcomes as is profitability. You have to find that balance."

When pressed about how she pursues new business, Williams says, "It's about relationships—be it ongoing relationships with existing clients who want continuity or relationships that you've had with

people through more casual interactions. Over time, these people get to know me and want to work together.’

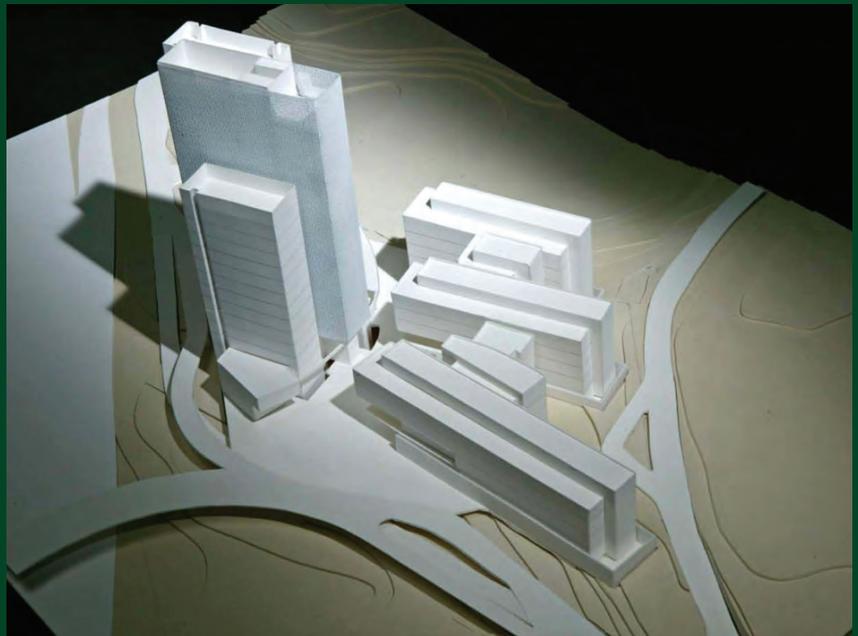
Due to the current economic climate, Williams realizes there’s not as much work at this time—there’s not as much capital to fund projects—so now it’s about trying to find new angles and reaching out to different audiences.

Williams has never believed in formal mentoring programs but acknowledges, “Early on, there were at least a half dozen people who presented a portal for me to sort of poke my head through, gain understanding, and get some sense that there were no limits on what it was that I should or could do.” She tried different things on for size, and while there were things that other people thought she shouldn’t be doing, she persevered. “It’s important to put yourself in places where you’re not always comfortable. That’s how you learn,” she says. “Looking back, being female and black, I’m surprised by some of the things I’ve done, but at the time, it never occurred to me that I couldn’t do them. I might make it easier for other women who see me succeeding without boundaries.”

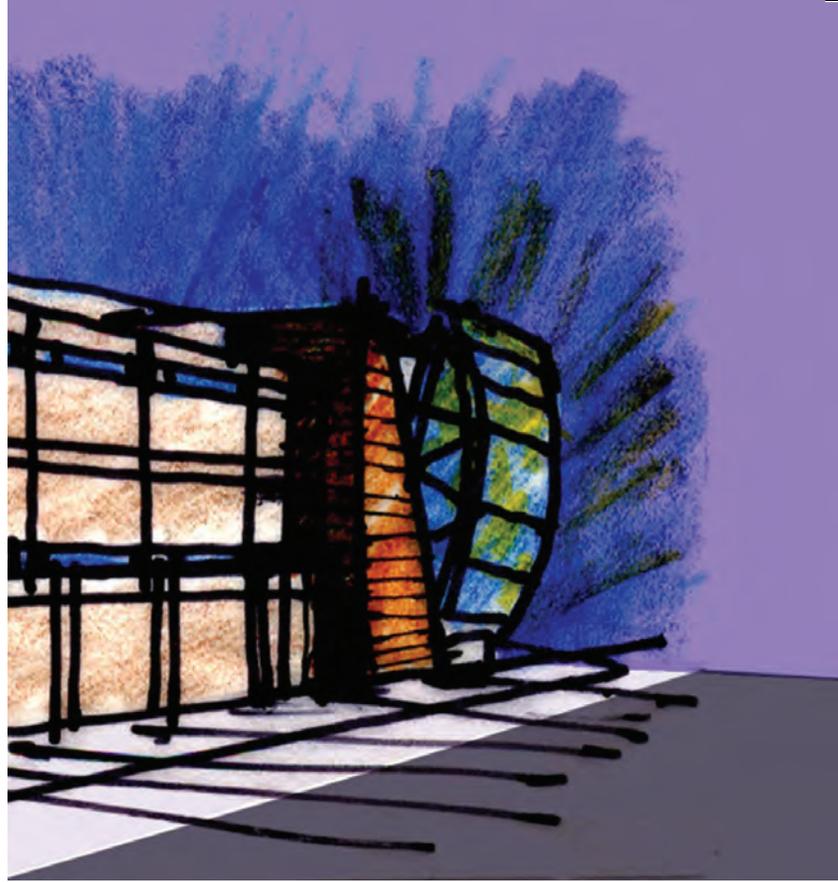
I asked Williams who her dream client would be. She knows immediately—a major cultural facility, museum, or a federal courthouse—citing that these significant projects are integral to the urban fabric. As for lessons learned, Williams suggests that seasoned architects constantly look for talented up-and-comers who are fifteen or twenty years their junior. They have new ideas, and both stand to learn a lot from the other. She also believes the first five years are critical to a new architect’s career. She stresses the value in experiencing the whole process and says, “It doesn’t take an iota away from their brilliance as designers. Actually, I think it makes them more broadly based, more responsible, and more innovative.”



CREATE Research Park



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(Robert Mathewson/RENDIMAGE)



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A successful architectural career is the result of many factors, including education, design, proficiency, and simple luck. This book offers stories of many diverse paths to success for those interested in starting or managing an architecture practice. Twenty-five innovators tell about their beginnings, mentors, mistakes, and lessons learned. They open up about highlights and low points of their journey and share how they survive—and even thrive during—market downturns, natural growing pains, and business challenges.

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