

ByDESIGN

An Online Journal of Exceptional Achievement

Allison Grace Williams FAIA

Nurturing a
Fertile Design
Culture of
Invention

Morality in
Architecture

ONENESS:
THE ARCHITECTURE
OF SELF

***Six Minutes &
20 Seconds,***
The March for
Our Lives

VOLUME 26 Spring March 2018

COVER STORY: Allison Grace Williams, FAIA

ByDESIGN®
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Volume 26

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Nurturing a Fertile Design Culture of Invention

Roy Rogelio Hernández, Photography Michael A. Hernández



"People think that design is styling. Design is not style. It's not about giving shape to the shell and not giving a damn about the guts. Good design is a renaissance attitude that combines technology, cognitive science, human need and beauty to produce something that the world didn't know it was missing."

Paola Antonelli

ByDESIGN is privileged to share our conversation with Allison Grace Williams, an architect with an illustrious career. Williams is the personification of a renaissance woman: artist, designer, and architect who has produced an impressive body of work displaying "an artful approach to the built environment."

[Tell us a little about your background?](#)

I was born in Cleveland, Ohio. My father was an urban planner (and closet architect and artist) my mother is a journalist (and was a radio editorialist in Cleveland). I am #2 of 4 daughters. Our family moved to Oakland CA in a career move for my father in the mid-sixties. We are a closely-knit family. All of my sisters went away from home for college and graduate school. Other than one year in Cambridge, I have never had a permanent address outside of the bay area, but whenever I could, I would travel somewhere, usually far away, so by the time I started to practice architecture I was seasoned.

I met my late husband (a planner and economic development guru) 1985 while an Associate with SOM designing projects in San Jose, where he was with the Redevelopment Agency. I have 2 twenty-something sons...they are my best and most important projects, are still under construction.

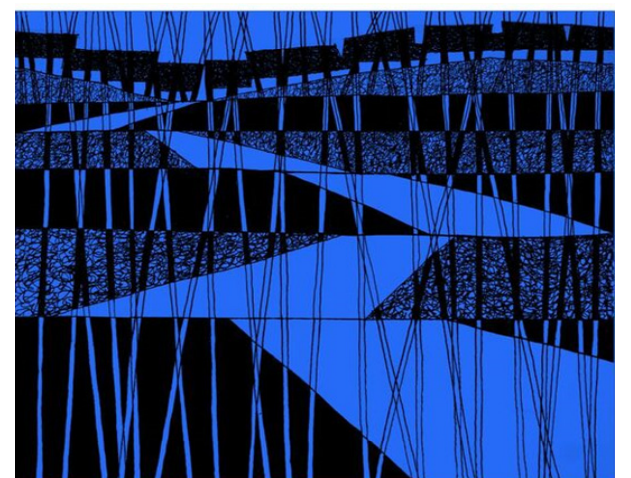
[Art came first, but you ultimately became an architect. What prompted that choice?](#)

In art school I gravitated toward printmaking... zinc plate etching... a very process driven medium, and because of that, one could test how intentional deviation could disrupt the outcome.

“ At Kroeber Hall I studied with Felix Ruvolo, Elmer Bischoff and few other bold abstract painters of that time. I was just 17, and in the background, People's Park, The Black Panther Movement, Vietnam, Cambodia were animating my education and life politically. ”



Drawings by Williams, 2017



Out of the Woods, (Pen and ink on Strathmore)

But art was quite solitary, too private an audience, disconnected from engagement and contribution by itself, with no way to know if it was successful, it was too subjective.

I was drawn to architecture as a process, a process of design, intentional interaction with others, as a tool for discovery and the craft as an opportunity for an artful approach to the built environment.

[You have attended world-class universities, UC Berkeley and Harvard GSD. How did the two institutions compare and how did those experiences influence your career?](#)

I earned my MArch and B.A. in the Practice of Art at the University of California, Berkeley.

At Kroeber Hall I studied with Felix Ruvolo, Elmer Bischoff and few other bold abstract painters of that time. I was just 17, and in the background, People's Park, The Black Panther Movement, Vietnam, Cambodia were animating my education and life politically.

There were other art students with incredible talent and commitment to art, to being artists, which I finally discovered I did not possess, but drawing had always been part of my life growing up, taking summer art courses, learning from my father who was an amazing watercolorist, always using my hands, building things, taking things apart. But I could not figure out how art, for me would be an engaged, productive or satisfying life/profession.

Just across the path on campus was Wurster Hall, the Architecture Department,much closer than Harvard or Yale. Ultimately I chose Berkeley for my Masters studies as at the time it was ranked the #1 graduate school for architecture! That was largely because of its pioneering design pedagogy around environmental concerns, energy conservation and social factors...



Allison Grace Williams
AGWms_studio, San Francisco, CA
March 22, 2018

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Nurturing a Fertile Design Culture of Invention

Continued

That was in the '70's. I spent 99% of my time in studio design courses rather than seminars. Strong influence of the likes of Sim Van Ryn, Christopher Alexander, Carl Anthony and others surrounded us.

My first summer job was an internship at SOM in San Francisco.

After about 10 years of practicing architecture I was awarded a Loeb Fellowship at Harvard GSD, and an NEA Grant. As I look back, it took some guts to step away from SOM to take that year away at Harvard, but without doubt, it enriched, amplified everything....taking a strong practical base and infusing design theory, history, philosophy....hardwiring it all together. It was an amazing year that I believe changed my life, the arc of my career and formalized my education: art and architecture....architecture as art. It made my professional world bigger.

Your professional trajectory included leadership positions at world class design firms like SOM and Perkins+Will. What would you consider your most significant accomplishments?

From the start, I chose the large-firm arena because I enjoyed the scale and complexity of the work, the talent, resources, and team-based, interdisciplinary practice. I am extremely proud of my portfolio and professional accomplishments. But *beyond* the portfolio itself, and as *important* as the portfolio, is the context in which the portfolio was accomplished. I was not constantly attentive or mindful of the package I was in, and in that context not preoccupied with how unusual I was.....and I am grateful for that. I was just myself, persistent, and I was just practicing architecture passionately, like every one else around me at the time. I was genuine and comfortable in my skin.

In terms of specific projects, The August Wilson Center in Pittsburgh PA and Princess Nora Abdulrahman University for Women would be my two most notable accomplishments.

“ It was an amazing year that I believe changed my life, the arc of my career and formalized my education: art and architecture.... architecture as art. It made my professional world bigger. ”

You have recently created a new professional platform. What prompted this and what will your new business model consist of?

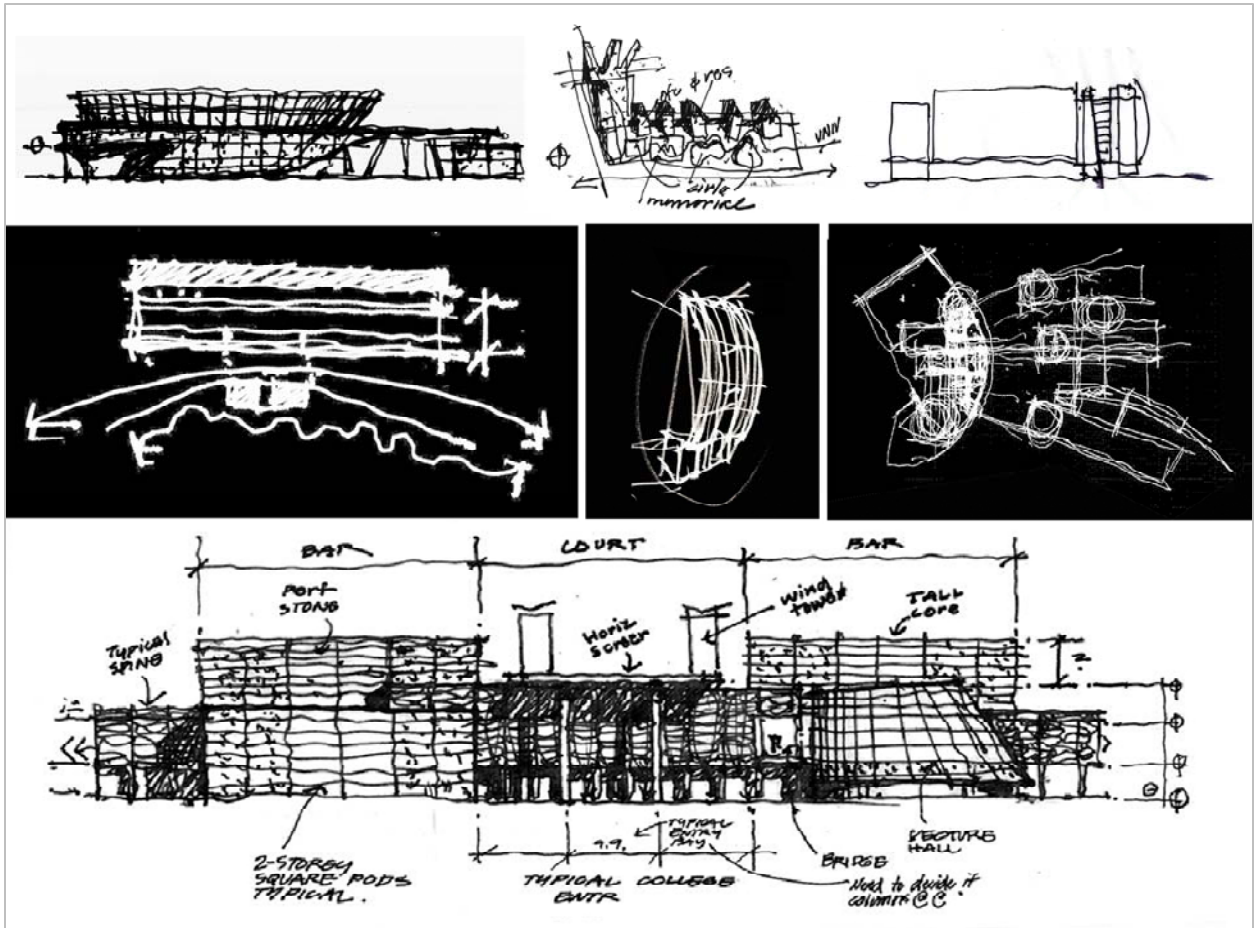
The routine of *processing* buildings, fast, profitably frequently outweighs a firms' commitment to nurturing a fertile design culture of invention. In a practice where these factors, these poles, are constantly out of balance, being an architect is more like dragging around a ball and chain and not so much fun anymore.

I really admire several firms, of small to medium size, regional firms, who have gotten the balance right, and are committed to an intense design

culture and to clear principles that guide their practices. They use design as a tool, a process, and are driven by a clear mission, and preserve space for design from the beginning all the way through Even in accelerated schedules they manage to maintain a high advocacy for design with their clients and their clients return or are attracted, because they see the value in the art of architecture, the intellect of it, not just the industry of it.

No question the profession has changed, but importantly, so have I. Working less time, with greater satisfaction, and recalibrating what I value most is now a critical par of the equation.

So, in 2017, I established **AGWms_studio**, a tiny consulting practice at the intersection of architecture and art. The studio allows me to engage just a few clients interested in collaborating to discover provocative, productive ideas and explore authentic, artful narrative in their work in the built environment and to keep the design conversation on the table.



Various Conceptual sketches. By Williams © 2017

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Continued

My clients include developers, institutions, and perhaps other architects and designers, in pursuits at all stages and scales. Definitely still in a formative stage, it's a framework to stay curious and relevant at this point in my career. I like the unpredictability of where it might lead...contentment is a goal.

[In your considerable experience, how has the architectural profession changed in general, and more specifically, for women/women of color?](#)

Despite that the schools are often turning out 50% women, very few who are choosing the large firm format and very few are staying to claim leadership as I did.

Gladly we see more people of color, more women of color choosing a design education, entering the profession, and coming together at events such as Black in Design, at Harvard GSD. Their contribution amplified by genuine, personal experiences. Many are getting joint degrees pairing their design educations with urban design and planning disciplines, toward policy and focus on socially and environmentally triggered issues.

Environmental and social concerns were always central responsibilities of this profession but today we address social justice specifically in a much braver, aggressive up front way now because we see, and can demonstrate that design impacts outcomes indirectly and very directly. More black architects and architects of color are taking leadership in these areas by founding principled firms focused on inner city restructuring, justice, affordable housing for example.

[Your creative roots were in art. Can you comment on the synthesis of creativity and art through the design process, and how that informed and/or formed your design solutions?](#)

I've mostly worked on large projects and urban design proposals in urban places. My practical training began at MBT (McCue Boone Tomsick) learning to solve the design problem presented by the program and site. I worked there for 3 years, took the licensing exam and passed, and then went to SOM. In many ways it was an extension of my graduate education. It introduced a methodology around a timeless aesthetic and its roots in technology. It was about the rigor, the discipline, the iterative process of exploration, a reductive and frequently technical interdisciplinary approach that distinguished that learning environment. Tangled up in all of that though, is raw instinct, gut, invention, values, beliefs, nuance and things hard to quantify, measure, predict. It is still today very much the way I think about design. In practice, authentic integration at the core is fundamental to design excellence. I feel that the best work, my best work bridges between and straddles design rigor.....cultural/societal/environmental value and advocacy...and expression.

I will always crave this. I'd rather draw than talk, do than teach. I will always crave this... Teaching and practicing are linked.

The August Wilson Center, Pittsburgh PA
[Design Competition won by Williams, while Design Principal with Ai \(Perkins+Will\)](#)

65,000 GSF Completion 2010
Photographer: James Steinkamp



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Who are the architects or artists that inspired you the most in your career?

Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn, Robert Motherwell, Aaron Douglas..... Volumes of space and form in 2D and 3D, light and daylight as a medium, experimentation and innovation with materials, bold deliberate color, big contrast.

What advice would you give students studying design or those aspiring to become architects?

As the profession of architecture is respected beyond designing buildings and the value of design becomes increasingly understood, the spectrum that attracts people, young people to architecture is broadening and that diversity is good for the profession. A design education is a set of tools for defining problems as much as solving problems. It is a lens through which to understand history, society, politics, the environment ... by tracking what role the built environment played in structuring, accommodating or diminishing the quality of our cities and our lifestyles. Then focusing it forward with advocacy for a well-designed future. Build something. Frame something.



Princess Nora Abdulrahman University for Women
Health Science and Research Campus
Riyad, Saudi Arabia
By William while Design Principal with Perkins+Will

2.8M GSF,
Completion 2012
Photographer: Bill Lyons

The built environment is architecture. It is buildings, shelter, places of memory and tradition, it is the fabric of cities, and it is a resilient organism, a social and political statement.

We can't design beautiful things in a vacuum apart from everything else. The craft, precision and intelligence, and the narrative of the work have been most important to me and the critical satisfaction is in realizing the work, physically, seeing it built, seeing others inhabit it, learning from it, raising the bar. I care deeply about actual outcomes, and critiquing, analyzing or hands-off directing of work is less gratifying than physically doing it, hands-on, committing to a point of view, fully engaged.

So my best advice is to find out what curiosity, what advocacy drives you, what passion is in your gut, what you bring to it. Nurture it, and give it impact.

Aristotle said: "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit."

Excellence is clearly a habit Allison Williams has sustained throughout her professional career.



Princess Nora Abdulrahman University for Women
Health Science and Research Campus
Photographer: Bill Lyons



Princess Nora Abdulrahman University for Women
Health Science and Research Campus
Photographer: Bill Lyons

SIDE BAR

Allison Grace Williams, FAIA

Architect / Provocative Design Consultant

AGWms_studio

Allison Grace Williams is an, architect, urban designer and....artist. Her international portfolio of civic, cultural and research buildings and places is an inventive, inspiring narrative that connects culture, technology and the environment and conveys the values and traditions of audience and place. Thus far, in her 35-years in practice, Allison led design studios in San Francisco as a Senior Associate Partner with SOM, a Design Principal and Director of Design at Perkins+Will, and Director of Design of AECOM's Western Region. Her celebrated career includes design awards from Progressive Architecture, AIA Honor Awards and recognitions, and multiple GSA Design Excellence Commissions, in addition to other significant acknowledgments for design, exhibitions and honors and board appointments.

In 2017 Williams established AGWms_studio, a consulting practice at the intersection of architecture and art. The studio leverages her design instincts and successes to engage clients collaboratively to discover provocative, productive big picture ideas and embed authentic, artful narrative in their work in the built environment. Her clients include developers, institutions, and other architects and designers, in pursuits at all stages and scales.

Williams has also returned to drawing and is working in pen and ink on Strathmore, informed with bold color.

Allison Grace Williams FAIA
Architect | Urban Designer | Artist
www.agwms.com

Professional Experience

AGWms_studio, Principal,
2017 - present

AECOM, Vice President and
Director of Design, Western
Region, 2013- 2016

Perkins+Will (merged with Ai)
Principal and Design Director,
1997 - 2012

Skidmore Owings & Merrill
Associate Partner in Design,
1980 - 1997

McCue Boone Tomick (MBT)
Senior Designer, 1976 - 1980

Notables

Keynote Speaker 2018
Hop Scotch Design Festival
Raleigh, NC

Keynote Speaker 2018
Portland Industry Forum
Portland OR

London Festival
of Architecture - 2017
Changing Culture International
Exhibition
Celebrating Influential Black
Architects
London, UK

Chouteau Greenway -
International Design
Competition Juror - 2018
St. Louis, Missouri

Architecture at Zero - SFSU
Romberg Center, Tiburon
International Design
Competition Juror - 2018
Sponsored by the AIA and
PG&E

Education

MArch – 1976
CED UC Berkeley

BA Practice of Art – 1972
UC Berkeley

Loeb Fellow – 1987
Harvard GSD

Fellowship – 1997
American Institute of Architects

Branner Travelling Fellow - 1976

World War One Memorial,
Washington DC
International Design Competition
Juror – 2016

AIA Design Awards Juror
▪ Washington DC Chapter - 2017
▪ Portland Chapter - 2017
▪ Kansas - Central Regional
States - 2016
▪ Tennessee - 2016

Stanford University
Adjunct Lecturer
Department of Architecture
2013 - present

Harvard University
Graduate School of Design
Visiting Committee Chair
2013 - present

Yale University
Paul Rudolph Lecture - 2016

Distinguished Alumnus,
Architecture - 2015
University of California
College of Environmental Design

a to Zaha: 26 Women Who
Changed Architecture
Architizer News, 2016



1



2



3



4



5

- 1. United States Port of Entry**, Calexico CA
A GSA Design Excellence Commission
Awarded to Allison G. Williams, Lead Designer
By Williams while Design Principal with Perkins+Will)
Design Completion 2012, 251,000 GSF
Under Construction, Phase I-2019, Phase II - 2021
- 2. Center for Research Excellence and Technological Enterprise (CREATE)**,
Singapore
Design Competition won by Williams while Design Principal with Perkins+Will
800,000 GSF, Completion 2011
Photographer: Tim Griffith
- 3. San Francisco Federal Savings and Loan Headquarters** (Now Citibank)
San Francisco CA
By Williams while Associate Principal in Design with SOM
280,000 GSF, Completion 1988
Photographer: Jane Lidz
- 4. Freddie Mac Headquarters**, Phase IV, McLean VA
By Williams while Design Principal with Ai
400,000 GSF, Completion 2003
- 5. San Francisco International Airport**
Senior Designer, Williams while Associate Partner in Design with SOM