

# Past, Present, and Future: The Women Shaping Houston's Architecture

By Alicia Islam



*In front of Joan Miró's Personage and Birds, Sally Walsh proudly stated, "I walk through Houston buildings today and find good contemporary design, whether or not I had a hand in it, I find myself taking credit ... because on this specific turf it flourished with my help."*

Photo courtesy of Paul Hester.

Architecture has helped cities create identities and given the citizens a sense of home. Few people can look at their skylines without having a sense of pride. The people who help shape these spaces often work in the background — especially women. With architecture being one of the last fields to integrate women into the industry, Houston women may have had a slow start but they have made a lasting impact and are here to stay.

Before the 1960s women in the industry were few and far between in Texas, let alone Houston. Not only was it a boys' club of sorts, but their female counterparts had to overcome hurdles that the men did not face. Ila Nunn, who married famed Houston architect Stayton Nunn, was a Rice Institute architecture student in 1922. Although the men could work on campus all night, female students had to "vanish" from campus at 5:00 p.m., making it impossible for Nunn and other women to complete the required amount of work. She did not complete the architecture program but did as much as she could until her fourth year, ultimately leaving Rice with an art degree.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Nunn is believed to have helped her husband in his design work.

Houston's earliest architecture graduate was Lavonne Dickinsheets Scott who graduated from Rice in 1934. Though Scott practiced a bit in Houston, the first female architect to actively practice in the city was 1947 Rice graduate, Betty Jo Jones. Jones received some recognition for her work as early as 1957. She began her business in 1952 and was in demand as a residential designer in less than two decades—fast by architectural standards. She told a *Houston Chronicle* reporter, "Had I been a man, I probably would have tried to get more commercial work. Boards of directors ... do not normally choose a woman architect." Nonetheless, she broke into smaller commercial work. Jones is also considered a pioneer for



*Sally Walsh is seated in the Jones Building of the Houston Public Library, which she designed.*

Photo courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Archives.

Houston women in architecture, being the first to operate her own business. She was a member of the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architecture (AIA) and was one of the twenty-two female architects of its 1,221 members.<sup>2</sup>

Other women had a hand in Houston's architecture through the Women's Auxiliary to the AIA, whose mission was to urge all wives of AIA members to join in order to "encourage fellowship, aid the Chapter, and stimulate greater public interest in and understanding of the architectural profession." They hosted events throughout the year, including design competitions that benefitted the community and a couples event. Though the organization was intended to bring together the wives of professionals, both men and women led meetings to further education.<sup>3</sup>

Another organization that was nearly exclusively women was the Houston chapter of the Architectural Secretaries Association (ASA). Begun in 1959 in Miami, Florida, for members to enhance the profession and community, ASA received pushback early on from architects who believed that it was either a union or a place where the secretaries discussed private office material.<sup>4</sup> Less than a year after its formation, the ASA put those rumors to rest and validated its status as an organization. Despite the initial opposition, the group has grown to include other industries pertinent to architecture and is now the Society for Design Administrators (SDA). For some, being a secretary was a stepping stone to understanding the ins and outs of the industry, but other former secretaries became major players in Houston's architectural scene.

Interior designer Sally Walsh was one of these early trailblazers who is credited with bringing modern design to Houston through her interior design work and is known nationally for her contributions to the industry. Walsh received

recognition from the AIA and, in 1986, became the first Houstonian inducted into the Interior Design Hall of Fame. These recognitions left her unfazed. She said that although it was flattering to be recognized by one's peers, awards did not impress her because she did not belong to anything.<sup>5</sup>

Walsh may have been referring to her lack of formal architecture and design training. Everything she learned had come from serving as the assistant to the renowned Hans Knoll, of the design firm Knoll in Chicago, Illinois. He considered her perfect for the job because she was a blank slate; someone he could train completely. Walsh went above and beyond as his assistant – from walking his dog to writing correspondences – but traveling to meet with other firms and access to the latest designs and fabrics allowed her to develop into a holistic designer.<sup>6</sup>

Walsh arrived in Houston in 1955 because her husband, Bill, a prominent criminal lawyer, had found work in the city. She intended to open a Knoll showroom to bring its modern designs to the rapidly growing business community, but Hans Knoll's sudden death halted her plans. Beginning her career anew, she initially worked at Suniland Furniture Company but soon accepted an offer with Wilson Stationery & Printing, where she began to work on her craft. In 1971 Walsh became a partner at S. I. Morris Architects, a prominent Houston firm, where she made some of her greatest strides. Her major local contributions include: the Transco Tower offices, Lehman Brothers offices, and the Jones Building of the Houston Public Library. Walsh began revolutionizing the interiors in corporate Houston during the 1950s, but many of those contributions were eclipsed by Gerald D. Hines, the development magnate credited with modernizing Houston's architectural scene, largely during the 1970s.<sup>7</sup>

Walsh went beyond the corporate world later in her career, acting as a role model for other women in Houston. She was considered quick-witted and outspoken, refusing to hold back her individuality. Both her male and female colleagues took notice and many of her co-workers strove to emulate her. Her intensity did not go unnoticed, even prompting her partner S. I. Morris to call her the "toughest son of a bitch in the partnership." Even with all her commercial success, Walsh spent her time after work working. After toiling all day at Morris, she went to her personal office among Houston's downtown skyscrapers to continue working on her personal projects, never content to slow down.<sup>8</sup>

The 1970s saw a wave of women entering the field in stark contrast to earlier times. The Houston chapter of AIA had twenty-two registered female professionals with just as many female students enrolled in the Rice School of Architecture and a few Houstonians scattered throughout Texas. One of these women was Carrie G. Shoemake. A native Houstonian, Shoemake grew up with very open-minded, supportive parents for a girl in the 1960s, which enabled her to go through five different majors at three different institutions. She jumped from being a humanities major to a pottery major, an art history major, and eventually an architecture student at The University of Texas at Austin (UT). Shoemake recalled being impacted by two images: one from an article she had read in *Ms.* magazine about



*New Hope Housing at Brays Crossing was designed by GSMA, which renovated former housing for NASA contractors in the sixties as well as low income housing units. The award-winning project has prevalent themes of Mexican heritage that tie back to the surrounding neighborhood.*

Photo courtesy of GSMA.

a woman who had gone through a bad divorce and breast cancer, ultimately leaving her with nothing; and another of a cartoon that showed a woman running around the kitchen trying to get all the chores done for her family. These images nagged at her until she realized that she did not want to be like those women and needed to pick an occupation.<sup>9</sup>

When Shoemake finally landed on architecture, her father, sure that she would excel, warned her that while he was in medical school, the women had a more difficult time and were not treated the same as men. Shoemake was one of six women in the program at UT. Having been exposed to a range of subjects and being somewhat older than the other students, she better handled the intensity of the curriculum. Even so, it was not always easy. When she presented in class, she recognized that the professor made jokes he did not make with the male students; and after discussing it with one of the two female professors with whom Shoemake became close, she saw the differences in how men and women were treated. She felt like an “other” at times due, in part, to being older and because she worked at home instead of staying late at school with her peers. Nevertheless, Shoemake enjoyed being the “other.”



*Carrie Glassman Shoemake, FAIA, has been involved in architecture in Houston for most of her life and is a founding partner of Glassman Shoemake Maldonado Architects (GSMA), the AIA Houston 2013 Firm of the Year.*

Photo courtesy of Carrie Shoemake.

Shoemake found the differentiating treatment sometimes benefitted her because when she outshined the male students, the professor took notice and praised her. Reflecting on the 1970s now, she feels women tolerated these differences in treatment because the expectations of them were lower, despite having to prove themselves more than their male colleagues. When looking for work during her final year of school in 1972, an employer once asked how quickly she could type and about doing interior design work, areas suitable for women. Shoemake insisted that she would only accept an architecture position. Her friend Bill Stern, who later taught at the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture at the University of Houston (UH COA), told her that these assumptions were not that big of a deal. Shoemake retorted, “Did anyone ever ask you to type, Bill?” To which he responded, “Well, no, of course they wouldn’t ask me.”<sup>10</sup>

Eventually Shoemake went on to take an architect’s job at Caudill Rowlett Scott Architects, where she was one of two women of 300 employees. Shoemake vividly recalls an incident when one of her colleagues had done a detail section of a receptionists’ desk and the head of construction documents thought she had done it. When walking across the office, he furiously demanded she come over to him. He put his hands around her neck yelling at her that she should not have done the detail. Shoemake thought to herself, “What is this?” She had to decide to either stay calm or react. Realizing he looked like a fool, she relaxed. Eventually, one of the partners, Charles “Tiny” Lawrence, came over, telling the man he could not act like that. At the time she realized how inappropriate the sight was, but she just kept working.<sup>11</sup>

Shoemake felt like she almost fell into architecture. Choosing a profession she loved was a lesson that her parents engrained in her. Her ultimate decision to stay in Houston and practice resulted from a shift in the architectural culture during the 1970s. Houston was attracting

some of the nation's top architects to design. Eventually in the 1980s Shoemake and her husband, also an architect, moved to Austin so he could receive his MBA. She had a small practice there, which she dissolved once she became pregnant, but agreed to do a residential project in Houston. The design received an AIA Award and sparked an interest in her designs, allowing her to open a new practice in Houston.<sup>12</sup>

Natalye Appel, who has lived in Houston since the age of one, has also made her mark on Houston's architectural scene. When taking various career aptitude tests, every one directed her to a career in the restaurant or food industries and architecture. Though she had and still has a love of



*Principal of Natalye Appel + Associates Architects, Natalye Appel, FAIA, has been involved in educating aspiring architects in Houston at Rice University and the University of Houston, and in practicing architecture since the eighties.*

Photo courtesy of Natalye Appel.

the restaurant industry, a discussion with her guidance counselor at Lamar High School solidified her decision to study architecture in 1976. The person recommended she *not* choose architecture because she was a woman, which prompted Appel to gladly take on the major. Appel decided to pursue the architecture program at Rice University as it had female faculty members, though few, and an encouraging environment. A notable role model there was Elinor Evans. One of the female faculty, she taught every Rice architecture student

during their first year for twenty-one years.<sup>13</sup> Evans opened her students' eyes to the art behind architecture, pushing them to see the world and profession differently. Evans's eclectic manner and style attracted Appel – like many others — to enroll at Rice instead of an out-of-state university.

Appel's husband, John Casbarian, a fellow architect and professor at Rice, and his business partners, Danny Samuels and Bob Timmy, are some of her fond mentors and a reason she chose to remain in Houston. Though they have separate practices, the spouses helped each other advance their work. Timmy, a former dean at UH COA, extended Appel a job to teach first-year studios. Appel knew nothing about teaching, but the faculty environment and her experience at Rice allowed her to pick it up quickly. Teaching became a natural fit for Appel and offered a perfectly balanced opportunity to work and teach. She knew that to continue, however, she needed her master's degree. Appel returned to Pennsylvania where she had done an internship in the final year for her bachelor's in architecture, and attended the University of Pennsylvania. She enjoyed her time there, but when it came time to pick a city to establish her career, Houston was a natural contender. By the time she completed her degree, architecture in Houston had become exciting. Unlike older cities in the North, which have strict zoning regulations, Houston has none, the only major city in the nation with that freedom. Appel was drawn to the possibilities of what this could mean for architecture.<sup>14</sup>

Although she moved back to Houston and married, Appel accepted a teaching job at Texas A&M and commuted to College Station. Three years later she accepted a tenured-track position teaching at UT, all while commuting to Houston for her family and projects, which included a West End project involving experimental neighborhoods for artistic clients, small-scale residential work, and renovating warehouses. Appel continued to live between two cities after she had her first child and taught through the following

*The Caldwell Residence was completed by Natalye Appel + Associates Architects in 2015. The residence is a LEED Gold Certified home that focused on the ideas of light, health, durability, and sustainability.*

Photo courtesy of Natalye Appel.



spring semester. She realized that juggling a major teaching position, a practice, and her family meant something would suffer. She loved all three intensely, and the thought of letting one go was nearly impossible. However, when she finally made the decision to leave UT, she immediately felt relieved. Once she settled back in Houston, she began teaching part-time studios at Rice and UH, which suited her growing practice. Appel has not taught for the past twenty years, however, due to how her practice has grown.<sup>15</sup>

Shoemake and Appel are each named a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects (FAIA) in recognition of their outstanding contributions to the practice of architecture. It is an honor only three percent of members have received. They had different educational experiences, but ultimately settled in Houston to open their own successful practices. They have fiery personalities and took their “disadvantage” as females entering the field more as a blissful challenge than a threat. Women in the field commonly either do not marry until later in life or marry another architect, and both women did the latter. On top of that, they had their own practices and families relatively early in their careers. When Shoemake was asked how she juggled a family and a practice, she looked me straight in the eye, smiled, and said, “I just did it,” followed by laughter. Appel did not find it to be much different from what most families must face, but she realized at a younger age the amount of time and dedication it would take to make it all work.<sup>16</sup>

Based on Shoemake’s and Appel’s experiences in college, architecture school in Houston has come a long way. Dramatic shifts have occurred in the field, with both Rice and UH boasting nearly 1:1 male and female student bodies in their most recent classes. In 2014 at UH COA, 43 percent of its incoming undergraduate architecture class and 56 percent of its master’s in architecture class were female. That same year, 59 percent of Rice’s incoming class were women.<sup>17</sup> In 2015, at UH COA, both the undergraduate and graduate valedictorians were females. In addition, the youngest licensed architect in the state of Texas is not only a Houston woman but also graduate of UH COA.<sup>18</sup>

Megan Tegethoff graduated from UH COA as the salutatorian in 2014, earning her bachelor in architecture degree. Like Shoemake and Appel, she is a native Houstonian but grew up with closer ties to the field. Her father, a civil engineer, recognized her talents at a young age and planted the idea for her to pursue an architecture career. Coupled with support from family and friends, Tegethoff’s strong desire to become an architect distracted her from



*University of Houston graduate Megan Tegethoff is the youngest licensed architect in the state of Texas.*

Photo courtesy of Megan Tegethoff.

any negative influences throughout her education. Though very dedicated, the summer before her second year of college, Tegethoff was diagnosed with a rare blood disease, idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura (ITP), causing her to be dependent on steroids. The second year at UH COA is very intense for most students as they completely dive into architecture, and many students drop out of the degree plan. However, Tegethoff’s professor Sharon Chapman showed compassion to help guide her through the year.<sup>19</sup>

Although the renamed University of Houston College of Architecture and Design (UH COAD) has competitive ratios of female and male students today, it had one female for every five male students when Tegethoff was in studio. These numbers did not deter her; instead she used her intense passion for architecture to push her to bigger things. During the fall semester of her fifth year she became certified as a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Accredited Professional (LEED AP), and three months after graduation, she took the first of seven Architectural Registration Exams (AREs). Tegethoff passed her final exam one year after graduating from college and officially became licensed August 2015 after completing her final required Intern Development Program (IDP) hours. Her philosophy in approaching the exams was to accept being miserable for a year and reap the benefits sooner rather than later. Now healthy and cured of ITP, Tegethoff is enjoying growing into her “architect skin” and looks forward to a long career where every day she learns something new, keeping her on her toes and living life to the fullest.<sup>20</sup>

The Houston architectural community is strong, and the women in the field are making strides. Appel has heard from young women in the profession today that it has been hard to have all their needs met, whether professional or personal, but she feels that the industry has made great strides to allow women and men to accommodate their lifestyles.<sup>21</sup> It is commonly said that architects in the city know each other, and that is in part due to the organizations that bring them all together. AIA hosts several events where local firms and student organizations compete against one another, such as the annual sandcastle and gingerbread competitions, allowing firms to showcase their studio culture and who they are as companies.

Organizations like Women in Architecture (WIA), a part of the AIA, provide an outlet for other aspiring and registered architects to come together and host activities such as mentorship events, social hours, and lectures. Sharon Chapman, a professor at UH COAD and a board member of Houston’s WIA, pointed out when gathering information from other chapters that other cities envy Houston’s sense of community and sheer numbers that their cities lack.<sup>22</sup> Women in the field have slowly made their mark in the industry, here and around the nation, but they are coming in masses now more than ever.

**Alicia Islam** is a native Houstonian who graduated from UH Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture and Design with her bachelor’s degree in architecture and a minor in energy and sustainability in the fall of 2016. An aspiring architect, she hopes to contribute to Houston as Sally Walsh, Carrie Shoemake, and Natalye Appel have done.