



The Architect's Questionnaire: Michelle LaFoe



Michelle LaFoe (Dina Avila)

BY JENNIFER WRIGHT

Next in our continuing series is architect Michelle LaFoe, principal at OFFICE 52 Architecture. Along with firm partner Isaac Campbell, their collaboration has established itself as one of the city's most creative and innovative. Whether its local urban infill projects such as House C and its sculpturally designed Light Space or their national competition-winning design for Scott Hall, the soon to be completed Nano-Bio-Energy Technologies Institute building at Carnegie Mellon University, OFFICE 52 exhibits an exceptional ability to create transformational spaces with light, color and materials. In this interview, Michelle shares the remarkable trajectory of her global experiences and the events that have given shape to her process driven design.

Portland Architecture: When did you first become interested in architecture as a possible career?

Michelle LaFoe: I love to draw and travel and always have. I first became interested in the art of architecture when I was quite young, probably around seven years old, and visited my grandparents annually in Tulsa, Oklahoma during the summers. During part of the day my grandfather was a draftsman and designer with Bethlehem Steel, and with the remainder of his time he was an artist who produced the most incredible lithographs, drawings and paintings in all media. I was the eldest grandchild, and he would take me on his sketching excursions to various interesting rural, city and industrial sites such as train yards. I still have the yellow canvas folding stools and his portable paint boxes and continue to use them. I would sketch and paint with my grandfather in Oklahoma (and in Houston and the Texas Ship Channel when he visited us), and my grandmother taught me about the importance of simplicity of form in life with her uncanny ability to make all things in a straightforward and enduring manner. In essence, they both taught me how to see. It was invaluable. My grandfather and I drew grain elevators, silos, industrial buildings, trains, train yards, ships, barns, water, trees, iris, and the landscape. He showed me that the space in between the forms was just as important as the forms themselves. My grandparents and I would talk about who designed these structures and how they were created and built, something about which my grandfather knew extensively from his work at Bethlehem Steel and my grandmother from her time growing up on a German farm in Kansas. I know that is why I have a passion for the simplicity of form, line, use of natural light, space, texture and color, due to these excursions into the urban and rural landscape.

Where did you study architecture and how would you rate the experience?

I studied in five places that had different approaches due to my focus at each one, and I learned important things from each of them. They include Rice University, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, an 18 month Fulbright Grant, The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, and Yale University.

I started my undergraduate studies at Rice University in the School of Architecture in 1985 and completed my professional architecture degree in 1991. One of the reasons that I chose Rice is that they were a globally-oriented university that encouraged a strong liberal arts education in conjunction with the focused bachelor-of-architecture professional degree, thus I had the opportunity to take additional courses in other disciplines related to architecture, such as physics and sculpture, and eventually double major in fine art/studio arts. Our first year at the Rice School of Architecture was all drawing, sculpture, and abstract problem solving, which I thought was a fantastic approach, with one of my first professors being Anderson Todd. In one exercise, we had to draw a series of objects, such as a detail of a tree with leaves or a detail from a car, without lifting the pencil and using pressure to create light and dark lines on an 18" x 24" piece of paper. It was a challenging yet relevant project that taught many of the important aspects of architecture. You really had to look and think about composition from an aesthetic point of view in order to do this while in a public setting. If you lifted your pencil, you had to start over. It was not as easy as it sounds, took more time than anticipated, and thus taught one the importance of schedule under a deadline. It also taught that it is essential to an architect to know how to see in such a way that the vision is not overpowered by rational analysis. I still have those drawings.



Model of a warming-hut structure for an international design competition (OFFICE 52)

I also had the opportunity to work with three other amazing professors who were very perceptive and progressive teachers while I was at Rice: John Casbarian and Danny Samuels in architecture, and Chester (Chet) Boterf in painting, each of whom introduced me to very important aspects of design, such as simplicity of the basic concept or parti, the building of physical models to test creative ideas, the potential of working with daylight as an architectural element, and the freedom to express architectural ideas in painted form. This rich experience continues to influence my work to this day.

After Rice I worked for a structural engineer and then was accepted for graduate work in drawing, painting and sculpture in 1992 in the post-baccalaureate program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, which was an equally valuable but very different experience in that it exposed me to the world of working in 'series' versus a program-based approach as one does in architecture. I continue to work in both ways with my firm. Being at SAIC was phenomenal in that I was exposed to all variations of the art world in multiple artistic disciplines. The exhibition, film and lecture series were incredible and included people from all over the world. As a student, you had free access to the Chicago Art Institute and of course the city of Chicago at your fingertips.

At SAIC, I had the opportunity to work with Barbara Rossi and Susan Kraut as my painting studio advisors, and I taught in the architecture department with Linda Nelson-Keane. All three taught me to follow my creative instincts and intuition and encouraged my painting, sculpture and architectural installation series not as tangential expressions to the architecture but as a body of work that can stand on its own in both worlds. It was at this time that I became at ease with work in both art and architecture, and I easily cross boundaries amongst disciplines in this regard to this day. I also did work in the foundry department and had first-hand experience with bronze and copper pours, the physics of the materials at different temperature states, and the importance of the clay and wax mockup of one's sculptural idea, all prevalent concepts when considering materials for architectural application as well.

After SAIC, I worked with Bill Grover, Mark Simon and Jeff Riley at Centerbrook Architects & Planners while attending at-large Italian classes at Yale University and independent painting study with Mary Barnes, an incredibly insightful and talented artist. After several years in Connecticut, I applied for and won the prestigious Fulbright-Hayes Scholarship in Architecture and Fine Arts to pursue my own work and teach in Perugia and Rome, Italy for 18 months. While there I was able to prove one of my predominant theories through archived sources and visual observation: that the 13th-14th century Umbrian towns had a network of streets and public spaces that were planned in three dimensions with regard to the relationship



"Stainless Steel Cups and Dice" charcoal drawing by Michelle LaFoe (Dan Kvitka)

between architectural, painted and sculptural forms. I also travelled extensively throughout Italy, Greece, Switzerland and France and would advocate travel as one of the best forms of education for anyone.

After returning to the United States and completing the exams for my architecture license, I worked for Cesar Pelli & Associates (now Pelli Clarke Pelli) before deciding to return to graduate school for a second advanced degree. In 1996, I was awarded a Distinguished University Fellowship for Advanced Architectural Research at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, where I also earned a Master of Architecture degree in Architectural and Urban History and Theory while I then worked towards a Ph.D. I chose UIUC over MIT and Yale (I was accepted at both) in order to work with the esteemed Dr. Richard Betts, who taught me the importance of asking key questions such as "what, how and why." In other words, what are you doing, how is it being done, and why is it necessary in regards to thinking, looking, designing and writing about architecture. He and I had more conversations than I can count in reference to how architectural design is not just about the physical context but about the culture and physical materials of a place and its people and how to transform those things into a meaningful, intelligent and intuitively passionate architectural design. After Illinois, I received grant funding to again return to New Haven, and Yale University to complete a year of post-graduate research in materials and fabrication technology as it related to the making of art, architecture and building design. My time there was equally valuable with creative debate, an excellent lecture series, and access to one of the best libraries in the country.

The educational experience at Rice, SAIC, UIUC, the Fulbright, and Yale were all quite different yet were rich, vibrant, rewarding, and all important to my development as an artist-architect who continually crosses disciplinary boundaries with my research and creative work in architecture.

What is your favorite building project that you've worked on?

In the last few years I have had the opportunity to do my own architectural design work, yet the designs on which I previously worked in other studios are still quite influential. When I think of important design projects where I was working for someone else, the National Museum of Art in Osaka, Japan on which I worked while at Cesar Pelli & Associates is certainly a favorite of mine. During schematic design, the design team for this project changed locations in the studio, and the result was that my desk area was on the entry path that Cesar took each morning. Since I was one of two



Scott Hall at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh (OFFICE 52)

people working on the design of the stainless steel entry pavilion and was building these fantastically intricate styrene and brass models quite late into the night, Cesar would stop for an impromptu critique on his way in each morning, at least until we had the design to the aesthetic and functional result desired. It was the most sculpturally oriented architectural project on which I had worked and was great fun.

In terms of my own work with my partner, Isaac Campbell, as OFFICE 52 Architecture, the new nano-bio-energy technologies building known as Scott Hall at Carnegie Mellon University is a favorite of mine because it synthesizes all my interests in one design project: architectural design, science, innovation, art, research, materials technology and collaboration with a multi-disciplinary approach. At 110,000 square feet, it is our first large-scale built commission, which we won by unanimous vote of the selection committee in an invited national design competition. The competition originally included 17 firms, and after initial submissions, the final list for presentation of concepts included only four. The site is a tight one on an urban campus, and the design solution that we proposed was different than all others. Our design was transformative and innovative with the placement of programmatic elements on the site with a visionary, coherent design that utilized adjacent spaces in a simple, more logical manner. At 110,000 square feet, this project is like eight projects in one: Scott Hall with Biomedical Engineering, the Institute for Complex Engineered Systems, the Energy Institute, the Collaboratory and Cafe, the Ruge Atrium, the Bertucci Nanotechnology Laboratory, the Porter Entry Sequence, and the green roof, which is the continuation of the Hornbostel Mall Sequence. Construction will soon be complete and the building will be opening this spring.

Who has been an important mentor among your colleagues?

When I lived in New Haven, Connecticut, I had the opportunity to work with both Mary Barnes, an amazingly perceptive painter from New York City and now in Maine, and Cesar Pelli, the well-known designer and architect, both of whom would ask hard questions about the aesthetics of a work with directness yet in an affable and respectful manner. Individually and on separate occasions, they would each say, "Why not?" about this painting or that project design, meaning why not push the aesthetic direction of an idea or a multitude of ideas as far as you can. Sure, it will take more work, but the result will be even more incredible. Cesar emphasized the importance of looking at one's design concepts in quickly built physical models with a multitude of viable options in order to test the idea. It was really an incredible experience being in his studio, as was my partner at O52, Isaac Campbell. It was like a design workshop. Soon thereafter I had the opportunity to work with the esteemed Dr. Richard Betts, one of the most brilliant people I



Left/middle: National Museum of Art, Osaka (Esto); right: study model by Michelle Lafoe

have ever met and still as sharp as ever. He emphasized integrity, straightforwardness, endurance, intellectual intent and artistic aesthetics in works of architecture and art. He was always up for a cup of coffee and intense conversation about any topic related to design and wanted to know your opinion as well. As it turns out, Betts had attended Rice back in the day when Anderson Todd was a young new professor in the schools of art and architecture. This is the same professor I had in 1985 for my freshman year. It is a small world indeed.

What part of the job do you like best, and as an architect what do you think you most excel at?

One of my favorite parts of the project is the beginning, when you have the opportunity to express and test the multitude of ideas you have and think about what is possible. You visit the site several times and have the opportunity of turning any project and site constraints into positive design features. This part of the project is intense and moves rather quickly, with a great deal of sketching and quick model building, and the intuitive ideas you initially have on site are typically the best. I find that I have so many ideas that one lifetime is not enough to do all of them.

I also love working with materials, materials research and technology, and having knowledge about traditional and innovative fabrication techniques in a variety of materials such as concrete, wood, stone, glass, metal, and fabric, to name a few. I enjoy the fabrication process when you work with various craftspeople and contractors who believe in making something worthwhile and whose input is crucial to the process itself. To me, it is important to maintain the overall vision of the basic design as the studio moves forward with a project yet also be flexible enough to work with the knowledge of fabricators to figure out the best way to make something as we think about the design of the details, materials used, and their fabrication. It is like you are considering the beginning and the



Triptych of lighting details at House C (OFFICE 52)

end of the project at the same time and thinking about all the parts needed. Just going to the fabrication house in Oregon to watch the water-jet cutter for that aluminum screen piece for one of our projects is enthralling.

What are some Portland buildings (either new or historic) that you most admire?

I knew of the designers Pietro Belluschi and Lawrence Halprin long before moving to Portland, so I find myself returning to look at their work. One of the supporters of the GB Nalli Conference that I co-organized in 2004 in Rome was an alumnus of Portsmouth Abbey School in Rhode Island, designed by Belluschi. During the conference, we and others had vibrant conversations on the terrace of the Hotel Minerva about Belluschi, Portsmouth's design, and Belluschi's architectural affinity to Italy. I admire Belluschi's diagrammatic clarity, disciplined logic, inherent understanding of natural and indirect light, and simplicity in material with brick, travertine and wood in his many local projects such as the Portland Art Museum, the Zion Lutheran Church and St. Philip Neri Catholic Church.

The Lawrence Halprin Sequence, known as the Portland Progression, is well known outside of Portland yet receives little attention here, with the exception of the *Where the Revolution Began* (featuring essays by Randy Gragg, John Beardsley and Janice Ross). Since Halprin had professional connections to Charles Moore, who started Centerbrook Architects in Essex, Connecticut, I knew of Halprin from my work at Centerbrook in the early 1990s. As with Belluschi, Halprin was influenced by his time in Italy, and he produced a wonderfully sculptural solution here for the Portland Progression, which acts as a series of outdoor rooms and is part of a choreographed sequence of open spaces. Halprin could really draw, with colorful, fluid sketches, and his sketchbooks are a lasting compendium that illustrates his thoughts.

When I first moved to Portland, it was reminiscent of the Italian cities in which I had lived, with the fabric of the city that works with the hills, the river, strong neighborhoods and mass transit. You could actually exist without a car and walk, which I love and had done previously when I worked in Europe and on the East Coast. It is really the best way to see a city, the details and textures of a place. The nearby wine country also reminds me of the Umbrian landscape.

What is your favorite building outside of Portland and besides any you've worked on?

I don't have one favorite building but several. It's like trying to have one favorite painting. Each is with a different perceptual experience. Luis Barragan's House in Tacubaya, Mexico, his Casa Gilardi, and the San Cristobal Stables in Mexico City are works I strongly



Luis Barragan's House in Tacubaya, Mexico (ArchDaily Brasil)

favor. Barragan understands the use of line, plane, color, and the serene yet dramatic interplay of light and geometric forms. His work includes a diagrammatic clarity with the graceful use of materials and natural elements such as water and the brilliant opening up of views and spaces that emphasize an indoor and outdoor relationship between the person and nature. There's a wonderfully poetic book by the photographer Rene Burri that includes his photographs of Barragan's work and relevant quotes from Barragan, such as, "Don't ask me about this building or that one. Don't look at what I do. See what I saw."

I also distinctly remember the first time I visited the Le Corbusier's Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp in 1994, and since then it has been one of my favorite buildings and experiences. It was a sunny day, and there was a crispness in the air. The light was exquisite. Only five other people visited. The design of the chapel incorporated everything that I considered important and still do: creative use of natural light, sculptural use of materials, sectional ingenuity, incorporation of painting and color in the design. The building design is not precious and is bold and is very moving in its sense of natural beauty and timelessness when you are in the space and watch the light.

In Helsinki, Finland, the Experimental House, which was Alvar Aalto's house and studio, is also a favorite of mine. It became a demonstration project of his studio's ability with creative experimentation in materials, light, and the relationship of interior and exterior spaces. In addition, I am partial to the Museum Brandhorst by Sauerbruch Hutton, the British Art Center by Louis Kahn (this is where many times I would take my lunch break while working at Cesar Pelli's office), Eero Saarinen's MIT Chapel with the incredible Bertioia installation, the circular structure of the 5th century Tempio di Sant'Angelo in Perugia, Tadao Ando's work, Carlo Scarpa's work, the tranquil Cullen Sculpture Garden by Isamu Noguchi and the Menil Collection by Renzo Piano, both of which are in Houston, Texas.

Is there a local architect or firm you think is unheralded or deserves more credit?

Until recently, all of our firm's work was outside of Portland, so my partner and I have not been here much. When I am here, I tend to hang out with artists. Since we now have several residential projects in the city and have been attending more local design events, I am more knowledgeable about the local architecture scene. There are a number of studios that are making their mark in Portland in an exciting way, and I look forward to more high quality work as the city grows. In my estimate, female designers in Portland should be more fully recognized for their excellent work with innovative and creative ideas, both here and elsewhere.

What would you like to see change about Portland's built environment in the long term?

Even though I have lived outside of Houston, Texas since 1989, I grew up there and return each year to visit family. I can say that the physical urban environment of Portland as a livable city is the opposite of what you find in most of Houston, which is changing in a positive way in the downtown and medical center area. Many of the elements that make Portland a great place are similar to the ones I found in the city statutes of Perugia, Italy when I worked there as a Fulbright Scholar: fostering neighborhood vitality, zoning laws, strategic plans, partnership models, a vibrant city center, protection of public spaces and places, creation of urban parks and mass-transit development. I think Portland's planning and design community has done a great job of creating a vibrant city fabric. Yet I believe that Portland is ready for new approaches and structures that represent a cultural transformation in respect to how regulatory processes and specifics of the zoning and building codes work so that they foster innovation in design and construction with even more attention to environmental issues. This is beginning to happen with current work in Portland and hopefully will continue with others who think outside the box in a thoughtful, meaningful way.

How would you rate the performance of local government like the Portland Development Commission, or the development and planning bureaus?

I look forward to working with and developing relationships with the PDC, people in the development and planning bureaus on future projects of ours in the city.

Who is a famous architect you'd like to see design a building in Portland?

I would like to see a building in Portland by the following people: Sauerbruch + Hutton, Tadao Ando, Zaha Hadid, Williams Tsien, and SANAA/Ryue Nishizawa and Kazuyo Sejima. They would all do great buildings and add to the architectural language of this city by creating something completely new with the physical parameters they find here. I would also like to see an Ann Hamilton installation in Portland. I'm delighted about the addition of the Kengo Kuma design to the Japanese Garden, which will be fantastic for Portland. Everyone should read the book about his previous work, *Material Immaterial*, by Botond Bogner.

Name something besides architecture (sneakers, furniture, umbrellas) you love the design of.

I love tools and maps and have a collection of both, half of which I inherited from my grandfather, including his slide rule and solid

geometry book collection. One of my favorite objects is this gorgeous, hand-made walnut container with a lid that my uncle made for me in the early 1970's. I love the design of furniture, my incredible MOMA umbrella, and Irma Boom graphics and beautifully designed books. I admire the way that Lella and Massimo Vignelli and Ray and Charles Eames would look at design as all-encompassing and work in a variety of medium across disciplines.

What are three of your favorite movies?

"Tema Hima: The Art of Living in Tohoku," Hayao Miyazaki's movies, such as "Nausicaa Of The Valley Of The Wind," and Federico Fellini's movies.

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