

A CONVERSATION¹

Sara Ishikawa



Sara Ishikawa
Courtesy Clare Cooper Marcus

I WAS BORN IN SACRAMENTO IN 1934. During World War II my family and I were interned at Tule Lake [Internment Camp, California]. We went to an assembly center first, but we were there for just a few months before we were sent to Tule Lake. My mother got us out of the camp very early. They were letting college kids out, and my two older sisters got to go out to college. Then soon after all the college kids were allowed to leave, they started thinking about letting other people leave if they got a job. My mother and I were there for just a year before she got a job at the Winnebago Indian Missionary School in Wisconsin. We were the first family to actually leave. As long as you went east, you were allowed to go; you couldn't return to California. So when she noticed this job as matron at this Indian missionary school, my mother grabbed it, and sent for a car, and we drove to Wisconsin. It was scary.

I can clearly remember who got me interested in architecture; it was my solid geometry teacher whose name was Dr. Brown. This was in Chicago in high school, where you had to take solid geometry, and he noticed that I was really good at imagining three-dimensional forms. He knew I was good at art—although I don't know exactly how he knew that, maybe I had some posters up or something—so he was the one who suggested architecture. And Chicago of course is full of architecture. My older sister was going to design school in Chicago, and she met a lot of architects and introduced me to some of her architect friends, and they got me into it. Even then, it was pretty unusual for a woman to go into architecture.

I came to Berkeley in 1953 to start my undergraduate studies. My mother really wanted me to stay in Illinois, where she was living, and go to one of their very good schools, but I was determined to come to Berkeley, I guess because my older sister was here. I majored in art from 1953 to 1955, but began during that period to take a lot of my requirements for architecture, and then I became an architecture major in 1955.

In those days there were lots of veterans of the Korean War in the program. These guys were so good, so serious. A lot of them had degrees or had gone to art schools in the East, and they could make these incredible renderings. It really intimidated me, but I became friendly with that particular crowd. I used to envy the heck out of them because they had wives. They were all married and some of them had children, and their wives would bring them food when we were staying up all night, full dinners; they would come marching into the drafting room, and I'd just be drooling. Here I was eating my English muffins.

Moreover, it was really difficult because if you were a woman and you did really good work, it seemed as though they just didn't believe that you did it. I was very stubborn about doing my own work no matter what, where all these guys got lots of help from each other. Being Japanese I think affected me in different ways. I know a lot of these Korean vets were interested in Asian women. I didn't want to get involved because I thought that

was what they were interested in. They thought I was going to be a typical Asian woman, which I definitely wasn't.

After two years in the program I went to Sweden. I looked for a job in the US before I went to Sweden. I really wanted to work in an office, but they would say, "We can't let a woman in the drafting room, the men wouldn't concentrate," stuff like that. The Swedes hired women. They didn't think anything of hiring women, so I got some real practical experience, and got exposed to housing and research, which I had never even heard of as an option in architecture school. There was incredible research being done on housing in England, Sweden, and other European places as a result of the war. I stayed for three years, and then came back and did my last three years at Berkeley. By then the school was totally different. The GIs were gone, thank god. The architecture students were much younger, and I felt much more comfortable in terms of equality and age.

When I was a student I guess we all sort of understood it was the Beaux-Arts sort of way [of teaching architecture]. It seemed to me, as far as design went, you became a Corbusian, a Wrightian, or a Miesian. A lot of students would say I'm not one yet, but they said they wanted to be one or the other. When I went off to Sweden and got exposed to research and housing, I thought it was wonderful because there was some basis for design other than just latching on to a style or an architect or whatever, trying to figure out what you are supposed to be thinking about once you design. That kind of thing was brand new; I mean it just wasn't done.

Chris Alexander came to Berkeley in 1963 just before I graduated and gave a very important talk; I mean in my mind it was very important. I think it was also important for the whole school. This talk was just amazing for me because I was doing my fifth-year thesis at the time on housing, and I was trying to come up with some more concrete or more scientific ways of designing houses. He presented a methodology for design at that lecture that I will never forget. Unfortunately, he did this in May, when I was finished with school.

After school, my friend Ben King was hired to do BART work at Wurster Bernardi & Emmons (WBE), and they asked me to work there; I said great. Then we asked Chris [Alexander] to work with us. I worked on the conceptual design of trains and stations. However, after a number of people were fired, I decided to go to Japan with my mother, which ended up being an around-the-world trip. I met up with Chris in London. He was trying to take care of his visa problems or something.

While I was gone, things were happening over here—the riots in Watts, the whole urban situation was in total turmoil. I came back wanting to do something in that area. I started working in the federal poverty program with Ken [Simmons]. There were local chapters and Ken was the program coordinator for the city poverty program for the Economic Opportunity Council. I was the program developer for the Western Addition [San Francisco neighborhood]. I also did a little bit of work in Chinatown, and then worked for the Oakland City Planning Office from 1966 to 1967. Then Chris came back from England and wanted us, together with Murray [Silverstein], to start the Center for Environmental Structure [CES], and that was the next seven years of my life.

In the beginning of the CES we had a rough idea. We didn't call it the pattern language immediately. We called it rules or environmental rules or something like that. The jump-start was a big grant from National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). That grant really funded the pattern language. The NIMH thought it was very important that environment should support and promote social and psychological well-being. When you look at a pattern, it's this long problem statement. There's a context statement, then there's a problem statement, and then there's a solution. The problem is where we try to identify all the sorts of various issues that would come into play. For example, if you were talking about an entrance to a house, then you were talking about kids coming home and playing right outside the door, or coming home with some groceries and looking for your key. We were looking at the different kinds of rituals people go through when they use any part of the environment. So you try and identify that and then say, "OK what does that mean?"

We were working on a lot of things at the Center. I had a special interest in housing, but we were also working on community facilities. In fact, the first project that we worked on in the Center was a multi-service center. The more complicated the problem, the better for us, and a multi-service center was something that was fairly complicated. We didn't really have the pattern language totally down yet, but that was a very important project in starting to find patterns. The second project was housing in Peru.

Right after the Peru project, I started teaching because Chris wanted some time off from teaching. And perhaps more importantly, my appointment as a lecturer [in 1969] had to do with affirmative action. Department of Architecture Chair Gerald McCue was very anxious to have some women teaching. When I was first hired in 1969, there were very few women students and very few women teachers. We all knew we had to get more women in here. There were Norma Evenson and Roz (Lindheim), but there weren't that many. Clare (Cooper Marcus) was hired in landscape exactly the same time I was.

Even though there were always a number of Asian students in the architecture program, I was the first Asian American hired as a professor in the department, and the first [tenure-track] Asian American woman hired in the entire UC system. I discovered this because as soon as I was hired, I was thrown into all these affirmative action committees. It was just terrible. I mean as a woman, as an Asian American, it was just terrible. I remember I had to go to a system-wide meeting, Santa Barbara or someplace like that. I think I was the only woman there, which was always the case. There was this huge table with all these professor and administrator types. We had this big file that Wurster students [asked to be] addressed at this meeting. I opened the file and there was all this data about different ethnic groups. I looked under Asian American, and then I looked under woman, there was only one listed under UC Berkeley, and at the other campuses none: zero, zero, zero, zero. I said, "Oh god, I wonder who that is, I would really like to meet her," and then I realized it was me. Then right away next year, there were more, as a result of affirmative action.

Doing courses in pattern language, two other interests blossomed for me. One interest was cultural patterns, which I defined as differences in the environment due to differences in culture. The other was the equivalent of cultural patterns in the US, which we called community-defined, but again we were trying to articulate what that was. That came along at the same time that affirmative action became a real issue where we started getting a lot of students who were Chicano and Black. It was really great, and I'm still in touch with a lot of those students.

Chris and I taught together a number of times when I was a lecturer from 1969 to 1974, which was when I got my assistant professorship. I taught the standard undergraduate design class, 100A. I did a lot of 100A with Ray Lifchez, and then I did straight design classes. We started a community design program, so there were community design studios as well. However, doing the kind of teaching I was doing in community design and being active in affirmative action, you tend to have your side of the faculty. That would be Jesse (Reicherk), Chris was definitely part of that, but then there was Ken Simmons, and there was Clare, the people who were in social factors in community design. The differences (between pure designers and those working in community issues in the faculty) were very pronounced in the '60s and '70s. It was amazing. I can remember that after Cambodia, Wurster Hall turned into a poster-making factory. It was just great, totally spontaneous and student-led. The students just said this



Sara Ishikawa teaching ARCH 100A studio
Courtesy of author

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is what we want to do. The students in my design section they said they also wanted to go to El Cerrito to talk to people about the war because El Cerrito was one of the more conservative neighborhoods. I can remember doing that. People would ring the doorbell and these little old ladies would come out and they'd say, "You should put some shoes on." The students wore sandals, not shoes.

Unfortunately, most of us in the social factors area retired at the same time. Because we were all hired at the same time, we all became retirement age at the same time, so now the school doesn't really have a strong program in social services. During the 1960s and 1970s kids came here from all over because of it, from overseas, from the East Coast. If you were reading their graduate school application files they were full of their desire to study under Chris or in social factors. So it's unfortunate. I don't know what's going on now. It's pure design I guess, in the sense that pure designers—what I call the elitist designers—say all that social stuff is in there, we just don't talk about it.

I think my major contribution to the Department of Architecture was that I was probably one of the first people who taught anything about different cultures. I offered courses in the pattern language, which I still think is really a good methodology. I mean that book, *A Pattern Language*,² continues to sell extremely well. I think of community design as my major contribution; that and getting students really involved in that because it is one of the very few times—I'm not sure if that's actually true—but I think that whole era of the 1970s is one of the few times that the department was thinking of the outer world and tried to connect to that.

¹ Sara Ishikawa interview with Elizabeth Byrne and Waverly Lowell, Berkeley, CA, April 2, 2002.

² Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, and Murray Silverstein, with Max Jacobson, Ingrid Fiksdahl-King, and Shlomo Angel, *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

DESIGN ON THE EDGE

A Century of Teaching Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, 1903-2003

