**About Beverly Willis** August 30, 2016

**A Brief Professional History**

Upon graduating from the University of Hawaii in 1954, Beverly Willis established her own art atelier in Honolulu and began seeking commissions. Her work ranged from murals executed in paint on canvas and in fresco, to sand-casting, to wood sculpture. Clients such as Royal Hawaiian Hotel, the Hilton Hawaiian Village, United Air Lines, and the United Chinese Society commissioned pieces from her.

Her success executing large-scale artworks led to commissions from the post-World War II military leadership stationed in Hawaii, for whom she provided art, interior design work, and renovation construction for military officers’ clubs. Here she learned the art of managing projects and of organizing architects and contractors.

In 1958 Willis opened a design office in [San Francisco](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Francisco), [California](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/California), at 545 Pacific Avenue, known then as the Barbary Coast. For two years she commuted to Honolulu in order to complete her commissions there. In San Francisco, her skillas a multi-media artist brought commissions for the interior design of retail stores, for which she quickly became nationally recognized.[[1]](#endnote-1)

In 1966 Willis became a licensed architect, qualifying for the licensing exam as a self-taught professional. Prior to this time, she was permitted to design buildings under three stories in height under California law: she designed her first house in 1960 for Roxanna and Abbott Robertson in the Napa Valley.

In the years following her licensure, the architect designed many types of buildings. Her approach differed from those of architects who believed in “branding” and who, by applying the same design sensibility to all of their buildings, established a recognizable style. More concerned about how effectively a building communicated to its occupant or viewer, Willis designed using organic proportion, combined with new materials, textures, light and color that visually communicated to the senses. Her buildings fit easily within their surrounding context and were environmentally sensitive. Consequently, each building she designed is different. All, however, express a “humanistic” ideal.

Many of Willis’s designs established new approaches to building typology.

In 1963 she designed a pioneering adaptive re-use project that converted three Victorian houses in the 1900 block of Union Street into a complex of stores and restaurants. Some have associated this design with the beginnings of the modern historical adaptive re-use movement.[[2]](#endnote-2) Willis co-founded the Union Street Merchant Association and provided design assistance to other stores owners on the street. She also opened and designed her own cookware store, The Capricorn, to prove the industrial design theory that “good design sells.”

Willis’s Glide Church renovation of 1970 presented a new national model for urban churches of the period, which were loosing their congregations.[[3]](#endnote-3) As wealthy and middle-class residents traded suburbs for the city, many urban churches were abandoned, Glide among them. Working with a young minister, Cecil Williams, Willis designed a dual-function church and multi-purpose room. Using light projections to change the perception of the interior and installing a high-tech, two-way sound system that allowed the audience to interact with Williams, the new building helped attract people from all over San Francisco. The congregation eventually rebounded, and the church hosted two packed sermons each Sunday.

When suburban expansion was booming, Willis and her associates elected to combine her retail experience with large-scale housing – a new town approach. “We decided to take a hard look at the concept of traditional architectural [home] production and productivity,”[[4]](#endnote-4) she explained in an industry article. In order to achieve certain design goals for large-scale housing and land development, in 1971 Willis organized the in-house development and coding of a computer program. The result, CARLA (an acronym for the [Computerized Approach to Residential Land Analysis)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Computerized_Approach_to_Residential_Land_Analysis_(CARLA)),[[5]](#endnote-5) was the first successful program used in the United States for large-scale land planning. It was applied in towns across the country.

The [San Francisco Ballet Building](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Francisco_Ballet_Building) in 1983 was the first in the United States designed exclusively for the use of a ballet company and school.[[6]](#endnote-6) As no architect had ever asked the organization what it wanted in a building, the answer was, “We don’t know.” Based on her astute observation of dancers and dancing, analysis of the company’s activities, and laboratory tests of various lighting and flooring options, Willis created a prototypical design that influenced ballet buildings to come.

Similarly, Willis’s Manhattan Village Academy, a New York City Department of Education high school designed in 1995, was intended as a prototype for small or “charter” schools embodying a new pedagogy.[[7]](#endnote-7) The school founders believed that the environment created by design would aid in learning, and it did.

Willis’s practice evolved from retail and housing design to institutional, cultural, and government projects, as well as urban planning and development. She also consulted. Having worked for more than 41 years as a designer, Willis was involved in over 800 projects, providing a variety of design services. Willis’s designs are forerunners to early 21st century projects that bring together a humanistic concern for the occupant. Her oeuvre expands the boundaries of architecture.

In the late 1970s Willis undertook design-build work in addition to her architectural practice. After several successful development on her own, in 1980 she teamed up with Olympia York and Marriott Hotels to form a partnership that won the international competition to design-build 24 acres in downtown San Francisco which they named Yerba Buena Gardens. Four year later, when Olympia and York faced financial difficulties in a European project, the partnership relinquished their right to the development. However, the Marriott Hotel was built.

In 1988, the beginning of a great national building recession that would last until 1995, Willis followed Frank Lloyd Wright’s example and took a two-year sabbatical. She relocated to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, at the invitation of her friend Marge Champion, of the Marge and Gower Dance Team. When in 1990 the construction recession showed no signs of abating, Willis moved to New York City to partake of the city’s lively architecture discussions. In 1995, she founded the Architecture Research Institute, a non-profit dedicated to analyzing the future development of global cities. Working with some of New York’s leading architects and scholars, the institute presented its findings in a number of cities worldwide, including Oxford, England, Singapore, Hong Kong, Honolulu, and Beijing. In the same year, the National Building Museum published her book *Invisible Images: The Silent Language of Architecture*.

In 2000, Beverly Willis was asked by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) to represent the United States, help organize a 90-day International University for Women (IFU), and participate as a professor.[[8]](#endnote-8)

When terrorists attacked the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001, Willis, in collaboration with *Metropolis Magazine* editor Susan Szenasy, organized a group of 500 Lower Manhattan residents to create citizen’s plans to rebuild Manhattan below Canal Street. The group, named Rebuild Downtown Our Town (R.Dot), was an initiative of the Architecture Research Institute. The American Planning Association recognized its planning contribution to the city by giving R.Dot the Lawrence C. Horton Award for Leadership in City and Regional Planning in 2003.

Decades earlier, as a woman working in architecture, Willis had come to realized that the significant contributions made by female practitioners were not becoming part of the profession’s historical narrative. She decided to take action. She shifted her efforts to exposing and changing the male-dominated culture of the construction industry into one that recognized women’s innovative work and preserved it in the historical record. In 2002, she established the Beverly Willis Architecture Foundation (BWAF).[[9]](#endnote-9) Under the guidance of its first Executive Director, Wanda Bubriski, and an active founding board, BWAF made grants to historians and writers to further the foundation’s mission. In 2008 the grant-making foundation underwent a transition to become a program-oriented one, relying on research and education to achieve its goals.

One of Willis’ activities with BWAF has been to create 15-minute documentary films. For a program celebrating the Guggenheim Museum’s 50th anniversary, she wrote and directed the very successful film *“A Girl is a Fellow Here”: 100 Women Architects in the Studio of Frank Lloyd Wright* (2009). Her other films include *Built for Ballet: An American Original* (2013), *The Artist, Beverly Willis: Honolulu and San Francisco Years, 1942–1960* (2013), *The Architect, Beverly Willis: San Francisco and New York Years, 1958–1995* (2013), and *Unknown New York: The City Women Built* (in process).

Remaining a voting member of the BWAF board, Willis resigned as its president in 2014.

**Public Service:**

1972–1977 Member, National Academy of Sciences, Board on Infrastructure and Constructed Environment

1973–1976 Chair, Federal Facilities Council, representing the Board on Infrastructure and Constructed Environment, National Academy of Sciences

1975–1980 Founding Trustee, National Building Museum, Washington, DC

1976 US Government Delegate to Habitat 1, the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements

1979 Vice-President/President Elect/President, California Council of American Institute of Architects

1980 President, California Council of American Institute of Architects

1982 President, Golden Gate Chapter, Lambda Alpha International, San Francisco, CA

1995 Founder, Architecture Research Institute, New York, NY

2001 Co-founder, Rebuild Downtown Our Town (R.Dot), New York, NY

2002 Founder, Beverly Willis Architecture Foundation, New York, NY

1. Willis, Beverly. “Stores for 1968 – Solutions for High Cost Land Problems,” *Nargus Bulletin* (1963) ps 30, 31, 96. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. William Marlin, “The Streets of Camelot,” *Architectural Forum*, 138 (April 1973): ps 26–38 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glide\_Memorial\_Church. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “A-E Firm Computerized Path to Large-Scale Housing,” *Engineering News-Record*, November 4, 1976, cover story. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Gwendolyn Wright, *USA: Modern Architectures in History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008).  [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Jennifer Dunning, ”San Francisco Ballet Opens New Headquarters,” *New York Times*, December 17, 1983. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. MVAAIA Committee on Architecture for Education, “Exemplary Learning Environments,” report, New York AIA, 2002, 128–29. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ulla von Terlinden, [*City and Gender: Intercultural Discourse on Gender, Urbanism, and Architecture (Schriftenreihe der Internationalen Frauenuniversität)*](https://www.amazon.de/City-Gender-Schriftenreihe-Internationalen-Frauenuniversit%C3%A4t/dp/3810034959/ref=sr_1_1/254-9060586-7285662?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1471540641&sr=1-1&keywords=Beverly+Willis) (Opladen: Leske & Budrich Verlag, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For more, see Beverly Willis Architecture Foundation, <http://www.bwaf.org/>. Due to her work with R.Dot, Willis was unable to participate actively in the BWAF until 2004. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)