

About Beverly Willis

2018 AIA New York/Center for Architecture Foundation Visionary Award conferred on Beverly Willis, FAIA

Award Certificate Text

“Beverly Willis FAIA, has produced a steady stream of contributions to the building profession in the realms of design, planning, and practice through innovation and leadership. Beverly Willis' long career as an artist, architect, filmmaker and author provides inspiration to women of all ages.”

2017 AIA California Council Lifetime Achievement Award.

Conferred up on **Beverly Willis FAIA** by AIA California Council October 2017 Monterrey Design Conference, Monterrey, CA **Award**

Certificate Text

“A Lifetime of Exemplary Service to the Architectural Profession. Your commitment to design excellence and your dedication to the highest standard of the profession is inspiring. Your courage for exploration created a litany of firsts and paved the way for many women who dreamed of working in the architectural profession. Your example has been empowering to many and your career is replete with numerous appointments to prestigious boards, commissions. Your unwavering dedication to enhancing the appreciation of architects and architecture will long be remembered”.

For more than seventy years, Beverly Willis, FAIA, (b. 1928) has steadily made contributions to the architecture profession in the realms of design, planning, and practice, whether through research, innovation, leadership, or filmmaking. An autodidact ever willing to take risks, Willis accepted commissions for which there were no built precedents, adopted practices that did not become mainstream until decades later, and sought research-driven solutions unique to each project. Designing separate projects during parallel years, Willis together with William Wurster and Lawrence Halprin, pioneered the concept of adaptive reuse. Her reconstruction of the internationally recognized 1890 Union Street Shops, San Francisco, CA (1963), set an example of reconstruction and reuse of residential buildings for urban revitalization. This began a world-wide movement. Also, Willis introduced the first computerized programming into large-scale land planning and design with CARLA (1971), a software program developed in-house by Willis and her firm. In 1983, Willis designed the first ballet building, the San Francisco Ballet Building (1984) in the US. This design influenced designs of many ballet buildings that would follow. Her designs for the renovation of Glide Church and her prototypical design for Manhattan Village Academy Charter

School within an existing building, created new way of thinking about the building types. For these and the other significant projects in her design portfolio, Willis has received many honors, awards, and citations. Her humanistic designs combine an artist's appreciation of light, color, and texture, and a designer's understanding of form and proportion that serve to enhance the experience of space and to communicate directly to the senses.

Humanistic Design

Humanism is a philosophical concept that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively, and generally prefers critical thinking and evidence (rationalism, empiricism) over established doctrine or faith (fideism). Willis believes the architectural use of form, function, space, proportion, texture, and color, when appropriately used in a design, influences a human reaction. Willis's humanistic designs communicate in a visual and powerful way directly to human senses.

In the Modernist era in which she worked, the dictum "form follows function" was intended as a guide to the design of the architectural form. Its application was directed by a set of "rules," such as the mandatory use of a flat roof, white color, surface mounted, horizontal windows, and stucco surfaces. While each design differed as its form followed function, it remained visually similar to other designs. For example, see Le Corbusier's Planeix house design compared to his Ozenfant House and Studio.

The human sensing of a design involves two separate processes that are very closely related – sensation and perception. Sensation is input from the physical world received by our sensory receptors, and perception is the process by which the brain selects, organizes, and interprets sensations.

Sensation is the process that allows our brains to take in information via our five senses, vision, hearing, taste, smell and touch and a sixth – extrasensory perception, which can then be experienced and interpreted by the brain. Nerves relay the signals to the brain, which interprets them as sight (vision), sound (hearing), touch, etc. The sensing organs associated with each send information to the brain to help us understand and perceive the world around us.

As a designer, Willis knows how to create these connections. She has learned this through her own observations and the writings of others; some dating from centuries of

architectural experiences. Willis's makes designs that send visual clues to the senses that cause "feelings." Her goal is to make the experience of her designs, positive feelings. For example, take the experience of nature's seasonal changes. These sensory changes affect the eyes, skin, smell, hearing and have a profound effect on the body. Architecture design affects the senses through space, Light – shadow, sight – form, feel (material – touch), hearing – decibel levels, color, psychic – instinct.

A 6th Sense, or one some call Psychic, is not well understood. Willis believes it plays a strong role in the designer's ability to design in a humanist style. Perhaps this is why she was commissioned to design many projects with no antecedents.

Beverly Willis, FAIA, has designed or consulted on over 800 projects during her long career.

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, 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 skill as a multi-media artist brought commissions for the interior design of retail stores, for which she quickly became nationally [recognized](#).

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. 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. Willis cofounded 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 losing their [congregations](#). As wealthy and middleclass 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. It became a national model for other abandoned urban churches.

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](#),” 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 inhouse development and coding of a computer program. The result, CARLA (an acronym for the Computerized Approach to Residential Land [Analysis](#)), 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 in 1983 was the first in the United States designed exclusively for the use of a ballet company and [school](#). 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](#). 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 expanded 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](#).

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 at age of 75, as a woman working in architecture, Willis had come to realize 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 ([BAAF](#)). Under the guidance of its first Executive Director, Wanda Bubriski, and an active founding board, BAAF 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.

At age 80, Willis became a filmmaker of 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) now a classic. 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* (2018).

Remaining a voting member of the BAAF 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

Footnotes

1. Willis, Beverly. "Stores for 1968—Solutions for High Cost Land Problems," *Nargus Bulletin* (1963): 30-31, 96. [↵](#)
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glide_Memorial_Church [↵](#)
3. "A-E Firm Computerized Path to Large-Scale Housing," *Engineering News-Record*, November 4, 1976, cover story. [↵](#)
4. Gwendolyn Wright, *USA: Modern Architectures in History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008). [↵](#)

5. Jennifer Dunning, "San Francisco Ballet Opens New Headquarters," *New York Times*, December 17, 1983. [↵](#)
6. MVAIAA Committee on Architecture for Education, "Exemplary Learning Environments," report, New York AIA, 2002: 128-29. [↵](#)
7. Ulla von Terlingen, *City and Gender: Intercultural Discourse on Gender, Urbanism, and Architecture (Schriftenreihe der Internationalen Frauenuniversität)* (Opladen: Leske & Budrich Verlag, 2003). [↵](#)
8. 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. [↵](#)