2019 AIA Women’s Leadership Summit

Held from September 12-14, AIA National and AIA Minnesota hosted the 2019 Women’s Leadership Summit (AIAWLS) in Minneapolis—a unique event where women in the AEC industry can network with other women from around the country in a professional setting. Themed “Reframe, Rethink, Refresh,” over 750 women from the architecture and design industry participated in a welcoming ceremony; actively listened to keynotes and story tellers; interacted in workshops and seminars; and took tours of local architecturally significant facilities.

The goals of the summit are to:

- raise the profile of women in the profession
- explore new paths to leadership
- create a learning environment that supports the needs of multiple career stages in one event
- provide a space for women architects to learn from one another
The summit’s host was Debbie Millman. Named “one of the most creative people in business” by Fast Company magazine, and “one of the most influential designers working today” by Graphic Design USA, Debbie Millman is also an author, educator, curator and host of the podcast, Design Matters.

Priya Parker, Founder of Thrive Labs and Toshiko Mori, FAIA, an award winning architect, joined the stage as the main Keynote speakers. Priya Parker shared her latest book “The Art of Gathering” with the audience including tips to create transformative, unforgettable gatherings that allow participants to step back from their daily routine, rediscover their motivations, and develop strategies for innovation. During her keynote session, Priya lead a group exercise where all 750 attendees interacted with each other and reflected on why we became architects, why we were there and why we got involved with the AIA. Toshiko Mori, FAIA shared her career path and experiences as an architect, how she started her own practice and walked us through some her award winning projects and initiatives. She left an inspiring message of perseverance: “Don’t think of it as a challenge, just do it” -Toshiko Mori, FAIA.

Mary-Margaret Zindren, CAE, Executive Vice President, Ex Officio of AIA Minnesota, opened the summit with an inspiring speech that focused on why AIA Minnesota wanted to host the Summit. Mary-Margaret provided not just an introduction, but an invocation – to invoke a greater power into the space, that greater power being the power of the collective. Mary-Margaret stated that by all accounts, this is the largest assembly of women in architecture ever to be gathered in one space. Her intention was also to set a tone of inclusion for this gathering—where everyone felt seen. The speech was so inspiring that many participants requested a written copy.

The event also hosted two panel conversations. The first one, “Re-envision: Leadership Lenses,” was led by Jane Frederick, FAIA, 2020 AIA President; Gabrielle Bullock, FAIA, Director of Global Diversity at Perkins+Will; and Alda Ly, AIA, Founder & Principal of Alda Ly Architecture & Design. The second panel, “Reclaim: The Power of Potential,” was led by Julia Gamoline, Assoc. AIA and Founder and Editor of MadameArchitect.org; Bolanie Williams-Olley, Chief Financial Officer at Mancini Duffy; and Michelle Mongeon Allen, AIA, Chief Executive Officer at JLG Architects.

After listening to the thought provoking speakers, some of the takeaways include: we have to be our own advocates; leadership is a continuous effort;
the importance of mentoring; the importance of networking and more.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the work that the Architects Foundation has been doing by offering grant opportunities for recipients to attend the AIA Women’s Leadership Summit. The grant honors Sho-Ping Chin, FAIA, a Principal at Payette and the founding leader of the inaugural AIA Women’s Leadership Summit in 2009. Tragically, Sho-Ping succumbed to cancer in 2015, but her legacy of women’s leadership continues. The memorial fund established in her name is focused on funding the development of future women leaders in architecture.

In 2017, I was one of five fortunate recipients to receive the Sho-Ping Chin grant and this year, the foundation was able to award 11 Sho-Ping Chin grants. One of the recipients, Katty Brath, Assoc. AIA, is the AIA LI Associate Director, AIA LI WIA Committee member and AIA LI Emerging Professionals Co-Chair. Congratulations Katty on this achievement!

I look forward to attending the next AIAWLS in 2021 and to connect with even more architects from across the country, where we can share our own experiences, learn from each other, network and improve our leadership roles within the AEC industry.

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