MAYA LIN
in conversation
Records and responses to a conversation held in Umrath Hall at Washington University in St. Louis on November 17, 2016 between Maya Lin and Sam Fox School faculty and students
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Introduction

Natasha Tabachnikoff

In November of 2016, Women in Architecture + Design had the remarkable opportunity to host Maya Lin at the Sam Fox School. Ms. Lin’s works are evocative—they test the expressive qualities of land and material and create a unique experience of the liminal space between architecture, land art, and activism. As students and, particularly, as young women, we aspire to the personal self-assuredness and design confidence Maya Lin demonstrated under a harsh public eye in her college years. In recognition of her legacy and achievements, Ms. Lin was one of several artists honored last fall by President Barack Obama with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the country’s highest civilian honor. It is easy to put an architect of her stature on a pedestal, but we hoped with our event to subvert the traditional and hierarchical format of a lecture and instead, bring Ms. Lin into partnership with students.

By facilitating a dialogue between Sam Fox School students and Ms. Lin, we hoped to create an elevated and reciprocal
discourse around issues of shared urgency and intrigue. We gathered questions and sketches from interested students and faculty and aggregated a set of diverse and intriguing topics for our speaker to address. We selected subjects that felt most real to us as citizens and designers: developing the foundations of a process for making; how to be active participants in our education; the essential paradigm shift around gender equality and diversity in our field; and how to be outspoken in politics to protect civil rights and steward our environment. The issues and solutions we discussed will stay with us throughout our careers.

We would like to thank Dean Colangelo, Dean Lindsey, Professor Greer, our fellow students and many partners within the Sam Fox School, and, of course, the brilliant Maya Lin, for being a part of this event. We hope the conversation will provoke thoughtful response and design.
Submissions

Women in Architecture + Design’s board worked closely with Valerie Greer on this event, which she also expertly moderated. It was Professor Greer’s brilliant suggestion to solicit topics and sketches from the Sam Fox School community on notecards—a process that worked perfectly both for the event and in creating this publication. What follows are the collected inquiries of Sam Fox School students and faculty, along with their sketches. WIAD’s planning board made the initial selections, based on the thoughtfulness of the language and the diversity of interests. Ms. Lin chose the final list of questions.
Dear Maya Lin,

We know that you are the niece of Lin Huiyin, who is said to be the first female architect in China. And as for your famous Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Oppenheimer voiced objection because of your Asian ethnicity, and being female. How do you consider your identity in Architectural field? And, does Chinese culture have any influence on your ideas?

Over the past 2 years, I walked past the Novartis campus in Cambridge everyday and always wondered – how did you come up with such an interesting envelope design and how did you select the material?

What challenges you most in your work, and how do you reconcile that with your process as an artist/architect?
Questions:

1. You have always been known for designing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. But are there any other works that you wish people would associate your name to?

2. How does one judge the quality of art? Is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial a piece of memorial art or architecture?

What role do you think landscape architects can play in fostering artistic expression in the communities they work?

What keeps you being passionate for design? (When you have a hard time in a project process, what makes you keep going?)
Dear Maya,

On Wikipedia, you are identified as an "American designer and artist" instead of what most people associate you with, namely "architect." There is a fine line between architecture and art. How do you define these terms and how have they influenced your practice? Also, as an artist I would like to hear you talk more about your obsession with nature and landscape.

So few Asian artists/architects are included in history texts. How can we make the "mainstream" more diverse? Is that what we can be exposed to more kind of artist/architects?

Best,

Jonathan Stitelman
Alexis Vidaurreta
Micah Stanek
Jeehyun Choi
Yuei Pan
Tom Klein
Jackie Chen
Maya Lin answering questions
Bruce Lindsey (BL):
It is terrific to have you all here. But this evening’s discussion is really the result of the amazing work by amazing women that are a part of the Women in Architecture + Design group. These women pulled off something that, in the context of institutional time, is just phenomenal. Working to be able to have Maya join us after the lecture is a tremendous gift that Women in Architecture + Design has brought here tonight. I also want to thank Valerie Greer for agreeing to moderate the discussion tonight.

It has been amazing to see Maya's work over the years. I have some special news, which is that Maya will be honored with the Presidential Medal of Freedom this coming Tuesday. It's also worth remembering, especially since the theme of Maya's last memorial project is titled "Missing", to remember that Rachel Carson was recognized posthumously with the Presidential Medal of Freedom honored by President Carter. Please join me in welcoming Maya Lin.
Your work has a lot to do with finding the middle ground between boundaries. As somebody from two different cultures and backgrounds, can you talk about what it was like reconciling this? What it was like developing your process as a young designer? How has your background shaped your work?

ML:
I can’t decide if my love of opposites is as much an influence [on my work] as my East/West heritage. My parents are both from China: They came over, they fled, they met in the states. They didn’t really talk much about it growing up, so I was really kind of conflicted as to where home was. It left a little ambiguity. On top of that I have a left side and right side of the brain mindset and was a bit of a polyglot. I was as good in math and science as I was in English and the arts, and I couldn’t choose. I think that’s why I ended up pursuing both art and architecture because it tapped very differently into those two kind of ways in which I think and like to make
things. I've always felt the memorials have been that hybrid. There's a lot of research that goes into the memorials whereas making the art—I've always equated it to poetry, and making a mark and trying to actually keep it pure. You're always editing down and you're trying not to overthink it and over process it because if you overthink it you could actually kill the art in it. With ["What is Missing?"] I'm lost deep in the research. Now that doesn't mean at the end. When I get a little bit further along, I won't try to strip it down and part of it will become more my voice in art. But right now I have no idea what it's doing and I'm in the data driven, wonkiest part of it. In a weird way part of that is the art of it.

It's very different, but I think my heritage as well as for some odd reason the way my brain thinks informs my work. If you had talked in high school to my math teacher they would've said, "she's going into math." I love math. I was teaching myself COBOL and FORTRAN at [Ohio University College of Fine Arts] when was a junior and senior in high school. I love programming.
And then my English professor was convinced I’d go into writing. Boundaries is how I conceptualize a piece—in writing first. I think writing is one of the purest arts because you can get right to what you’re thinking. And then my dad was a ceramist so I was making things in his studio in clay since I was probably three-years-old, and I’ve never stopped.

But I don’t think that answers your question. It’s definitely something that’s coming out of a combination of being born with a love of both sides of the brain, and a feeling with parents who were immigrants, that where home is becomes a little bit ambiguous. You’re not quite sure and at times you feel like you’re in neither realm. In a weird way my choosing art and architecture and then—oh my god, she’s still doing the memorials—we have gone away from being compartmentalized. I don’t think a professor today would’ve said that they thought I won this competition and I was blowing it. Now we’re much more interdisciplinary in how we think, how we create things that are blurring [boundaries]. But at the same time we like to codify things. As creatures, we love to find the systems and it’s hard. As a polyglot, [people question] the landscapes and architecture and the memorials. To me they’re all one thing.

Francisco:
Could you talk a little bit more about as an architecture student, starting out developing your design process?

ML:
The funny thing is, I’ve been told by many a professor that I’m unteachable. When I got to Yale, with undergrad and grad, I almost had to kill off the formidable, analytic side of me. “Missing” is all about the analytical. I literally had to stop thinking and in a funny way I feel like I’m much more of an artist who happens to build buildings than I am an architect. There would be professors who would look at my work,
throw up their hands and say, “I can’t react to this. I don’t know, you’re just too intuitive for us.” I don’t process in an architectural way.

In fact, some of the questions that you’ve asked about codifying what we do and I try not to [distinguish between architecture and art], though I love architecture because it’s about problem solving, and you can definitely strip it down and find the art and the poetry out of it. How many of you are architects in this room?

[hands raised]

How many are artists?

[hands raised]

I think if I try to design a work of art, I kill it. I have a love/hate relationship with architecture. It’s not that I don’t love buildings, but I don’t think like an architect. I never have and I never probably will. I’m my father’s daughter, I’m kind of an artist who likes to build buildings sometimes.

BL:
You drew differently.

ML:
I drew really badly! I didn’t draw, I made models. I’m 3D. I couldn’t think my way, I could not make a decision if I wasn’t making a model. I can draw in plan, because plan is a path. So it’s slow, it is really slow. I remember in grad school, I brought in a model that was so big I could stand in it because I wanted to feel it and walk through it. And it wasn’t till I interned for Fumihiko Maki in Japan where they modeled everything and I felt like—phew.
But I literally was told in the second year of architecture school, “Well, Maya, we know you can make a model. You’re not allowed to make a model. You just have to draw.” It’s like putting blinders on me. I couldn’t think my way out of a paper bag at that point. It was the most cruel thing to do.

I definitely approach my design a little bit differently. What drives me crazy is that, in art, if you’re making a painting or you’re making a sculpture, you have the reasons why you’re doing it and you’re just not going to explain it to someone else. In architecture we have to get up and we have to [explain it]. And I think that’s what architecture school is, we have to defend our ideas. Sometimes I think we are explaining too much. We lose that sense of trusting that you are doing something because it feels right. There’s this nature to the profession that we have to get up and convince someone in the room to invest in us. I think that’s a good thing but be careful because pretty soon you’ll end up tricking yourself into thinking that what we’re saying about what we’re doing may be very different from what we’re actually doing. Anyways, I hope I answered your question.
How can design serve all human beings, transcending cultural and geological boundaries?
Mingxi Li asking her question
Question 2

*Mingxi Li*

*How do you find yourself navigating through both the field of architecture and that of fine arts at the same time? And how does that affect your conceptual approach and how your colleagues and collaborators each respond to your interdisciplinary practices? I’m also interested in your emotional or mental reaction to comments about your work.*

ML:
I didn’t realize when they were giving me this guidance when they said, “Don’t make models for the whole semester.” I tried. I didn’t make a model. My designs were the worst things I’ve ever seen. But it’s part of the teaching process and you trust that process. I got out of grad school and started working right away and making art as well as architecture. I’ll never forget, I ran into one of my professors after the civil rights memorial had come out. He looked at me and said, “I always knew you weren’t going to be an architect.” And I said, “Just you wait.”*
Thankfully, we’ve become more interdisciplinary. I think it would be a lot easier today, it is a little easier today, to do both the art and the architecture. It’s hard. I understand why I was told that I shouldn’t do both. It’s hard. And I don’t take on much architecture. Novartis [campus in Cambridge] was five years. I took nothing else. I said no to him three times before I finally met with the head of the research labs, Mark Fishman, and he said, “This is why we want you to work for us.” He was really talking about where science was and I really liked his approach. I thought he was incredibly enlightened but part of the reason I said no was because I’m really small as a studio.

I have three or four assistants working on art and architecture. I have two and a half assistants working on “Missing,” which is my little volunteer project I do on the side. The rest of the crew is like, “What about us?” It’s because I’m so crazy focused on “Missing.” I think fifty per cent of my time is devoted to “Missing.” Beyond that, right now I’m working on Smith University’s [Neilson] Library, and about five art commissions. It’s hard, I’m tired. But I love it. It’s so much fun. And again, I’m very lucky. I get to take on what I want to take on. But I’ve also decided consciously to stay very small and to not take on much. Because I really protect my freedom to choose what I want to do. But it’s a very unusual situation.
Question 3

Jenna Schnitzler

*How will the convergence of sculpture and architecture shape future building?*

ML:
I think at this point, starting with Gaudi and then there is Frank and then there is Zaha, there have been brilliant architects whose buildings are as much sculpture as they are architecture. I think that is exciting. I think this wouldn't be constructed if it weren't for the computer, to figure out these insane curves.

I'm a little funny because I chose not to make my architecture sculpture. What I want is that in between ground. To me it's all about that tension between the gestural and the orthogonal. I like the tension point between the two. Rather than make it purely fluid, I almost call it Jazz.

When you look at one of Zaha's buildings, they're incredible,
and they’re both sculpture and architecture. And for some odd reason because I’m doing my sculptures, I really didn’t want to go that route. I’m playing with something else. One of my pet peeves for architects is that when art is commissioned to go into a building, the art is commissioned after the building has been designed, which means the dialogue is one way. The art isn’t influencing or interacting with the building. The art now has to genuflect and work around the building. And it would just be great if they brought in the artist as they were bringing in the architect. Heaven forbid the architect has to allow for a true dialogue where the art is actually influencing the building. I’ve been in too many buildings where the hand of the architect has been so loud they’re almost trying to compete with the art and in a museum space it creates a non-neutral reading of the artwork. To me it leaves off the potential of allowing art to come in, to build the art and the architecture together. It’s a one way street and I’d rather it be something much more about that dialogue. It could get more interesting that way. I don’t think we’ve seen that happen much.
Jared Crane posing his question
Question 4

Jared Crane

If you were a young architecture student today, what would you look for in your education?

ML:
I kind of regret that we’re not taught in architecture about the psychology of space. We’re taught on a more formal or theoretical level. I actually think architecture lends itself to be one of these amazing interdisciplinary educational opportunities. You could be running to the art history department, you could be running over to the science department and take a course in psychology, in psychiatry. To me, I really regret not taking a psychology course. I took some social psychology courses but so much about what architecture is about the human condition and how we interact. If you walk into a room and it’s been painted red verses if you walk into a room and it’s been painted green or yellow, you’re going to feel totally different. And they don’t teach that, we don’t talk about it. Is it taught here now? Run
over to the psychology department and take some psychology courses because you have access to that in a great university. I would say please go do it. I don't know what could come out of it but it would be really interesting. To get yourself out of the architecture school and explore some other disciplines. That's my pet peeve.

VG:
Well it probably applies to art as well.

ML:
Yes. But I think it’s more for architects because we have to think about the urban fabric, we have to think about buildings. The psychology of spaces is a topic if you read Bachelard, if you read Experiencing Architecture by Rasmussen. Even if you read more of Scully’s work, it was coming out of the 60’s, it was a much more humanist and more about psychological experiences. Then we just stopped talking about it that way. But it might be really interesting to go take a course over in the psychology department.
IF YOU WERE A YOUNG ARCHITECTURE STUDENT TODAY, WHAT WOULD YOU LOOK FOR IN YOUR EDUCATION?

Jared Crane
Natasha Tabachnikoff asking her question
Question 5

Natasha Tabachnikoff

You’ve spoken previously on issues on gender and representation in architecture. I’m wondering how your views on this have changed as you’ve grown from student to one of the most looked-up-to women in the field? And also what changes you envision for greater equity of achievement and recognition in the field.

ML:
First question back to you is, what did I say about gender?

Natasha:
Us on Exec were looking at a quote in Architectural Record that was questioning why the 50-50 gender split in university and then such a lack of women in leadership and in higher levels of the field.

ML:
I think it’s still unfortunately like that. I don’t know why. It shouldn’t be. It’s kind of fascinating. I witnessed it in my first
job when I was in D.C. There were two partners, both male, and there was a pack of designers, three of them, all men, and women were doing the managerial roles in the office, running projects. I thought, “That’s strange,” and I don’t know if it’s changed that much. The ones being groomed up were the guys and I bet it’s the same now. And fifty per cent or more being trained are women. Where are they going? I do think it’s hard if the principles choose the hot shots and they’re a boy’s club. My guess is it’s still that way or we’d see many more lead women architects, designers heading their firms.

And also, just in my experience, a lot of times I’m putting an artwork in a building and that boy’s pack of designers is still there after all these years. It’s such a subjective view of why would there be a weird bias. No, unfortunately I think the gender inequity is still there.

VG:
I definitely empathize. From my own experience acknowledge the disjunction that happens between what is acknowledged as being a designer as opposed to what’s being acknowledged as leadership and management. I think that women’s role at the design table needs to be fought for. It is something backed by momentum of history. In terms of thinking about changes for the future, I think advocating for women as designers is one good way.

ML:
There’s an article that Martin Fuller just wrote and it said that I’ve led an odd career arc. I’m viscously protective that my studio stays microscopic. There’s maybe five or six of us. I delegate to one, there’s no tiers. If I’m designing buildings with my assistants, I’m working with each one of them one on one and there’s only so many people I can do that with before my head explodes. I think in this article by Fuller he says, “Maya’s perceived lack of ambition,” because I had said
no to another artist three times and that’s unheard of in the architecture profession. I don’t think it’s a lack of ambition, I think it’s a choice. Maybe it’s a choice a guy wouldn’t take because the goal is small. “Bigger the better, 100 to 200 man office, flying all over the world.” I’ve known a few women who want that. It’s not my ambition to fly all over the world and to be delegating to my team on an airplane. It’s not that you’re not controlling or making fantastic works or architecture but I have absolutely no desire [to do that.]

In fact I don’t have an office, I don’t have a firm. I have a studio. Am I not ambitious? Maybe not in the way they think ambition is. It’s different. I like being home at night. I now have a 19-year-old and 17-year-old. In the last twenty years, I was home for dinner as much as I could. I don’t travel much, I’m very protective of my family life. You juggle a lot. But at the same time, am I not ambitious? It’s an interesting take on it and it’s different. No, I have no desire or want to have ten people around me. It’s looked upon in our profession as a little odd. Whatever.

Andrea Godshalk
Question 6

*Rita Wang*

*How do you think technology such as virtual reality and autonomous design will play into the design process and education in both the present and future.*

**ML:**
I chose that [question] because I have no idea what it means. I’m going to throw it over to Bruce for a second. Let’s hear how you think and then I’ll respond to it. Because I’m so hands on, I’m like a pterodactyl. I mean, I had a flip phone until earlier this year, I’m such a technophobe.

**BL:**
I think we often have a misunderstanding about what technology does. I’m not sure technology changes. It engages us in different ways and I think that we tend to confuse that with significant change. That’s not to say technology doesn’t influence and impact how we design, in particular how we build buildings. At the same time the counterpart
to technology is that it increases our own awareness of the different ways of making. That increases the attention to, for instance, what is not technology. It happens that the tradition of hand-making and hand-drawing have been increased by the increasing level of technology in design. Virtual reality and autonomous design have been around for a long time. Linear perspective was a form of virtual reality. Autonomous design is an interesting idea. There’s something there relative to how nature designs that we can learn from and I don’t think it means that it’s mindless or automatic, it happens in a way that aggregates a lot of smaller decisions into complex arrangements that can have really important impact. I think that’s a little bit of a way designers are starting to think like nature, in the way that they work.

ML:
I think someone dropped off the [Sam Fox School] core catalogue and [I saw] student work that is tracking the movement of clouds and the movement of birds. In a funny way, I incredibly and heavily rely on technological advances in scientific instrumentation in my art. But in my architecture it’s much more basic. It’s much more about path and about a very simple understanding of material and path and form. I’m almost avoiding it in my architecture. But it’s absolutely expressing itself in all my sculptures. I’m loving seeing the new datasets of the ocean floor. Like how James Cameron goes down in Challenger Deep—I want to get that data. I want to know what’s in the deepest point of the ocean. But again I made a conscious decision that my architecture and my art are these separate, formal entities. I’m actually using the technology to explore the earth. I’m kind of being a cartographer. Everything I saw in the core catalogue is beautiful. The tracking of bird flight, the tracking of motion is getting expressed. And I think you’re going to see much more of that in the architectural profession.
VG:
This is the question that is sensitive to all of us especially in light of the last two weeks. But thinking about the future and the impact that art and architecture will have: in light of contemporary and future issues including poverty, pollution, environmental crisis, political unrest, how can architects and designers solve some of the problems we face today in ways others may not be able to?

ML:
I think we’re going to have to think in a very interdisciplinary manner. I think you’re going to have to work with economists, you’re going to have to work with social scientists, you are actually going to have to work with scientists, because a lot of the problems we face are converging. And whether it’s this huge separation of the 1% to the massive resource threats because of climate change, or even out and out resource consumption, to emergency shelters. So much of this is happening before our eyes. The UN predicted ten years ago that there might be almost 50 million climate refugees and they were made to recant that. Last year I think there were 43 million refugees driven in part by climate. If you look at the conflict in Syria, you can trace it back in part to a massive drought that was happening that caused food prices to spike. I think we should be in absolute communication with everyone from the economists to the social psychologists. Take advantage of that opportunity. Don’t try to solve it in a vacuum. That being said, there is brilliant stuff coming out. It’s not just necessarily urban design, but an emergency shelter that has to be put up or how we’re going to deal with the desertification of Africa. There’s going to be major flashpoints over water, over basic food, over clean air. There’s immediate needs and architects are really getting involved doing emergency shelters and refugee shelters. But also there are people designing a water wheel for areas where women have to carry water for long distances. So someone designed
In old times, Architecture focused more on Art and crafts. As time passed, current Architecture Design gradually shifts its focus to Technology.

Q: In the near future, Technology & Art, which one will be more important, or take more proportion in Architectural Design? How to find a balance between two?

Btw: About VR, will VR be put into Architecture Field in the future?

Rita Wang
a plastic wheel that they could fill with water and wheel it home. Be a part of that. There’s so much we’re going to have to design to help people.

If we green our cities, it’s 70 per cent of all climate reductions. So I think one of the biggest things we could do is really think not about individual buildings being green but begin to think of the fabric of the city itself and how we green an entire city. And please don’t forget the inputs and outputs, like how to feed the city, where is the food coming from, what is happening to the waste. I talked to the people at Freshkills Park. They can’t do anything. You can’t plant trees because there are so many toxins. They put all these millimeter-thick plastics down, cap it because it’s so toxic, and put some soil on it. But you can’t puncture that layer. Why are we putting anything toxic in the ground? Why aren’t we creating massive recycling hubs around those super-state areas? The amount of money that we can gain from the rare metals would pay for these centers. We need to start thinking on a much bigger scale than building-to-building.
Do you think it is possible to greatly increase the efficiency of architecture design and construction with the help of advanced technology (such as AI)?
Question 7

*Kahlil Irving*

*How do you push against the system and call out inequities? How do we fight to work to make green cities when society is normalized to destroy, to be destructive, and to be violent?*

ML:
You're thinking negatively. If you'll notice, everything I have done, I tend to think positively. Because my attitude is that the cities are changing. We have made massive gains in climate reductions. An average person living in New York City has a carbon footprint of six tons. It used to be twelve. It's dropped significantly under Mayor Bloomberg whether it's planting a million trees to changing the fuel.

My attitude is there's so much political goodwill at the city and state level. We've been kind of broken at the federal level for a while. How many politicians really mention climate change, because they think it's political poison, other than Bernie.
It’s horrible, what they’re proposing to do, but get involved. A really bad genie was just let out of the bottle. If you see racism, declare it, report it, discuss it. You can’t suppress it. But at the same time, you have to have hope. Especially now. And hope has to turn into action right now because it might be our only recourse. We’re not broken at the city or the state level and a lot can be done and a lot is being done. Volunteer, get active, get educated, we have no choice at this point. And I think we have to move very quickly because [your generation] is going to have to bear the burden of it. I think politicians have always been afraid they’re not going to get elected so they’re going to tell you what you want to hear rather than what you have to hear. But I still believe we have to try to change things because we can.

Go to WhatIsMissing.org. We can turn this around overnight. Yes, we’re waiting for a battery and yes, we’re waiting for a technological advances in concrete. Other than that, if we practice best practices around the world, that’s 50 per cent of climate gas emissions right there. So we’re doing it. I think the mistake now would be to think it’s hopeless and to get so upset and angry that you give up. Right now I would say is the time to be crazy optimistic. You can actually do a lot to make a difference.
How can architects and designers solve the problems we face today, in ways that others might not be able to?
In your first talk earlier tonight, you talked about your earth works and how you really enjoyed the tension between your organic lines and inorganic lines. When you made your “Wave” pieces you were referring to them as interactive (when they cut spaces and you could sit in them) but then when you had the piece that had the cows on the dairy farm--

ML:
Quite the contrary, if you’ve driven by one of those horrible cow lots, have you noticed there’s always a mound in the middle of the lot? Top dog. The cow likes to be on there. We actually had to get permission because this was a state of the art organic dairy. I literally showed what I was going to do and we wanted to make sure that the cows weren't going to be adversely affected. No one guessed that the cows actually liked being above the other cows. It’s kind of cute actually. Sorry. I deviated from what you were asking.
Allie:
I was wondering when you were creating these Earthworks and had other animals you weren't expecting to be there?

ML:
Absolutely. Storm King [Art Center] Wavefield. Two of the rows had underground water flows through them. We didn't put in any plastic drainage, we literally gathered the rocks that were there and made our own natural drainage ditched underneath the stones. Those two last rows are a little moister than the rest and so when you go through them—butterflies. Incredible butterflies. It's kind of magical as you walk through them. One time I was out there with the EPA, because we had to open up a brownfield site and they were so excited that an artwork ends up becoming a brownfield mediation site.

Now the other wildlife that loved the wet field was woodchucks. And after the first year, it looked like a woodchuck condominium. It was not a good thing. It actually looked like someone was throwing grenades out there. So they actually had them trapped and relocated because they were getting problematic. The only other thing was in Sweden where they had a massive problem, like we do in certain parts of the country, with feral pigs. It looks like a grenade field as you go through it. And they always and will continue to enjoy wild boar bolognese. But they've been doing it before because these are feral animals that are native and they actually destroy the fields and meadows. I don't think my piece actually attracted them more or less. The woodchucks we had to move along.
what do you believe needs to change most about modern art/architecture?

Kaitlyn Schwalber
What do you believe needs to be changed most about modern art and architecture in terms of content and target audience and what do you think we as students can do to create that change?

ML:
I don't think you want to change. Art is really a reflection of each individual person. Art generally tends to be a voice of our time. The making of art, the object of art is it's own existing, it's your voice.

The one thing that's a little embarrassing right now is the price of art and I have this horrible feeling we're in this moment in time that art might be looked upon years from now as being like Holland during the Tulip craze, when one painting could have sustained the National Endowment of the Arts for the entire year. What is going on? Now art itself, the object is still the object, whether it's a dollar or a hundred million dollars—only time is going to tell. The price of art, like the sea level, changes.
As an artist, I certainly don't want to be a part of an era labeled as the tulip craze. Are we the indicator of the greatest disparity in wealth, the greatest excesses of the time? 1.3 billion of us are having the biggest party in the world and if the whole world consumed like Americans, we'd need five planets. The opposite question is how many Americans can live on the planet. And it's something like less than 2 billion of us. Whereas how many Indians could live on the planet? 14 billion. I find art to be so critical and vital to who we are and at the same time I'm a little embarrassed by where we are and how we're valuing things. We're in a very high point in the arc of a moment of excess that is incredible. You're hoping that will stop but not sure what it's going to be.

I think architecture, because it's a functional art form, right now we have a massive responsibility in architecture to be responsive to and to be solving the problems of climate change. I think we could be such a part of the solution. That's the potential.

I think in art, art has to be itself. There are artists out there whose art is very functional or is very much about advocacy. I sort of used the memorials that way. But you don't want to always say that art has to have a social consciousness. Well that's if you are an artist with that sort of a bend. Art has to be a lot more individualistic and a lot more egocentric in a way. Whereas architecture is the exact opposite. We have almost an obligation to make the world a better place.

VG:
Thank you. Thank you very much.

Ruth Blair:
Really quickly right now I want to invite up the Women in Architecture Executive Board because we all worked really hard to plan all the little details, although we didn't have to do the
hardest part. Thank you to both of our deans, one of whom is not able to be here because he is hosting dinner as deans must do sometimes. Thank you to everyone—thank you for coming, thank you for your support—and thank you Maya.

Letao Zhang, Natasha Tabachnikoff, Valerie Greer, Maya Lin, Ruth Blair Moyers, Elise Wang, Alexis Vidaurreta, Jennifer Li, Yulin Peng, Bruce Lindsey
Gravity as Glue

Micah Stanek
Maya Lin + Urban Design

Linda Samuels

“The mistake now would be to think it’s hopeless and to get so upset and angry that you give up. It’s time to be crazy optimistic. You can actually do a lot to make a difference.” – ML

The minute Maya Lin began speaking I was transported. I had not met her in person before, but I had heard her voice many times as I watched and then shared with my students the award-winning documentary, Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision. The film is both the story of the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial competition, in all its celebration and controversy, and the first flicker of what we now recognize as a substantial and meaningful life of creative work. Lin’s intonations, her precise cadence—her way of putting words into the room—seemed, in the film, at first affected, then painfully careful. As she started answering questions from the attendees in Umrah Lounge, I heard instead her voice from the film—her description of two simple lines on paper, the reversal of figure and ground they indicated, and the value of poetics and making space for memory that more literal and normative monuments on the
mall still fail to do (see, for example, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial). That slow, punctilious selection of words would confront the naysayers (and worse, the racists) who labeled her design a scar and her own identity too foreign, too Asian (and, perhaps less overtly, too female and too small) to be granted the task. Maya Lin, a feisty 21-year-old, grew to prominence as the tenacious agent of the century’s quintessential anti-monument. When I heard her voice this past fall, that is who I saw (though in reality she is far more relaxed and conversational these twenty-plus years later). Would she be the person she is now had she not won? We will never know, nor does it matter, as her work that followed has held fast to the same disciplinary fluidity and commitment to meaning that is design’s highest purpose.

The later memorials have continued the experiment one beautiful, poetic object at a time. The Civil Rights Memorial is another brilliant black slab, this time curved in a circular timeline and covered in the optimism of flowing water. All are commentaries on material qualities—weight, reflectivity, coolness—as much as commentaries on human (bad) behavior.

But her work is shifting now, as she recognizes that objects—even the beautiful and meaningful—are no match for the speed and scale of the damage we are doing to the world around us. Her newest project, “What is Missing?”, seems all consuming, and how can it not be? Faced with “an obligation to make the world a better place”—a sentiment she and I (and many in attendance) share—one pristine object at a time is a luxury we can no longer afford. As she talked of Syrians as climate change refugees—a crisis resulting from drought that brought spikes in food prices and, ultimately, deadly competition for resources—she appealed to the audience to think interdisciplinarily on the pressing problems of cities and, yes, infrastructure. Her example of the rolling water wheel (Hans and Pieter Hendrikse’s Q-Drum project, featured in
the 2008 book *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism* is one of many infrastructural dilemmas designers have taken on in the past few decades of emerging design activism. We are working on water, sanitation, food scarcity, informal settlements, transportation, incarceration, borders, pollution.... The boundaries of designers are broader than ever, as is the call for better, deeper, and more rigorous knowledge. Maya Lin is not only an artist and an architect, but she encapsulates the very interdisciplinarity and mission of an urban designer.

“What is Missing?” is its own indicator species—her activism is no longer about what has happened in the past (be it last decade or last week); memorialization is too late. In this age of globalization and instant media, we must engage in what is happening while it is happening, before it is too late.

Back on the Washington University campus, in a room of future designers in conversation with Maya Lin, I hope the questions that were asked were only vague hints to the passions that were present. Listen not to the answers, but to the actions, I say; her words may be less scrupulous in casual conversation, but the razor-sharp precision of her work perseveres. Maya Lin exemplifies the fact that gender, origin, and discipline don’t matter nearly as much as content and commitment, even though they may contribute to defining it (or not). The most powerful statement we make is not what we look like or which bathroom we use, but the quality and content of the work we give the world regardless of its resistance to us—or perhaps in spite of it. Certainly, we must root out the barriers, but we must also own and deliver the strides we each contribute in the march to making the world a better place through design. I suggest we use her quiet clearing to widen that path.
It was a remarkable experience for me to meet Maya Lin—I still remember taking her Chinese biography off of my mother’s bookshelf to read when I was a child. Now a decade later and half a world away, I got the opportunity to meet her and ask her the questions I have always been curious about.

Four years ago, when I was deciding on my major, it occurred to me after visiting and reflecting upon Ms. Lin’s works, that architecture might be an option. As a student passionate about sculpture, I often found myself imagining them to be human-scale structures that have a psychological impact on viewers. Ms. Lin’s works truly affirmed that that approach is not just feasible, but impactful, both on an individual level and on a larger social scale. Upon meeting her in person, I asked about her interdisciplinary approach to architecture and fine arts. It has always amazed me how she had the rigor to navigate through two extremely demanding fields of practice and essentially chisel out her unique career path. Architecture
How do you find yourself navigating through both the field of architecture and that of fine art at the same time? How does that affect your conceptual approach? How do people in each field respond to your interdisciplinary practices?
as a field of practice is already notorious for its long hours, and individual artists take on perhaps even more pressure in realizing their independent projects.

Her response, as I expected, was extremely relatable and oddly reassuring. At one point, she looked me straight in the eye and said, “It’s hard, I’m tired.” It’s hard to take on an interdisciplinary approach because people still conceive of architecture as functional space for social interactions, and sculptures as artistic objects to be placed within afterwards. It’s hard because her process necessitates a small studio size in order to maintain a one-on-one communication process, which, in turn, limits the number of projects she can take on. It’s hard in terms of time management, because she also dedicates nearly half of her time to her research project. In her I saw equally strong passions for art, architecture, and environmental science; I saw an urge to express herself through fine arts and a no less powerful sense of obligation in civic engagement. It’s hard because she simply had to weave her interests into their own complicated entity. Yet, somehow she was able to push through. And, in the end, she believes she was fortunate to have the opportunity to choose what she wanted to take on.
WIAD member Ruth Blair Moyers
Acknowledgements

Yulin Peng

Women in Architecture + Design was honored to host Maya Lin for a cross-disciplinary conversation at the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts at Washington University in St. Louis on November 17, 2017.

As the first female artist since Georgia O’Keeffe to win the Presidential Medal of Freedom, Maya Lin has overcome many gender and racial barriers in her remarkable career. Though she humbly described herself to be “not ambitious” in terms of project scope, office size and lifestyle, her prominence despite the impediments before her and her presence on the night sent a strong motivational message for designers in minority groups and students at Sam Fox School.

At the time WIAD hosted Maya Lin, she was grieving the recent election result. “What just happened is so bad,” she said, reflecting on her lifelong efforts advocating for environmental preservation. She lamented how the new
presidency might have detrimental effects on clean energy companies and other environmentally friendly institutions. Ms. Lin addressed similar concerns at the White House on the following Tuesday when she accepted the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Obama. In such a divided world with an unpredictable future, artists like Ms. Lin remind us to be hopeful and to work for what is right. Her empathy and optimism inspired many in the audience. Talking with her at this particular moment held significance for WIAD.

We would like to express our gratitude to the following individuals for their contributions to this important event. Thank you to professor Valerie Greer for her expert counsel and for moderating the event. Thanks to Ruth Blair Moyers, president of WIAD, for designing this book, and for her role in advertising the event. To Natasha Tabachnikoff, who designed the elegant tickets and membership buttons for our audience. To Letao Zhang, who designed and assembled our “notecard cake” displayed on event night. To Sam Fox School staff members Ellen Bailey, Amanda Bowles, and Melinda Compton Carter, for their generous assistance in planning the event and producing this book. To our advisor, Elisa Kim, and executive members Jenny Li, Elise Wang, and Alexis Vidaurreta, for their invaluable guidance and assistance. To Dean Lindsey for his help and for bestowing the affectionate moniker “Exceptionalism Board” on our excellent team. And to Dean Colangelo, for his enthusiastic support of this event.
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