



DISRUPTING PRACTICE

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Disrupting Practice

Evelyn Lee

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AIA 2025 President-elect Evelyn Lee shares her agenda for change.

DesignIntelligence (DI): We are talking with Evelyn Lee, the recently elected AIA president in 2025, president-elect in 2024. Congratulations, and welcome.

Evelyn Lee (EL): Thank you.

DI: I’ve interviewed a handful of AIA presidents in my book, “Managing Design,” but this is my first opportunity to talk with one fresh from celebrating a victory. The national election just finished in San Francisco in June. How are you feeling?

EL: I’m feeling pretty optimistic at this point. I was exhausted, and I went through a period of asking myself: What do I do now, especially immediately after the campaign? Now that it’s happened, requests on my time have been rolling in. Things were filling up even before the election ended, and now the 1:1’s have really begun to pick up again. I’m not in any official capacity right now, not even on the AIA board, but it’s been great to see the enthusiasm.

DI: You were off on a break after the election. Did you go somewhere fun?

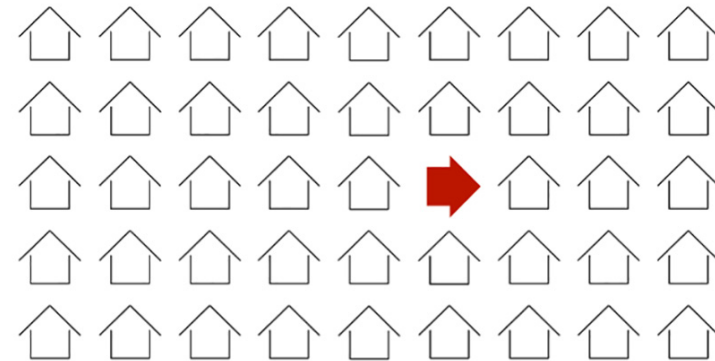
EL: We planned a family vacation earlier in the year — a bit of a family reunion in Florida with my dad’s side of the family, and then we went up to North Carolina to visit my in-laws. Some nice family time.

DI: Happy to hear that you are refreshed and recharged. First, thank you, from me and thousands of others for your commitment to serving this crazy business we all love. You’ve made a huge commitment to serving the practice of architecture. Can you share how your decision unfolded and when you decided to run?

EL: I had a lot of encouragement. When you're on the board and have served in leadership for as long as I have — I've been involved in AIA leadership for 20 years — you get a lot of encouragement from the leaders who came before you to continue to step up. I've tried to pass this same kind of encouragement on to other individuals as well. I officially said yes to running for AIA president as I was finishing my role as the first female treasurer of AIA National. That was toward the end of 2021, when you had to formally announce at the annual meeting in December. I actually ran last year and lost to Kimberly Dowdell, our 2024 president. I then took a good, long, reflective break before deciding to do it all over again and run this year.

DI: I'm glad to hear that kind of support network is in place and continues to be strong. Kudos to you for your persistence and for continuing to pass on the encouragement. I have a sense of your agenda, but I'd like to dive into that more. You're carrying an important mantle for one of the biggest issues in our profession these days as a woman president, the AIA's third in a row. That's a clear indication of the demand for continued change in a profession that has been predominantly led for decades by white males. Will correcting the imbalance in women and people of color and diversity within the profession continue to be a point of emphasis?

EL: When Kimberly Dowdell ran, even her past focus as NOMA president was about increasing the diversity pipeline for architects. We've been talking ever since she graciously opened herself up for dialogue while I was campaigning. I'd say my campaign is complimentary to hers, what she hopes to do there. A big part of who she represents as the first Black woman as AIA National president is to ensure we expand the pipeline. My concentration has always been on designing and building better architecture businesses, ensuring we don't have a leaking pipeline and answering the question: How do we make the decision to stay in practice as great as any alternative to choose a different path?



PRACTICE DISRUPTED

with Evelyn Lee and Je'Nen Chastain

Image courtesy Evelyn Lee

DI: Your podcast, “Practice Disrupted,” which you co-created with Je’Nen Chastain, by its very title conveys the impression that change is afoot in the architectural profession. Why is change needed, and what is your focus for doing that?

EL: As somebody who has left the profession, this might sound a bit odd, but I've said this publicly numerous times: My critique of the profession and the industry is not because of my dislike of it. It's just the opposite. Ultimately, I just didn't see a place for myself in the traditional roles within the profession, and that is why I had to leave it and approach my desire for change from a different vantage point.

My focus is on the business of architecture — how the business of architecture needs to change, expand and evolve. One example I cite often is that there are great leaders in firms right now that would love to be able to provide parental leave for new parents. In the tech field, working at a company like Salesforce, for example, parents get six months' parental leave for new-borns and growing families. That's a benefit that architecture firms, especially small- and medium-sized ones, have a hard time competing with because they simply can't afford it. If people aren't billable for that long, how do they provide the overhead to support individuals to do that? For me, a lot of these equity issues requires that we change the business model or perhaps developing new models of business for the practice so that we can, in fact, treat our employees as well as we want to treat them.



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DI: What other issues are top of mind?

EL: Changing the business of architecture is a huge challenge, especially within a one-year term of office as president. But the other issues that are always top of mind are how we talk about the value of architecture. We have a lot of people sitting at many different tables who can speak to the value we bring as architects. Not only within the built environment, but from a broader perspective, opening up our institute and our profession to find a new way... I like to call us outsiders. To find a new way to bring fresh, previously unconsidered perspectives and experience sets or valuable folks who might have left the profession back into the AIA as an organization and back with us architects as well as others trained as architects who have pursued different paths. I've always said, just because they might have left the profession of architecture, I don't believe their love of architecture went away. How we reconnect with those individuals is top of mind for me, as well as changing the business. So much of each of these issues — changing the business, increasing the value of architecture and bringing outsiders back in — is in the forefront of our minds and in line with what we're seeing from the next generation coming into practice.

Generation Z is really committed to their communities. They are very vocal about working for socially-drive or mission driven organizations that allows them to grow in multiple ways, not always following a linear path. They want to work in mission driven organizations that allow them to have a life beyond work. How do we begin to do all that within architecture? That's the question. How you look not only in terms of the business model, but also on the entire employee experience side.

DI: Years ago, I had the opportunity to do a project with IDEO, the first firm I was exposed to that had someone called “director of employee experience”. What a wonderful thing to focus on and a great need in the profession of architecture — all hopefully directed so we can enhance our clients’ experiences. It’s time to redirect the focus away from ourselves and our buildings and shift it to our clients and constituents.

EL: Right.

DI: Your decision to leave traditional practice was significant. Can you tell us about that?

EL: It was a decision only made more difficult by architects themselves. We are often taught that there is only one path to leadership within the industry and to step away from that path was unimaginable. Ultimately, when I made my decision to change course, I went back to school for an MBA and an MPA, a master’s in public administration.

DI: When I find a fellow disrupter like you, a kindred spirit, it’s funny because it points out: Who among us is trained to be a change agent? We didn’t get that in our insular cultures in traditional architecture school. We’re trained to believe we’re great collaborators and great leaders, but do we really have those skills? You did something to rectify that. I commend you for taking action to retool yourself. Did going back to school arm you for the road ahead?

EL: It offered me a better understanding and appreciation of what was happening outside of architecture. If you look at the professional development of architects, whether it’s Continuing Education Units (CEUs) or the type of programs architects tend to go to, it’s all about project management. Beyond project management, we could do so much more around practice management, business and entrepreneurship.

Going back to school made it clear that *we think we are so special*. In many instances, we don’t believe we can learn from other industries. But other industries are trying to be innovative and be thought leaders, and they’re running similar design teams. There’s a lot we can learn from other industries about managing those kinds of high-performance teams. If anything, going back and getting my MBA clarified what we aren’t doing.

DI: Tell us more about your background. Did you explore traditional paths in school and practice? How did you come to realize that traditional practice was not for you? Who did you work with? How did your eyes open?

EL: There were several aspects. I was never the best designer in school. I realized that. A part of me always wondered where I fit in the profession. If I’m leaving school to not be a designer, what will I do? So, I worked at a firm called WD Partners, and I was doing site adaptations for Home Depot stores. Commercial work. What attracted me to WD Partners was they were working on branding with franchises and how you carry branding all the way through to the built environment. That interested me. Then, I worked at a firm called Dougherty and Dougherty. They were acquired by Perkins Eastman a few years ago. With them, I was doing K-12 schools and community buildings. The last built project I worked on was the Newport Coast Community Center, a project I got to see through from conception to completion, but I also worked on quite a few schools in California. Part of that process was going through the Department of the State Architects in a low bid environment with contractors.

I was set off by the fact that we worked with a lot of horrible contractors who were looking for errors in our drawings so they could change-order their way to their profit. The fact that the system was setting us up for failure was not very exciting for me, and there’s nothing that can fix that, unless we change the low



bid process, which is a valuable cause to try to change. In short, working in that environment was really off-putting for me.

DI: I share your pain. I was fortunate in my career to be exposed to CM at Risk and collaborative approaches with great partners that kept me going longer.

EL: But what I discovered through that experience is that I really liked project management and the construction administration side of things. Also, organizational design, building in better operations, processes and policies to gain efficiencies. I lean into that now with the work I do.

DI: Were there any epiphanies, events or realizations — so good or so bad — that dramatically altered your course? Any light-bulb, serendipitous or milestone moments along the way?

EL: No, it was cumulative. The biggest thing I was fighting was everything I had learned in school, in practice, in the AIA and in all the time I had invested getting to this point, do I step away from that? And if I step away from that, where do I go? That was ultimately the biggest struggle I had internally.

It was a number of things building up over time and then finding an opportunity to take a break away from that. I went to work for a nonprofit organization called Public Architecture, which has since closed. But that was the chance I needed to reflect on my next steps in the industry.

DI: I appreciate your honesty. Who were and are your mentors or important peers?

EL: I have a lot of incredible mentors who have helped me through different times throughout my career, all of them gained through friendship with my AIA involvement. They include the other seven past female national presidents, including Helene Dreiling, FAIA; Kate Schwennsen, FAIA; Elizabeth Chu Richter, FAIA; and the current president, Emily Grandstaff-Rice, FAIA.

DI: A stellar list to be sure. A historic, courageous group.

EL: Thank you. I'm honored to be a part of it.

DI: How would you describe your leadership style? As the head of an organization of 100,000 egotistical architects, you'll be faced with influencing and setting direction for an incredibly diverse group of constituents. Some are practicing in one-person firms and drawing by hand, others are global giants pushing the edge of digital practice. Some believe sustainability is the only agenda item and others simply work on, oblivious to the impacts of their projects. You will lead fringe factions as well as the mainstream you propose to disrupt. How do you plan to build momentum and move the needle for all of practice — a discipline which seems more than ever to need its direction reset? How do you find the common threads?

EL: A lot of what I do at Slack and what I have been doing involves listening and driving toward consensus. I am most interested in understanding the various needs of all our members. An interesting paradox is that many small firms feel like AIA's leadership only listens to the large firms, and the large firms feel like we only serve the small firms. If that's the case, I sometimes wonder who are we truly serving well.

I feel like, and heard this often throughout the campaign, that there is greater need for business acumen and entrepreneurship throughout the AIA and throughout the profession. I believe the need for better leadership development in general, and finding outside inspiration for leadership, is going to continue. But I will always have my ear to the ground when it comes to trying to understand what our members are struggling with most.

There are a lot of ways to reach me. Many people reach out to me on LinkedIn to talk to me and open conversations. Another thing about my leadership is, and I say this candidly, my mind is



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always open to change. I believe that everyone grows and changes over time. That's the natural progression of personal growth.

I would also say my convictions can be changed over time if the correct case presents itself. As a leader, I'm always open to navigating through what change means. When do we need to lean further into change and when must we also rely on history, what we've done in the in the past in the AIA, to inform our decisions going forward?

DI: Those are leadership attributes, to listen and be adaptive. One potential critique of the AIA, as an organization with many factions, is that it could be said that the AIA has been historically focused on maintaining the status quo. But perhaps a little boat-rocking is in order. To do that, some have said we must work at larger scales, at systemic government and legislative levels, using interdisciplinary alliances to generate real impact. Do you agree? If so, what are you considering in this regard as first priorities?

EL: The AIA already works with and has strong relationships with many other organizations, especially when it comes to advocacy. If anything, one of the first things we can do is be better communicators about all the work already being done. I feel like a lot of our membership doesn't even understand half of the work we are doing on their behalf.

DI: Probably true.

EL: In the advocacy area especially. We are sending a delegation to COP 23, so we're interested in organizations immediately adjacent to the built environment. But we're also reaching out to other organizations with even bigger impact on world economies and decisions. We're trying to make sure we have a seat at the table.

DI: What do you love to do most?

EL: I really appreciate talking about the future of the profession and understanding, especially from up-and-coming leaders and even new graduates, where they see their careers going forward. I like to work on how we can start designing now for an organization and an industry that provides a place for them. How do we do that? Those are the conversations that get me excited.

DI: Can you share your vision for the architectural profession in 10 years? Dream for us. Disrupt our comfort zones.

EL: If anyone can conceive of what our profession looks like 10 years from now, I would be surprised. I imagine there are going to be many more roles we didn't even think could exist in the profession. Due to technology and the pace of change, we can't even predict them. If anything, my hope is always going to be that our profession has greater influence and is more widespread than ever before. That the voice of architects in the built environment and in our communities is elevated. That would mean our profession is strong and doing well.

I used to love these kinds of questions when I was a new graduate and people asked me, "Where do you see yourself in five to 10 years?" But as somebody who's been in the profession 20 years, I can't say where I want to be five years from now. That's because of how quickly change happens and the fact that career paths are no longer linear. So, I feel like that's a hard question to ask or answer.

DI: Fair enough.

EL: But to the extent that architects are seen for the value we want to be seen at, we need to be at the tables we want to be at. We need to truly be thought and knowledge leaders for everything around the built environment, our communities and the

health, safety and welfare of the public in general. If we're doing that, that would mean we're well positioned for success in the future and this is a profession and an industry people still want to be part of.

DI: As we talk about people encroaching and taking some of our roles, if we're interested in becoming more engaged in business, there's no reason why we can't integrate and become inclusive in all directions.

EL: As others come in, we can go out and become smarter about the world at large, in business. Maybe that's part of what it means to be a better architect and create a future where we're more influential.

Evelyn Lee, FAIA, is the first-ever global head of workplace strategy and innovation at Slack Technologies, founder of the Practice of Architecture, and co-host of the podcast "Practice Disrupted." Lee integrates her business and architecture background with a qualitative and quantitative focus to build better experiences for the organization's employees, clients and guests. She is widely published, wrote a monthly column for "Contract" magazine for over three years, frequently contributed to "Architect" magazine and is working with Architizer to develop recurring content on the business of architecture. Evelyn has received numerous industry awards, including the 2016 40 Under 40 award for Building Design + Construction and the 2014 AIA National Young Architects Award. She served as the first-ever female treasurer to the AIA National Board in 2020-2021 and was recently elected to serve as the 101st president of AIA National in 2025.