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Norma Sklarek, FAIA: A Litany of Firsts that Defined a Career, and a Legacy

By Layla Bellows

Norma Sklarek, FAIA, died Feb. 6, after pioneering a career that saw her become a leading designer in her own right, and an influential mentor to other minority and women architects who followed in her trailblazing footsteps. The cause was heart failure. She was 85.

Sklarek's name is associated with a litany of firsts including the first African-American woman to become a member of the AIA (1959) and the first African-American woman to become a Fellow of the AIA (1980). She was called the "Rosa Parks of architecture" by AIA Board Member Anthony Costello, FAIA, when she was honored with the 2008 Whitney M. Young Jr. Award. Former AIA President Marshall Purnell, FAIA, credited her with making possible his career as well as the careers of many women and minority architects.

Tenacity and talent

"She was very charming, elegant, and beautiful," says Kate Diamond, FAIA, who knew Sklarek as a mentor, a friend, and as a partner at Siegel, Sklarek, Diamond in the 1980s, the first architecture firm to be formed and managed by an African-American woman. "Behind that was a backbone of stainless steel, and an intellect and ability to deliver that was extraordinary."

That backbone, intellect, and talent underpinned a career marked by overcoming both explicit and implicit racism and sexism. "All of us, and certainly Norma, carry the scars of opportunities that were closed when clients made assumptions that were unwarranted, but if you let that stop you, none of us would have survived at all, and Norma certainly wouldn't have," Diamond says. "She simply made up her mind to look at the good side of things and find a way around it. If one door wasn't opened, she was going to open another one. And she did that consistently all the way down the line."

Sklarek hired Michael Enomoto, FAIA, at Gruen in 1973, and today he is a partner. "When she was working at Gruen, we didn't spend a lot of time talking about the social injustices of life," says Enomoto, President of the AIA California Council. "She didn't spend time moaning and groaning. We just worked hard, we did good architecture."

Mentorship

A New York City native, Sklarek graduated from Columbia University in 1950. After a brief stint working for Skidmore Owings and Merrill, she moved to Los Angeles to work at Gruen. During her 20-year tenure there, Sklarek completed some of her most important projects, including Fox Plaza in San Francisco, the American Embassy in Tokyo, and the Queens Fashion Mall in New York. From 1980 to 1985, she was a vice president at the Welton Becket firm, where she designed the Terminal One building at Los Angeles International Airport. Sklarek headed her own firm for four years after that, and in 1989, she became a principal with Jon Jerde Inc., now known as the Jerde Partnership, where she worked on the Mall of America in Minneapolis. Sklarek had been semi-retired since 1996.

For a generation of minority and women architects, Sklarek served as a symbol of what could be, and was a stalwart mentor to those she knew.

"For Norma to be leading the entire department of a major architectural practice and doing truly high-visibility, cutting-edge work was something that we all looked to, and we all took pleasure from," Diamond says. "She was teaching, she was engaged, and she was available to young architects, particularly to women and minority architects."

Sometimes her mentorship was subtle, often not recognized by those she worked with until many years later. "On her last day at Gruen, she took me aside and said 'Don't let them get you down.' I didn't understand what she meant, I just kind of said 'fine.' It was only many years later that I understood she meant 'Don't let the obstacles placed in front of minorities prevent you from getting ahead,'" says Enomoto, who is Asian-American.

Sklarek's legacy

Perhaps most importantly, Sklarek's legacy and accomplishments inspired those around her to become advocates for a more diverse profession. "I remember what it was like in architecture school in USC when I was there," says Chet Widom, FAIA, a former President of the AIA and founding partner of the Los Angeles firm WWCOT. "There were maybe two women in the entire school of about 400 people. It was incredibly rare. It certainly was rare to see black men, but to see a black woman going through the process and succeeding—she was this high-powered woman—that set the tone for me." As such, Widom has been involved with improving diversity within the industry since the 1970s.

Widom and others note that things are different today. Two partners who followed Widom at his firm are women. Enomoto says Gruen's staff is 49 percent female and 60 percent minority, something he says is certainly a legacy of Sklarek. Diamond notes that there is a smattering of female design principals in major multinational firms today, but that it is still not easy. "I like to think we broke the glass ceiling, but there is still what a friend of mine calls a maze," she says.

Diamond (now a principal at HMC Architects) says the key for Sklarek being able to break through these barriers was using wit to navigate social politics and get ahead. "She didn't overcome these things by fighting them," Diamond says. "She would charm them and then she would deliver. It's that combination that I think helped her overcome amazing obstacles."

Reference:

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