



Cracking Culture

DesignIntelligence[®]
Quarterly



Cracking Culture

Snøhetta Managing Partner Elaine Molinar discusses her firm's attitudes toward structure, respect and food in scaling collaboration

ELAINE MOLINAR

Partner, Snøhetta New York

DesignIntelligence, Michael LeFevre (DI): It's a pleasure to talk to you. I'd like our conversation to explore the issues and opportunities around collaboration and the dependencies upon others. Is that OK?

Elaine Molinar (EM): Sure, these are fascinating topics.

DI: Per your website, your career — and the firm's — was “kickstarted” by your winning design for the Alexandria competition. Now you're the managing partner of the New York office. How and where did you develop the management skills to do that? Based on my understanding of your firm's ethos, I have to believe that “managing” is a self-leveling, self-governing kind of process — a means to an end, that being design. But somebody has to

run things; staff projects; pursue work; find, develop and keep great people; keep support systems; and keep the lights on. Your title suggests that is you. What do you really do?

EM: I would say yes to your thought about managing in our firm being a means to an end - the nuts and bolts that enable design work. But let's talk about words first. We're a global company with seven studios across the world. We've adapted title conventions that translate across languages and cultures to the greatest extent possible. Those of us who are managing partners lead studios, and each have their own approach about what that is. My calendar and timesheets suggest I spend most of my time in conversation.

Looking back, I've never had specific mentors in my career or an employer that took a dedicated interest in my professional development, and managing a practice is not something that's taught in school. My work experience had been with eccentric sole practitioners, a couple of small firms and Snøhetta, which had minimal organizational structures for many years. I've never been part of a regimented hierarchical firm.

We hit the ground running when we established our practice in the U.S. to carry out the commission to design a cultural institution at the World Trade Center site. Most of what I've done has been "trial by fire" and finding good references — either in real life or in print. Hindsight is a powerful teacher. I have a network of people who are in similar positions but outside of my profession that I meet with regularly and learn from. I don't work alone. We have dedicated finance, HR, new business and communications teams. I have partners who focus on the quality and delivery of our design work. Without them, we wouldn't have a practice.

DI: As a self-avowed nonhierarchical firm, what management aspects DO you hang your hat on or care about? What do you manage?

EM: My interest in organizational health started to grow once we opened a studio in the U.S. At some point, I moved out of project work to focus on that. How work was getting done (or not getting done) became more interesting to me than doing the (architectural) work itself. We all know that a healthy workplace is good for a bottom line, but it is also

good for people. Our profession is hard enough outside our doors, why make it difficult within?

DI: Remarkably, your office organization is democratic, participative and transparent as a founding tenet, even to the point of displaying salaries, I think. Does that openness and inclusiveness translate into design process? If so, can you share how? Your firm has a widely recognized "stellar" global design reputation, extrapolated to a potentially despised word: "starchitect." What's the truth? Your husband, Craig Dykers, one of the firm founders, is one of its visible design leaders. I'm sure there are more. Is it a design meritocracy? How do teams, partners, key consultants — even clients — participate in and engage in a design process?

EM: When you work alone, that's a personal, idiosyncratic process. Whether it's erratic or linear, you know what you're dealing with. Once you add another person, things start to get interesting — and exponentially more so with each additional person added to a team or organization. I find the connections between individual and team behavior and creative output rather fascinating.

Total transparency in all things is not productive and can place unnecessary burdens on people. Clarity, on the other hand, is more meaningful and lessens the burden on others. So, for example, your individual salary may not be transparent, but the context in which it sits is clear. The goal for our design process is to begin with an uninhibited brainstorming. That requires participation from the full team.

Even those who have strengths other than design can be valuable contributors here. We all experience the built environment every day, and I think our discipline is about paying attention. Our education prepares us to take notice and analyze physical relationships so we can recreate new ones. We also recognize when our clients and other collaborators have valuable ideas. Some of our more impactful works have been the result of a very close exchange of ideas with clients and their initial, seemingly crazy vision, such as putting library books in a robotic storage system or building a restaurant underwater.

Do we have a design meritocracy? A collaborative process requires empathy, generosity, risk-taking, trust and leadership. Non-led and unmanaged collaboration can result in what I'd call a "fried-egg-banana-pizza" if it is misunderstood as an assemblage of everyone's ideas.

We strive for works of powerful clarity, and this comes from a collaborative process that employs leadership and defines a clear, common direction that our clients can believe in and put their funds behind. We need to understand a client's needs and desires as well as our own and offer them in a way that captures their imagination. I think communication is the most underestimated skill we don't really learn in school. It's one of the most important skills, and obviously, some people will excel at it more than others.

DI: In your integrated approach to architecture and landscape, I've observed what I might call naturalistic formal tendencies. Certainly not many boxlike forms. Calling it biomorphic or biophilic would be stretching it.

*Photo of glass façade of Ryerson University,
photographed by Lorne Bridgeman.*





Photos courtesy of Elaine Molinar

But from there, it's not too big a stretch to draw analogies to your firm governance: flat, natural, organic, responsive. Certainly not so many human-made structural constructs as conventional "command and control" firms have relied on since the Industrial Revolution. Little hierarchy. Are the parallels between your work and your organizational structure intentional?

EM: I don't think so. First, I'm going to defend boxlike forms! You only have to think of anything by Charles and Ray Eames or Richard Neutra (and many others) to realize that creativity and innovation are not limited by form. Also, there's plenty of hierarchy in nature and natural forms. Even when something seemingly random repeats, it becomes a solidified structure and might be post-rationalized to seem intentional from the outset. You might argue, though, that a

rigid, process-heavy, formal routine would stifle creativity in whichever way it emerges.

DI: What are your secrets toward maintaining your firm's culture of collaboration? I've heard about your annual retreats. I love this photo (Above, left).

EM: We've always spent time doing things outside of the studio together, and I think our studio is known for the solid friendships people form. Yes, those retreats have been epic! Size is a factor, and it's never possible for 100% of us to get together at our current size of over 200 globally. Scaling up a culture that works for a small group to also work for a large one has been a revealing experience, and I wouldn't say we've exactly cracked it, but there's a lot of heart in our company.

DI: How do you attract and retain staff who are both highly skilled in design and technical matters and simultaneously can nurture the interpersonal skills to be inclusive and embrace diversity? The stereotype is that talented designers are quirky, sullen, arrogant. As stereotypes, they're wrong by definition. But what's your secret? Do you hire team players and empathic folks by design? Is there a litmus test? Do you talk about such attributes or just live them?

EM: We take recruiting seriously and have made a conscious effort to constantly tinker with the process to find the best way. While there is no foolproof system, we have developed a type of litmus test based on both skill and fit. The premise is that skills can be acquired (unless you have very specific and urgent needs) but you are either a good fit or you aren't. And by that, I mean a good fit for us versus another firm, because everyone is a good fit somewhere.

Our fit criteria can be summed up as a combination of being humble, hungry and (people) smart, and we've developed a line of questions to use as a guide. Everyone who interviews candidates uses this simple tool. No one is equal in all three, but we look for balance. Being a team player is key to collaboration — being able to buy into and carry forward the ideas of others with the same commitment as if they were their own. Prioritizing team and project goals over a personal agenda will keep design work from going off the rails. But leadership does and should emerge, because I believe good leaders have the experience of having been led by others. It's a process of respect and a respect for a process.

DI: Since Snøhetta is a global firm with multiple offices, how do you find consistency? Do you track it, measure it? Is it simply an invisible part of the culture, or do you celebrate the variations?

EM: Though they are very different people in many ways, our co-founders share a strong vision and similar values about design and the built environment. It hasn't been so long that we've had studios spread out all over the world, but they are led by people who once sat in the same space and worked together. I would describe our company as a "design diaspora," with the homeland being those common visions and values. I see trends emerging from our various locations in the type of work we produce, the type of clients we cultivate, typologies, response to local cultures, etc. Though I think it is all ultimately representative of us.

DI: Beyond mere awareness or attempts to embrace equity, diversity and inclusion, the next level of mastery is to depend and rely upon it, then transcending that to achieve magic. Have you reached that level? Can you give an example of a relationship, person, consultant or perspective that has now become inextricable from your firm culture, design process or results?

EM: We've been working with an EDI consultant since 2019 and have an internal task force, which includes me, dedicated to these issues. Architecture in particular has historically been an elite, white man's profession. Change happens slowly, but it does happen, and that means reaching out to the K-12 crowd if we want to see a broader spectrum of professionals emerge from degree programs a decade from now.



Photo of metal roof of the Alexandria library, by Gerald Zugman

We participate in a program that pairs marginalized middle schools with professionals to expose kids to possibilities they may not otherwise have. So, while one generation moves out and a future one moves in, the middle is messy, which is where we are. Our consultant, Feminuity, has had a positive impact on our studio, I believe. We take a close look at issues and processes, such as recruiting, standard holidays, training, unconscious bias — it's a long list! Are there trends where people are assigned to roles, tasks and opportunities based on gender? What about those who celebrate holidays not traditionally recognized in the United States? Are we reaching candidates from far and wide or just from the usual list of top schools? How we approach these issues and more contributes to the health of our workplace and impact the quality of our work.

DI: Can you cite any examples of better project outcomes due to collaboration, diversity and multiple perspectives or perhaps failures when you didn't? And what you learned?

EM: The first library we built after the Alexandria Library was the James B. Hunt Library at North Carolina State University. The user-client, Susan Nutter, wanted to use an automated retrieval storage system (ASRS). Only a small handful of libraries had used these systems, and she was a champion of this innovative solution. We originally assumed it would be off-site, as others had done before. She wanted it in the library itself, and this posed a significant spatial challenge. These are enormous, two-hour fire-rated, unoccupied volumes.

Librarians are not afraid of challenges and are some of the most innovative clients we've had. The inclusion of this storage element came midway in schematic design, at the same time the state of North Carolina pulled 12 million dollars out of the project. The Construction Manager-At-Risk, Skanska, had just come onto the project at that time. They did their own analysis in parallel with ours and suggested that excavating and submerging half of the large volume would cost less than surrounding it with usable space above grade. We were then able to integrate it into the library program effectively and place a large window into it in the entry lobby so everyone could see the robot at work.

Compacting book storage this way — as opposed to open shelving — left more real estate for people, and we were able to reduce the overall building size as well. Susan Nutter understood that the power of her library should be its capacity to bring people together to learn in new ways. It was a fruitful and rewarding collaboration that combined a broad spectrum of expertise. Every library we've designed since begins with a discussion and often inclusion of an ASRS.

DI: You describe your office organization structure and workspace as having no hierarchy.

Noteworthy is what you call your “communal kitchen table,” which doubles as team workspace. It’s a physical manifestation of unity and teamwork, equality. We had a similar construct at my former firm Lord, Aeck, Sargent — a single team table that encircled the core of a spec office building — with occasional breaks for circulation. We all “sat at one table.”

But I want to zero in on the importance of food as a social connector. Your website says you have a cook. The U.K. design consultancy Pentagram is one of the few other design firms I’ve ever known who had a cook. Can we talk about food? What does it mean to how you work together?

EM: First, I'd like to clarify that I don't describe our organizational structure as having no hierarchy. We are not an ESOP, and we do have hierarchies of responsibility and liability. Our teams are organized around tiers of responsibility, as is our company as a whole.

A structure is there for support, not to dictate decisions. Crutches help you walk when you have a broken ankle, but they don't tell you where to go.

Our physical space, however, has no hierarchy. Our studios are based on an open landscape, with most people randomly placed and others with meaningful adjacencies. The New York studio is the only one that has an enclosed office, and our finance and HR teams share that space. Part of having an equitable workplace is providing privacy when it makes sense.

All our studios have a communal table, but not all our studios have a cook on site. I'm looking forward to being back in the studio and having lunch together at our big table without the restrictions the pandemic has imposed upon us. It's less important how food gets to the table than the fact that we are there together sharing our mealtime.

I think it's well documented that families who share meals enjoy greater health and relationships, as well as reduced stress levels. It's no different at work. Eating together builds trust and morale and improves productivity. It's enjoyable to get to know each other, and this trust spills over into our work teams, making a collaborative process natural.

DI: You probably don't know, but our paths have crossed before. At my last firm, Holder Construction Company, we did a project together, the Virginia Tech Arts Center. I was on a couple calls with Craig. The client asked us as the CM to provide BIM coordination of some of the complex systems late in the game. I remember a sense of mild tension on some of the calls sorting out turf, building trust, adding new players. Are you feeling the same pressures: encroachment by CMs, program managers, the inexorable getting in-budget and in-schedule? Late-breaking owner changes? How are you coping? How can the AECO and building design and construction industry move past our centuries-old biases? At least, what's your attitude and approach to it?

EM: Ambition and budget alignment needs to happen right up front — before design begins. When this is understood by clients and expectations are within reach, the resultants and process are usually more successful. As you know, the lion's share of the cost of a project is in its size and in the quality of that size. That can only be reconsidered right up front before valuable time is wasted. And it makes no sense to price nuts and bolts during a concept or schematic phase because we're still defining a project's identity. Your phrase, "late in the game" sparks many thoughts. It is frustrating to be asked to do things "late in the game" that we had advised

doing much earlier when the benefit would have been significant. New ideas or changes coming from the owner can be accommodated through the process of additional services or schedule adjustments if they are significant. And even though there's a process for working these things out, new solutions do not always reach their full potential when they are introduced late.

BIM is new territory in our industry, still. When deliverables were two-dimensional drawings on paper, coordination required dialogue and what was produced was controlled. Today, 100% of a BIM model can be mistaken as fact, so putting that digital model in the hands of others can be nerve-racking.

DI: Thank you for buying my book, "Managing Design." While it began as an investigation of whether design could be managed, it soon morphed into being about the power of others, empathy and the subjects we're talking about. I'd love to hear your reaction to it and the issues it addresses. Did any of it ring true?

EM: I've just cracked it open, and it's proving hard to put down! I really appreciate the interview format because it's a direct window into someone else's specific world, and there are so many relatable moments. As someone who spent the first half of my career abroad, it's interesting to gain perspective on practice in America. I wish you had interviewed more women!

DI: I wish I had too. Thank you. Where are you going next regarding collaboration?

EM: Exploring the limits of a collaborative process poses questions and opportunities — on team size, firm size, client type, project complexity, etc. Is collaboration for everyone, or are there people who thrive by being given explicit direction? Perhaps a collaborative practice also needs people who have a service provider mindset. We are starting to consider the limitations that using so many digital tools have on our design process.

DI: What's your message? Something I haven't asked that you'd like to say?

EM: We need to figure out how to change the mindset that architecture is a luxury. It's well known that design has the power to influence the way people behave and interact with one another. It is instrumental in creating a just and inclusive environment, not only for people, but for animal life and nature as well.

DI: What else can we learn from you?

EM: My motto: The fun never stops!

DI: Last questions: What brings you joy? What are you hopeful about?

EM: Well, that's another long list! But I am hopeful about the next generation of architects. Right now, they're experiencing the extreme challenges of the pandemic, the economy and social justice very early in their careers. They're starting to lead the action on how best to meet challenges of climate and inequity, and I'm inspired to work alongside so many designers advocating for a more just future.

Elaine Molinar is managing partner of Snøhetta's New York office. Snøhetta is a leading global design firm, including offices in Oslo, Paris, Innsbruck, San Francisco, Hong Kong and Adelaide. She is a graduate of the University of Texas at Austin and serves on the Board of Trustees of the Van Alen Institute as well as advisory boards of the University of Texas School of Architecture, the Penn State School of Architecture, and the online editorial platform Madame Architect. Elaine's focus on issues of social and physical well-being drives her work not only as a design leader but also as an employer and cultivator of Snøhetta's growing practice.