

# Profile | Ann Abernathy, AIA

From scholar to author, mother to painter, this Frank Lloyd Wright aficionado is more than just a well-rounded architect.

Known most recently for her work on the soon-to-be-released Master Plan of Frank Lloyd Wright's famed Kalita Humphreys Theater, Ann Abernathy, AIA, is arguably Dallas' foremost expert and proponent of the late architect's life and work. Since visiting the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo as a child, just a year before it was demolished, Ann moved on

to become a well-versed follower of Wright's own architectural principles and has been intimately involved with many of his projects. In 2005, she spearheaded the effort that led to the theater (1959) becoming a City of Dallas historic landmark. She gratefully acknowledges a grant from the Dallas Architecture Foundation that supported her research. Twenty years earlier, she had been the project architect for the restoration of Wright's Oak Park Home

(1889 to 1909). Once a teacher at her alma mater, M.I.T., Ann practices with Booziotis & Company Architects. Her passion for not only architecture, but everything Wright, has led her to places few architects dare to explore.

The locale for my casual conversation was Ann's North Dallas residence. After entering the circa 1970s home, Ann graciously gave a tour through the main living areas, showing off her personally designed dining chairs and table. On her dining room wall hangs an impressive framed piece showing the dozens of inked drawing iterations she completed as a way of discovery and exploration during the process of designing her chairs. We sat down in her lofty living room and this conversation unfolded:

**You have said you'd rather be known as a design architect, than a preservation architect. However, much of your work deals with existing buildings.**

Working on old buildings provides really valuable experiences – to see how things were constructed and understand the sensibilities of previous generations is instructive and illuminating. Sometimes I am struck by how much they knew that we seem to have lost.

**What influenced you to become an architect?**

I think it was building forts—out of sticks; I still like to build stick models. Growing up, I didn't go to summer camp. I didn't



Photo by Steve Clique, [www.steveclique.com](http://www.steveclique.com)

get driven all around. My mother just said, "Go outside and play," so I went out to explore. Man evolved over millions of years, and all that time learned to operate in the natural environment. And we still react to places with those same evolved perceptions. But we often settle for relatively impoverished environments that we don't react to in any kind of visceral way.

**It seems that Frank Lloyd Wright's works in Dallas are from the period just before his death. Why did it take Wright so long to come to Dallas?**

Wright finished about one-third of his life's work in the last decade of his life, ages 82 to 92. He developed an apprentice program and it was a kind of diaspora of these apprentices going out to all these locations. For example, Kelly Oliver, the apprentice that supervised the DTC [Dallas Theater Center at the Kalita Humphreys] was 29 years old when he supervised the construction of this major reinforced-concrete building.

**What was right with Wright?**

This is something I admire about Wright: he had molting periods. He regularly stepped out of his own career, and then came back into it like a phoenix renewed in some kind of new direction. Because I have moved around a lot and done different things, I identify with that ability to step back and process things to get some perspective. Wright kept moving forward with the times and reinterpreting his design methodology. He was always on the cutting edge of the new technology—for seventy years. Isn't it remarkable?

**You are a painter, volunteer, teacher, architect, author... you really do seem to be able to do anything. If you could imagine any other career, what would it be?**

I'm a mother, you forgot that one... [laughs] I can't imagine any other career. Architecture is, as Wright said, "The Mother art," because architecture is the art that combines all the other arts.

**When architects think of great American cities, New York, Chicago, and Boston come to mind. How does Dallas become a similarly great city?**

I think that one of the most important things Dallas can address is the Trinity River Corridor. A river is thematic to having a great city. When a population doesn't have access to nature, it suffers. All the other cities where I've lived have a water's edge.

**Best place you've visited?**

Afghanistan. We flew from India over the Hindu Kush to Kabul. I think that is the most beautiful place in the world.

**What do you consider your biggest mistake?**

I would not have made as many moves; but, no regrets. Everything I have ever done I have put to use. All of that moving gave

me a perspective on the way different people live. Had I not moved, I would not have worked on one of Wright's first buildings, and two of his last.

**What do you consider your most profound professional success?**

I will say the greatest contributions that I have made are things that I did for free. The things I didn't think were the thrust of my work ended up, in many ways, being the most interesting.

**In your free time, what do you like to do outside of architecture?**

I kayak on the Brazos with my friends. I sing in the choir at church.

**What was the last album you downloaded?**

Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra*

**What book did you last read?**

"*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*"—I read the ending first. My favorite book of all time is *The Book of Tea* by Kakuko Okakura.

**Do you have favorite websites/blogs?**

You are asking the wrong generation. I go on the Internet as little as possible. Music is a very important component in my life. I exercise to hip-hop in the morning (Lil Mama) and I go to sleep to Tibetan Bells.

**What movie did you last see?**

"Julie & Julia" I liked "Mostly Martha," which is another cooking movie... but "Babette's Feast" is my favorite movie ever. Ironic, since I don't cook.

**What is one important thought you'd like other architects to know?**

I believe in frontloading a project, spending a lot of time understanding the people and place, and filling all the office walls with stuff pertaining to the project. Then the later phases work themselves out more smoothly. Architecture is synthesizing, not problem solving.

**Any last thoughts you would like to leave with us?**

When I think back to the Oak Park years, more than anything I recall all the people at the Home and Studio. It was a family, really. We calculated that volunteers contributed more than 200,000 work hours toward the restoration of the buildings, all coming together for this common purpose. Ultimately, it revitalized the community. If you are an architect, your accomplishments are never just your own. You cannot do anything bigger than a bread box alone. ■

Interview by Andrew P. Moon, Assoc. AIA