



CURATORIAL CHAT | ZOË RYAN AT THE HELM OF THE ART INSTITUTE'S ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN DEPARTMENT

APRIL 30, 2018

Zoë Ryan joined the [Art Institute of Chicago](http://www.artic.edu) (<http://www.artic.edu>) in 2006 as the inaugural Neville Bryan Curator of Design, and in 2011 was named chair of the [Department of Architecture and Design](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/arch) (<http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/arch>). Ryan's tenure marked an expanded scope for the museum and its collection with the introduction of design to the previously named Department of Architecture the year prior to her arrival. She has since spearheaded the department's rapid acquisition activity while organizing exhibitions of architecture, furniture design, graphic design, and more. Her current project, *Past Forward: Architecture and Design at the Art Institute* (<http://www.artic.edu/exhibition/past-forward-architecture-and-design-art-institute>), makes use of the department's new permanent collection galleries and examines key moments in the history of architecture and design alongside recent and expanded visions for these disciplines.

In 2014, Ryan participated in the [Center for Curatorial Leadership Fellowship](http://www.curatorialleadership.org/programs/ccl-program/) (<http://www.curatorialleadership.org/programs/ccl-program/>), which she described as "enormously helpful" for her practice when she sat down with CCL at the Art Institute for a conversation this winter. In her Curatorial Chat, Ryan discusses her goals for the department of architecture and design, its importance to the city of Chicago, and how she has developed a curatorial team that speaks to large ideas from inside a formidable institution.

What kind of voice do you see design having within an encyclopedic museum, and how did you set out to animate that in *Past Forward*?

Leading up to this project, we had spent a long time looking at, building, and getting to know the collection. With *Past Forward*, we can really make clear that the department of architecture and design is a fully-fledged member of the Art Institute family, and that there will always be a place where you can see the history of these disciplines through the lens of

the museum's collection. The galleries have become a space where we can test out our ideas. It's a real opportunity to continually tell different stories not just about the collection, but also about installation and how you exhibit architecture and design.

We didn't just want to show a chronological display that takes you through different moments in time, but instead take an issue-driven approach. What you'll notice are different movements and moments that have impacted the field and changed the way that we understand and relate to the world—everything from the design of our streets to the design of smart devices. What unites the projects in the show is thinking big and visionary ideas, but it's not always a success story; we show the positives and the negatives of trying to do good. In that way it's quite different from what you're going to see in other exhibitions elsewhere in the museum.

An encyclopedic museum is a fantastic environment to work in. We're conscious that our work sits alongside thousands of years of creative practice. People move from our galleries into galleries from completely different time periods and parts of the world—but I love that. I love that they're coming across things and hopefully connecting the dots, whether it's when they're in the galleries or when they get back home.

Are there stories that you think should be told specifically in Chicago through design, or that can only be told here?

One only has to walk the streets of Chicago for a history lesson in modern architecture. This was such an important place for experimenting with what it means to develop a city and to live, work, and play in an urban area. It's been interesting, too, seeing that unfold. In the eleven years that I have been in Chicago, the area around the Art Institute has developed enormously. The ideas that Bertrand Goldberg, for example, seeded with a project like Marina City—two of the first multi-use buildings along the river—emerged in the 1960s as a response to white flight and an attempt to encourage people to move back downtown. More recent developments such as Millennium Park around the Art Institute have also helped this area develop its own character, but it is a very different place now than even when I first came here. I feel like we're part of that ongoing history with the work that we do at the museum.

We're able to tell such stories that resonate locally, but they're absolutely international stories that every city grapples with.

So many have looked to Chicago as a model. The new galleries start with the 1909 Plan of Chicago (http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork-search/results/1909+plan+of+chicago/+AND+artist_name%3A%28Daniel+Hudson+Burnham%29), which was so influential in envisioning a city with magnificent public places and civic buildings that would knit the urban core together. There's no city official that does not look at that original plan when they're thinking about the future of Chicago. These projects, although they were made a hundred years ago, are still absolutely relevant today. When you come to the Art Institute, we want you to get a sense of what makes this place unique.

What kinds of changes have you seen over the last decade in the public perception of design and architecture, both within and outside of the museum?

Chicago is fiercely proud of its architecture. When I came it was really wonderful to see how much people care. They really value architecture and see it as a creative discipline, so there was already a high level of dialogue. I think this was less true of design. We needed to bring it back into the discourse, because Chicago has been so influential for the field of design. We wanted to work on that aspect of the collection and tell some of those stories—like the histories of graphic design and advertising in Chicago—that were ready for presenting to new audiences. There were such important figures here in the modern period, from the founders of the New Bauhaus and visionaries at the School of the Art Institute, to designers such as John Massey working at the Container Corporation and at his own studio CARD, who helped create an image of and brand the city; an enduring legacy. Massey's posters (http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/2349492search_no=8&index=2) are on view currently in our galleries. It has been rewarding to dig around and find that work.

The first exhibitions that I organized ranged from graphic design to furniture design to fashion design, and every single one of those challenged the idea of what an exhibition is. There were shows where you could sit on the furniture or try on clothing; it was a way also for us to challenge being in an institution like this and consider how architecture and design fit within that.

I definitely think the community has embraced the work that we're doing. We've made a commitment to bringing work that matters to this community, whether it's local or international. I try to keep up with the pulse of changing ideas and open up approaches to thinking about architecture and design. They're not just tools for solving problems, but avenues to create dialogue, debate, and exchange as well. In that way, they're perfectly suited to being shown in a museum because that's what we're all about.

What are your collecting priorities in this moment of increased visibility for the department?

Organizing *Past Forward* has helped us forge loose criteria for how we move forward. We have three curators in the department and we all have quite different interest areas and lines of inquiry that we want to focus on. We don't want to overlook what we have. Most recently we were fortunate to find and acquire another drawing from the 1909 Plan of Chicago, for example, so we're constantly making sure that we're enriching the historical collection. One of my favorite acquisitions in

the past few years was a [pre-fab bathroom](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/222487?search_no=15&index=3) (http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/222487?search_no=15&index=3) and [kitchen](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/222486?search_no=15&index=2) (http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/222486?search_no=15&index=2), designed in the 1970s for a ski chalet in France by French designer Charlotte Perriand. These are incredible pieces that allow us to tell the story of modern design internationally and ensure we have excellent examples of work by more women designers. But we're also keeping an eye on contemporary practice, following architects and designers that are making their mark here and internationally.

For me it's never a one-time hit. I'm interested in following the twists and turns that people take in their careers.

Our collection is based on experimental practitioners and visionary thinking. I'm interested in work that helps us understand where we are now and where we might be headed, as much as it helps us understand the past. This was the case with a [recent show on architect David Adjaye](http://www.artic.edu/exhibition/david-adjaye) (<http://www.artic.edu/exhibition/david-adjaye>), who was at a critical moment in his career while at work on the [National Museum of African American History and Culture \(NMAAHC\)](https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/building) (<https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/building>). Through Adjaye's practice, you can link back to the history of ornamentation, including figures such as Louis Sullivan, but also tell a more internationally diverse story of this aspect of architectural history, making it a great story for us to be able to tell here in Chicago. In one gallery we have displayed drawings from Sullivan's seminal work, [A System of Architectural Ornament](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork-search/results/A+System+of+Architectural+Ornament) (<http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork-search/results/A+System+of+Architectural+Ornament>), which was commissioned by the Art Institute in 1922, and in another are showing Adjaye's façade treatments from the NMAAHC, which draw inspiration from the ornamentation found on the porches on homes in parts of the South worked on by slaves. We were able to show this confluence of aesthetics, while leaving the visitor to make their own connections.

You participated in CCL 3 years after being named Chair of the department; for you, what were some of the most important lessons from the program, and how have they impacted you since returning to the museum?

The terminology to which we were introduced certainly stands out, like being a “collaborative leader” or the idea of “managing up.” These were things that I thought about, but didn't necessarily have the language to articulate. I learned a lot about definitions of leadership, how to define your own leadership style, but also the importance of understanding how other people work and how you can get the best out of them as much as they can get the best out of you.

The diversity of perspectives and meeting colleagues outside of my field and at other museums was invaluable. Architecture and design is quite a small world, so I was able to understand others' challenges and how they can often be quite similar despite the scale or type of an institution. Being able to have people that you can ask questions of and be honest with has been really useful.

CCL changed my approach to how I see the world.

I realized that being able to understand my leadership style is critical. It is something you can adapt, but you'll always be working on it. It's not as if you take the course and then you're immediately able to digest everything and implement all that change. The notes you have from each class and the binder of information are essential. I am constantly returning to them. What's been so interesting, now a few years removed, is that what I get out of CCL is different depending on the situation that I find myself in. I am much more aware of when I need to take stock and reflect on things for a minute—the tools are there.

Could you speak about your [weeklong residency](https://www.curatorialleadership.org/mentors/) (<https://www.curatorialleadership.org/mentors/>) shadowing Iwona Blazwick, director of the Whitechapel Gallery?

I was really interested in Whitechapel because I work in a large institution and wanted to understand whether being at a smaller place allows you to be nimble, make change more quickly, and take different kinds of risks. In shadowing Iwona, I was able to see how she brought her team together and created opportunities for brainstorming. It was also interesting for me to understand the role of a director in Europe, which is quite different from working at an institution in the United States.

I feel like our department here works like a small institution within a larger institution, and I've tried to emphasize that ever since I came. My residency reinforced that this is necessary to make sure that we remain nimble even if the large armature of the institution takes more time. I've kept in touch with Iwona, and it's been nice to have different kinds of conversations, especially after having the time to reflect on my takeaways from the residency.

What aspects about your role as department head excite you most?

My team. Being able to shape the department over the years and make some really fantastic hires has been very rewarding. I really want to provide a space where people can do their best work and make their own contributions to scholarship and the field. To give people those opportunities is such a pleasure and a privilege. We've created the team like a little institution, which means figuring out how people fit together and also understanding that other people's expectations and needs are not necessarily yours. I've made time to be reflective about that, too, and make sure that people are really getting the most out of their positions. That's something that I learned a lot from CCL.

Our most recent collection show was a challenging project on a very fast timeline. Having a really good team that locks together meant I could see them in that moment at their best. That was really rewarding to see all the hard work really pay off. Everything we do is based on teamwork. I don't make too many decisions without talking to the team, making sure that they are providing me with their insights, and getting their buy-in. We're a small team and we all should move forward together.

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