

## CLOSE-UP: KRISTI BYERS

# SD architect says the future is in sustainability

By KATIE GRONENDYKE

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San Diego architect Kristi Byers was recently honored with the American Institute of Architects' Young Architect of the Year Award at the organization's Design and Vision Awards on Nov. 7, but has bigger goals in mind, hoping to help make sustainability an integral part of all architecture.

"It's trying to do the most we can with the smallest amount of resources and figuring out how we can all work, live and play in less space as we accommodate more people," Byers said.

The award is given to an architect who has shown leadership and made significant contributions to the profession at an early stage in their career.

At age 39, the former president of the AIA has held many leadership positions in the organization and has worked for several San Diego firms. She now teaches architecture classes in addition to running her own small architectural business, Kristi Byers, Architect A.P.C.

"This is a profession that you have to be really passionate about," Byers said.

And yet, Byers almost took a different path. The former editor of her high school newspaper in Lake Havasu City, Ariz., considered studying journalism in college, but her school, the University of Arizona, had recently shuttered its program.

After graduating in 1998 with a degree in architecture, Byers moved to San Diego, when the industry was booming. She first worked for Mosher Drew Watson Ferguson for a year and a half, then Carrier Johnson for eight and a half years. The two firms "exposed me to a lot of responsibility and a lot of big projects," Byers said.

She was then recruited by Houston-based Studio RED Architects to start its San Diego satellite office. In 2009, Studio RED named her director of sustainability. When the economy plunged in 2008, Studio RED struggled and eventually had to close all its satellite offices. Byers worked in the Houston office for a time, but turned down an offer to relocate and launched her own firm in June 2011.

"My network has very much taken care of me and we've had really good clients and a lot of diverse work that keeps us busy and doing different things, so that if one area seems to kind of slow down, there seems to be enough in the other areas," Byers said.

Most of Byers' business consists of small to midsize commercial restaurants, retail, residential remodels, LEED certification projects and some development of small multifamily infill housing. In addition to her business, Byers does sustainability consulting for construction firms, engineering firms and other architectural firms. Byers has been a sustainability advocate ever



Photo by Katie Gronendyke

San Diego architect Kristi Byers.

since her classes in college stoked her interest.

"Where I went to school, there was very much a sustainable focus," Byers said. "But it was 20 years ago, before it was the world's focus. It was about design in the desert and harsh climates."

The architectural world, however, is now catching up with Byers' passion.

"I think there are some folks that are still designing as they've always done, but codes and the plight of the world is going to force everybody to start designing that way anyway," Byers said.

Byers also practices sustainability in her personal life, often biking to work from her small home just down the street from her North Park office. She works with clients who have a wide range of sustainability interest, but tries to implement sustainable principles in her projects as much as she can.

"If I can even expose folks who maybe weren't even thinking that way, about using healthier products, things that'll make the indoor environment better, or ways they can save energy or water, then I feel like I've accomplished quite a bit there," Byers said.

Byers has been involved with the AIA since 2005, when she joined a committee. She became the young architect commissioner in 2006, and served as president in 2011. While on the board, Byers was involved with several programs, including Praxis, which introduced students to local firms, and Architectural Registration Exam seminars. She is now involved with AIA

leadership at the state level and is a member of the 2013 Advocacy Advisory Committee.

During her presidency, the AIA started its Good Deeds program, which encouraged community outreach and collaboration with other organizations. For example, the AIA organized a book drive for local schools.

"It was pretty bad for the architecture and construction industry, in like 2010 and 2011. So we had a lot of our members who were out of work," Byers said. "The idea was just to get folks out into the community doing things that would help bring awareness to architects and how they can be problem solvers."

The industry is still not quite back on its feet, but Byers is optimistic. She said that certain sectors are still struggling but others are "getting slammed" with projects. In general, Byers said work in the private sector is starting to ramp up, but public projects are still scarce.

Byers teaches prospective young architects as an adjunct faculty member in the School of Architecture at Woodbury University, where she's taught off and on since 2008. Next semester she is teaching Pro Practice, a class that is part of a three-part series on life after school.

"Go after what you're passionate about," Byers said she tells her students, "but if you don't land exactly where you want to, take anything you can to get experience. Work in construction for a while; work in interiors for a while. Be very open-minded about different opportunities."