

# Representatively Unique:

## Kurt Lavenson, AIA



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*arcCA sat down with Oakland architect Kurt Lavenson, AIA, to learn about his path from UC Berkeley architecture student to design-build general contractor to licensed architect and public advocate. Unlike many of the individuals profiled in this issue of arcCA, Lavenson's career has always revolved around the design of buildings, but like many architects it has involved departures of various sorts. We asked Lavenson to describe his career—unique and at the same time representative of the diverse ways in which architects engage the world—in his own words.*

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### UC BERKELEY

When I first arrived at Berkeley, I was close with Joe Esherick, because we were both from a Pennsylvania Quaker background. His uncle Wharton, a sculptor, lived up the road from our house near Philadelphia, in the art studio that he built with Lou Kahn. I was drawn to Joe's calmness, and I felt taken under his wing. That was reassuring and helpful, because I was out of my depth, having moved across the country for college and being entirely freaked out by the brutality of Wurster Hall, to the point of tears. I could not believe I had relocated to the other side of the country for this. The Wurster shock turned out to be okay, though. It was like jumping into a cold pool. It shocked me and opened my eyes.

Another big influence for me was Stanley Saitowitz, who was a new faculty member then and an outsider. He had us reading Italo Calvino stories and drawing cities from them. I was energized by the poetic crossover. I was engaged by writing and drawing from the imagery, seeking architecture in an almost dreamlike way. I remained interested in architecture and have pursued it until now, but my digressions have been just as important, if not more so. My path to being an architect was more of a spiral than a straight line.

A year or so into my degree, I started studying under William Garnett. He was already in his 70s, I guess, and

was rather famous as a pioneer of aerial landscape photography. He was one of the last vestiges of the Visual Studies Group, which were leftovers from the artsy '60s College of Environmental Design. Garnett was inspiring for me, because to him photography was all about perspective and point of view and communication of the big idea, which brought together architecture, drawing, and observation. I was learning the architecture of light, what Corbusier called "the masterful play of forms in light." The experience with Garnett was formative, because he was old-school, a rigid instructor. He supported you in your work, but he demanded commitment and excellence. He didn't go for any flaky, "I'm a photographer, here's a picture of my foot" stuff. Abstraction and artistry were fine, but casual folly was not. Ultimately, his lessons sunk in, and I won the Eisner Prize in photography the year that I graduated.

I learned as much about architecture from Garnett's training me to make beautiful photographs as I did from my design studios. The two fields share a focus on frames of reference. What is your experience of the space and the light? What is the message the designer conveys by composing the experience and the point of view? Photography is narrative and spatial. It is also very much about the hands-on craft of making the image. Interestingly, it is often the primary



medium by which many works of architecture are known and judged. The photograph of a building is the experience in many circumstances. I have always enjoyed that irony, in which the craft of the photographer in a moment can supersede the craft of the architect over many years.

### GENERAL CONTRACTING

During the semester breaks, I started to work with a carpenter/contractor, to earn money for school. I became invigorated by this other side of architecture—the hands-on approach, where we essentially sculpted the space as we went. I worked for an architect during school, as well, but by the time I received my degree, I did not want to work in an office. I was addicted to the variety and satisfaction of design-build. I went back into construction, got a general contractor's license, and spent around fifteen years designing and remodeling houses. A few others of us from Wurster Hall did the same. Cass Smith and I met this way and ended up doing some great projects together. Brennan O'Brien and Kelly Keyes helped me build out a few of my larger jobs. It was intoxicating. At twenty-five years old, we had clients, jobs, budgets, and a lot of control. We were winging it and learning a lot along the way. That was also when I started to get my projects published. I was hooked on the independence and recognition, which contrasted with what I had experienced in offices.

I've noticed—this is an oversimplification, of course—that many people have taken an almost servile path through architecture, going to big offices and doing small things over and over and over. And they've gotten a little trapped inside the big firm. I understand that is essential to mastering the profession, but I regret seeing some people lose their spirit in the process. Now, there are parts of me that regret not going to a big firm myself, because maybe I could be working on schools, libraries, and tall buildings, to make a much bigger impact on the environment. It's a trade-off that I have to accept. My path has limited me to the residential scale for now, but I think that, through my writing and my community volunteering, I am finding my way to the urban scale, the community scale.

### ARCHITECTURE LICENSURE

Near the end of the '90s, I burned out on contracting. It had stopped being about craft and love and had become an exercise in putting out fires. I was tired of having employees, and I struggled with a bit of a juvenile attitude in the construction industry. So I remodeled my career. "Remodeling" is a great metaphor for what we do. It's all remodeling, at different scales. After I got married, I took two years off work, remod-

**Sports** O'Dowd girls win NCS cross country title [C1]

**Arts** Alexander mystique endures for centuries [C16]

## Stairs project receives award

A group repairs four sets of stairs that link together separate parts of the hillside community

By Tricia Caspers

The Oakland Heritage Alliance has presented its Partners in Preservation Award for enhancing Oakland to the Oakland Home Association, former City Councilman Dick Speer, City

Councilwoman Jean Quan and Oakland's Public Works Agency for the rebuilding and repair of four sets of stairs that link together separate parts of the hillside community.

Ron Lavenson, a member of the Oakland group, says the award highlights the community spirit that, after three years of division, revealed that the project crossed the finish line.

"We also wanted to acknowl-

edge Public Works for overcoming bureaucratic inertia," Lavenson said. "There are so many reasons that projects like this die."

Lavenson and Virginia Lewis had discussions with Oakland officials about repairing the dis-

repair stairs, which connect Leimert Boulevard and Bridgeview Drive, Bridgeview Drive and Arden Way, Leimert Boulevard and Oakview Drive, and Oakview Drive and Hoover Avenue.

Lavenson said Mike Neary, engineering division manager of the Public Works Agency, also

deserved credit for the project's successful completion.

Neary agreed to suggestions "that didn't come a lot more and made the project special," Lavenson said.

The 400 steps re-opened in July after 18 months and \$300,000 worth of work, according to Jeanette Edgerly of the city's Public Works Department.

How: Tricia Caspers at 510-748-2822 or tcaspers@montclarian.com



OAKMORE RESIDENTS Joan and Howard lived in the area since 1975, by and the stairs after a ribbon-cutting ceremony July 14.

### Oakmore Stairs in The Montclarian

eled my house, and studied for the architecture exams.

I took the last paper-and-pencil ARE over in San Francisco in '96, right before they switched to computers. I sat for the whole battery of tests in one shot. Hundreds of us were lined up for days, at tables inside one of the piers at Fort Mason. We had to bring our own drafting equipment, including the board, plus food and water. A friend joked that it was like the Donner Party expedition—right down to the low survival rate. Most of my peers had gotten their licenses five or ten years before that, but I had been on my spiraling course as a designer-builder. I came back to the professional fold and got the architecture license. Contracting is technically about manufacturing products, while architecture is defined as providing professional services. It took me many years to appreciate the difference, and now I value my architecture training more than ever.

I work from my house. I took over a couple of rooms upstairs, where I look out over the Bay and see the Golden Gate Bridge every day. That warms my heart, because I'm still this guy from Pennsylvania who thinks the Golden Gate Bridge is really exciting. Working from home has also afforded me time to write. When I write, I feel like I can affect a much larger number of people, compared to my architecture practice, where I'm limited to a few residential clients. Writing is a way to leverage my point of view, personal experience, and design training. What already exists? What could be? How are they linked? How can I express this in a way that will connect with other people and their emotions? I'm interested in narrative and the way it links people together.

Architects are alchemists who make something out of nothing. As designers, we're well-trained to evaluate and visualize a situation—any situation. So why does our profession suffer so often with a sense of powerlessness? Does it begin with a culture of being beaten down in critiques? We struggle with not being compensated well enough or respect-



ed highly enough, compared to lawyers and accountants and other professionals with similar training and liability. Yet, ironically, there is a perception in the public that we are somewhat magical characters who know how to create and draw and radically transform the environment. We often don't see how heroic we are and how much power we actually have.

#### PRO BONO COMMUNITY WORK

Years ago, my wife and I moved out to the suburbs, so my stepson could go to a better school. I'm still intrigued by how rootless and isolated we were out there. We were there seven years and essentially did not put down roots. It's as if there were no nutrients for us in the social soil. We moved back to the Bay Area, to the metropolis, and became energized again. We started running into people we knew from years before. We realized that this was fertile ground for community activities and relationships. Though my suburban clients and friends might disagree, I think the complexity here also makes for better design. The demands and competition usually lead to better buildings, better restaurants, and a richer street life. I think it has to do with energy being focused publicly outward instead of privately inward.

While trying to figure out how to use my design ideas and my reawakened excitement about the city, I became interested in my new environment and started talking to neighbors. Soon I found myself on the local homeowners' association, and I got involved in some local public works projects. They were trying to get the neighborhood public stairs restored. I learned that our neighborhood—Oakmore Highlands—was a very progressive development from the 1920s. Walter Leimert, the developer, had the foresight to buy 150 acres of "undesirable" land that was isolated from the main boulevard by Sausal Creek. He hired George Posey, who had also designed the Tube into Alameda, to create a grand bridge over the creek. Next, he negotiated for a spur of the Key System Railway to cross his new "Leimert Bridge" into his subdivision. At this point, his land was no longer remote. He had transformed the access *and* the perception, which boosted the land value dramatically. Then he hired some of the best architects in Oakland, like Miller and Warnecke, who designed the house that we're sitting in, to do model homes to get people excited about the subdivision. Leimert understood branding and the value of design.

The more I learned about the neighborhood and about Leimert, the more interested I became in adding my efforts to the Oakmore tradition. I dedicated a lot of *pro bono* hours to being on that board and helping them work with the Public Works Agency to rebuild four staircases in the hills.

These were old-time public access stairs like you find connecting the streets in Europe and a few older U.S. cities. They had fallen into disrepair, and the homeowners association had been pushing for their renewal for several years. By politely refusing to take "no" for an answer, they finally won the City's cooperation and funding.

At a certain point, the association was not able to communicate effectively with the Public Works Agency. That's where my expertise was particularly valuable. I became the point man. I understood the issues, and I could work with the Public Works people to resolve construction problems on the fly. I also found that I could deal with irate neighbors and draw them into the process. Additionally, I worked with others in the association to stay in touch with the press and with our City member person, to garner recognition for the project. When the stairs were completed in the summer of 2004, I submitted the project to the Oakland Heritage Alliance, for recognition of the private-public cooperation that this venture had achieved. It won a "Partners in Preservation" award in their annual competition. I also submitted it to our local East Bay AIA chapter.

Acknowledgment is a primal motivator. It is important to us as individuals and to organizations. I think it's important for architects to practice seeking publicity for good works and to be visible in the community. Building is a political act, and design is a creative offering. Both things benefit from healthy recognition. When architects participate publicly, we gain more power to make a positive impact on the environment. Press coverage is a very effective design and planning tool.

#### REFLECTION

Last year, I had the pleasure of dining at the French Laundry with some wonderful colleagues from the AIA East Bay chapter. We ran the gamut of age and experience, and we were sharing practice stories. A woman who was preparing for the licensure exams and evaluating her future career choices asked me how long I had been "on my own." My answer was, "The whole time." I was reminded at that moment that the risks and responsibilities of self employment have been outweighed by the opportunities and by gratitude for the freedom to define my own career. I also realized that when I felt lonely in private practice, my *pro bono* involvement had connected me back into the community. ●

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*Kurt Lavenson can be reached through his website, [www.lavensondesign.com](http://www.lavensondesign.com).*

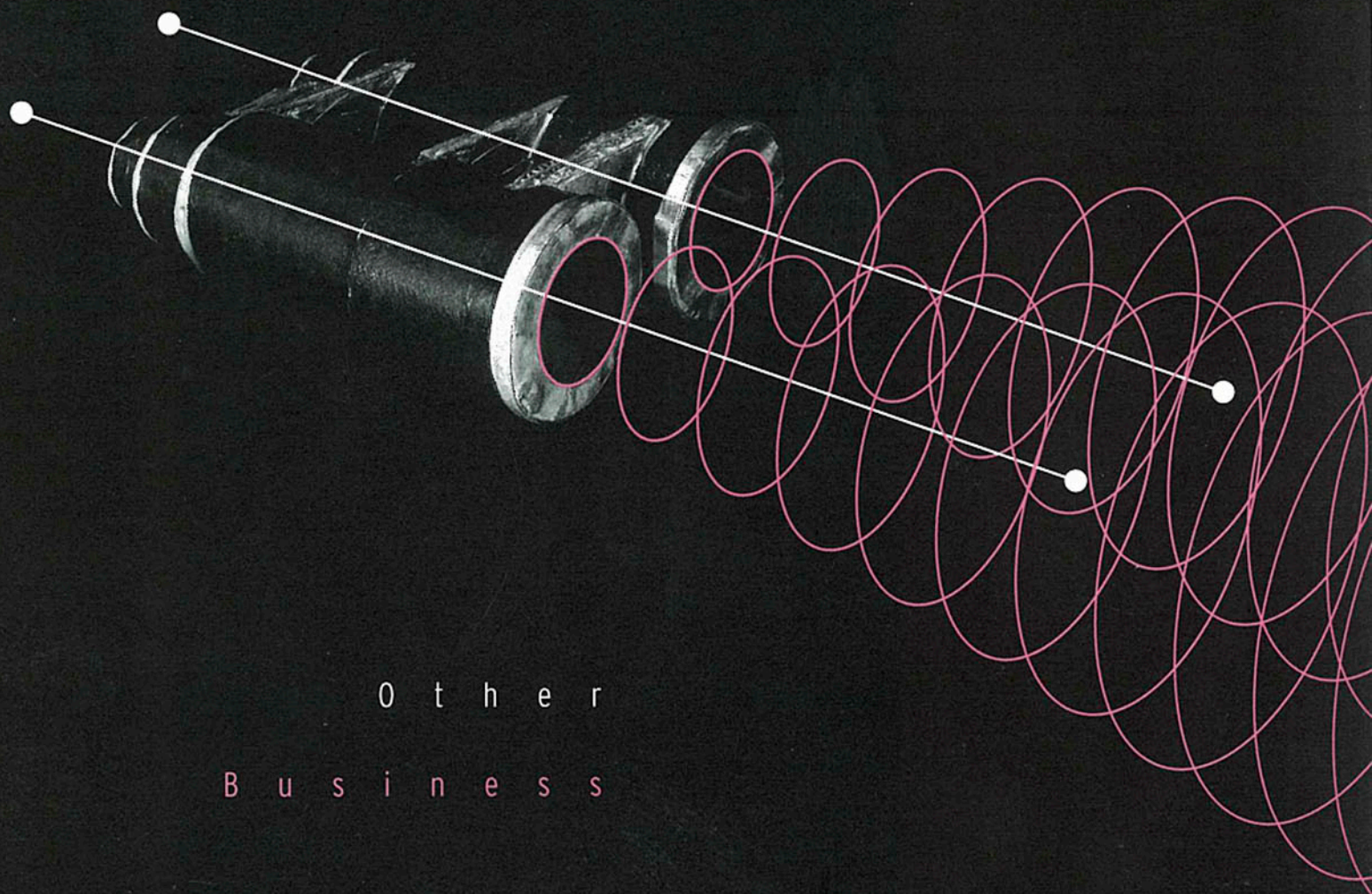


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