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**contributors:**



**Verda Alexander and Primo Orpilla** are co-founders of studio o+a, established in San Francisco in 1991. Leaders in the field of "democratic design," their expansive, open-plan environments—which stress sustainability, accessibility, and careful coordination of function and form—have become a signature look for some of the West Coast's most forward-thinking tech innovators. *Contract* magazine named Alexander and Orpilla its 2011 Designers of the Year.



**Kay Sargent, CID, LEED® AP, IIDA**, principal at IA Interior Architects, holds a design degree from Virginia Commonwealth University and studied environmental design at Parsons School of Design. A practicing design professional for 23 years, she specializes in working with government agencies and corporations, and is expert in security design and workplace strategies. A frequent lecturer and author of several articles, she has served on the international boards of IIDA and NCIDQ.



**William Taylor, FAIA**, co-founded the Los Angeles Institute of Architecture and Design (LAIAD) in 2001. He is also a founding principal of TFO Architecture, a Los Angeles design firm with a wide ranging body of local and international projects. Taylor was recently named a Fellow by the American Institute of Architecture (AIA) based on his educational work. Taylor earned his Master of Architecture degree from Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1981, with distinction, and his Bachelor of Architecture degree from Virginia Polytechnic Institute.

# building blocks of a design career

## LAIAD teaches aspiring design professionals to think like designers

By William Taylor, FAIA, founding director, LAIAD

Learning how to think like a designer is a sound foundation for those dreaming of becoming a design professional. Whether a student wishes to become an architect or interior designer, or isn't sure which design path is the right fit, Los Angeles Institute of Architecture and Design (LAIAD) believes the journey should start by learning fundamental design concepts.

Founded with a single architecture student in 2001, LAIAD fills a niche in design education: offering students an alternative pathway into design professions and providing degree-granting institutions highly qualified transfer candidates. Although initially conceptualized as an apprenticeship program that would serve as a direct gateway to design jobs, LAIAD is not a vocational school; rather it is a place where students learn to think conceptually and rigorously about architecture and design. Increasingly, more students had the goal to transfer into accredited undergraduate programs, as well as to apply for graduate studies. As the focus transitioned toward transfer preparation, the Interior Design program also was added in 2004 to provide a wider range of options for students interested in design industries.

Aspiring design professionals—who do not yet possess the pronounced skills and portfolio to fully demonstrate their design aptitude—seek out LAIAD to develop design skills, create a portfolio, and gain entry into a future design career. “Coming from a fashion background, I became interested in interior design when I was working in a high-end furniture showroom,” says current student Rachel Wittle. “As I began researching the industry, I wasn't sure if I wanted to pursue an interior design or architecture education. Exposure to both fields through LAIAD's integrated curriculum helped me determine which side of the business I ultimately wanted to practice.”

First-year interior design and architecture students from divergent educational and professional backgrounds, cultures, and ages work side-by-side in twice-weekly, intimate evening studio courses. Our approach to education is to start by establishing a canon of universal design fundamentals that later can be called upon as students begin to focus their studies. These elements do include practical skills, such as drawing, model building, and 2-D and 3-D computer modeling, but the primary goal is first to establish the tools of a student's design mind: the ability to fully conceptualize a project's process, methodically create order out of seemingly disparate parts, and devise creative solutions when presented with problems. “LAIAD doesn't teach drawing so students learn how to draw. We teach drawing so they learn how to think,” asserts our co-director Carl Smith, AIA.

One way LAIAD has been able to successfully achieve this goal is through presenting students with complex, somewhat abstract, studio assignments. One example is a first-semester project based on artist Sol LeWitt's “Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes” series of drawings. Students select a data source, such as a poetic meter or ocean tide cycle, and then use that data to create a set of rules, which is then applied to solve the exercise. The newly derived rules are used to choose a set of incomplete cubes from LeWitt's series and also govern how those cubes are used. Using 3-D computer modeling, students apply their rules as a map to systematically stack and rotate the cubes, thus creating a structure. The digital model is then used as a guide to build a Basswood model. Through the process of extracting and applying rules, students gain valuable conceptual ordering skills. This understanding of spatial functions becomes the base for their future: more advanced design work.

“The courses and design exercises are intensive. But, if you put in the work, the results are more than worth it,” says Wittle, who plans to pursue an interior architecture degree upon completion of LAIAD studies. “I've studied visual communications at another school, but here I learned how to brainstorm about a design problem and work through the problem-solving process on my own. LAIAD instructors challenge you to discover your own design solutions through guided critiques.”

Teaching students design fundamentals first makes them stronger design candidates for both a future in interiors and architecture. After completing the LAIAD program, students have been routinely accepted into some of the nation's top architecture and design schools, including The New School, Cal Poly Pomona, Harvard, Otis College of Art and Design, University of Pennsylvania, SCI-Arc, University of Michigan, UCLA, and Yale.

The hands-on, design-oriented approach LAIAD has developed is earning recognition in another way. Our students have won scholarships for six consecutive years—including two awards this year—in the AIA/Los Angeles' 2x8 Competition, competing against students from highly recognized design programs across California. About 25 percent of LAIAD alumni have also received substantial scholarships toward their undergraduate or graduate education based on portfolio presentation and individual achievement. ■

For LAIAD student projects images visit [www.contractdesign.com/LAIAD](http://www.contractdesign.com/LAIAD).