

NICOLE STARNES TAYLOR, ARCHITECT This former carpenter talks about how having worked in the trades made her a better architect.

Can we start out with a timeline?

In 1996, I graduated from North Carolina State University with a degree in environmental design in architecture. Then I worked for almost five years at several architecture firms, where I gained residential and commercial project experience. In 2001, I returned to graduate school at the University of Washington in Seattle with a strong interest in green building. In 2004, I received my master of architecture degree. From 2004 to 2006, I worked as a carpenter in all phases of construction on residential remodel projects. After that, I returned to architectural practice to complete the licensing requirements. In 2008, I opened MAKE Design Studio in Seattle. Our focus is residential remodels and custom green homes.

Why did you spend time as a carpenter?

I always enjoyed working with my hands. In school, I sought out architecture classes that gave me hands-on building experience, including studios in sculpture, furniture, and industrial design. After my first five years in professional architectural practice, the gulf between the world of drawing and actual building seemed unnecessarily broad. It seemed fundamental to me that to be a good architect, I needed to understand how to build. It only helped that I was living in Seattle in a strong economy surrounded by amazing craftspeople. The Northwest has a thriving woodworking tradition and a progressive green-building focus. Seattle seemed like an ideal place to learn home construction.

What did you do?

In the field, I did everything. When I started, I had woodshop experience but zero field experience. My first few months were full of laborer-type work. I remember a lot of digging, moving building material, and sleeping very soundly. I was incredibly

fortunate to be exposed to all phases of construction—from jackhammering concrete, to pouring concrete foundation walls, to framing, to installing trim, and to doing punch-list work. I was best at trim and punch, and while I like framing, I was slow as molasses.

How did your work in the field affect your work as an architect?

After carpentry, architectural practice was much richer. Those endless lines became objects with weight and unique qualities



that I understood intimately and in an entirely new way. I could visualize three-dimensionally much better, and problem-solving the details was fun and much easier. I developed a new confidence in drawing a clear line between what was doable and what was unnecessary architectural gymnastics. I also fundamentally understood home construction and all of its systems much better, which has been extremely useful in implementing green-building strategies in my work. After carpentry, collaboration with contractors became fun and more productive. My design work also became better as a result. I saw firsthand in the field which details are critical to the eye and which ones are not.

What conclusions did you reach?

I think all architects should be required to build as part of their education. Many architects gain this experience through working on their own homes, myself included. That is valuable, but it does not compare to what you can learn from working with the pros. You gain a real understanding of deadlines, integration of the trades, and standard means and methods for getting the work done. When you are working on your own home, you can spend four hours picking out the perfect fastener. In the field, you are part of a larger team with pressures to deliver. That is a great lesson for an architect and has made me extremely responsive to calls from the field. I understand the pressure contractors are under and the domino of subcontractors that get delayed if the architect responds, "I need four days to figure this out."

As a woman and as an architect, were you treated differently on the job site?

Strong mentorship is the key to success in this field. When I applied to work in construction, I didn't know any female carpenters. It turned out not to be an issue. I had many excellent female and male carpenter mentors who taught me the craft of carpentry, and I have immense gratitude for those who took the time to teach me. Being "the architect" on site periodically brought some ribbing when I met someone new. But even that was fleeting. The bottom line was that I was in the field to become a better architect, and tradespeople's gripe with architects is that they do not know how to build. There is no better way to address that issue than to teach the architect when she has her tool belt on and is ready to learn.



For more on Taylor's work, check out her articles at FineHomebuilding.com/extras.