

Latinas in
ARCHITECTURE
VOL. III

Stories of raising the 1% one Latina at a time



ALICIA PONCE, AIA, NCARB, LEED AP



ALTERING PRACTICE

KATHERINE DARNSTADT

“Be bold. For many Arquitinas, you were already the first. Don’t be afraid to be the first to ask the question, to champion a quiet voice, or to push for a better design. Become an architect of instigation to create architecture for equity.”

150 years ago, my mother’s family were building lives post slavery in Louisiana. My father’s side of the family was nomadic throughout central Mexico. Their migration patterns of necessity and hope would eventually cross in Chicago. As a child, my mother didn’t know her social status was improved by a single sweep of a pen from a census tracker who stuck through the word “Negro” and listed “Indian” since “Mulatto” was no longer an acceptable categorization term for race. My father came to Chicago on his own as a teenager for work. I have never met either of them.

SNEEZING THROUGH SATURDAYS

If it was furry, grassy, floral, or dusty, I was allergic to it. Before I could easily get a pill over the counter, I had to wake up at 6am every Saturday to visit a doctor’s office with my adoptive dad to get three allergy shots; two on the right arm, one on the left. Afterwards, we would get pancakes piled high with whipped cream and strawberries at a sweetness level that only a child could tolerate.

Most Saturdays I had to follow him to his office and try not to die of boredom for the rest of the day. It was usually just the two of us. Him working extra hours as he was starting up an electrical engineering and contracting company, me clicking all the mechanical pencils until the lead fell out and reloading them again to pass the time. Attached to the drab monochrome office was the much more interesting to explore shop full of wire spools, grated floors, actual rolls of blueprints, and hidden Playboy calendars. It was back in the shop, newly immunized that morning from dust, that I would pretend to read through those drawings and marvel at the crisp lines that made pictures I didn’t understand. It was my dad that told me architecture was a profession that I could go to school for, and gently reminded me of that when I enrolled into an English and Philosophy program instead.

BECOMING AN ACCIDENTAL ARCHITECT

I ended 2009 by receiving my architecture license and marrying my architecture school sweetheart. We met my first

year and his last year of school and shared an intensity for design research and bonded over bad vending machine coffee during late studio nights. Both of us thought we made it through the worst of the recession and felt confident starting 2010 as a new couple with our first professional milestones checked off, design ambitions at the firms we were working at, and grad school debt to pay off. I started 2010 by finding out, in order, that I was laid off from the job that just promoted me and I was pregnant from having a bit too much fun on our honeymoon. I was suddenly thrust into a depressed but highly competitive job market in Chicago being both overqualified (licensed) for most entry level positions and under qualified (3 years) for licensed architect positions. I was spending nights staring at the ceiling trying to shake the feeling of insecurity and disappointment that I had worked so hard just to become barefoot and pregnant. It might have been insomnia, but the only logical option when you can’t get hired is to hire yourself.

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

When I started Latent in 2010 at 28, it was Plan B. My Plan A was to get hired at a firm, but I needed to support myself and my future family in the interim with work. During college, I worked my way through school with various hospitality and bartending jobs that fit my late night post studio tendencies, but I was just too sleepy during pregnancy to make that possible. I also knew how fraught and nearly impossible it would be to get a job at a firm while visibly pregnant. I vividly remember one of my

from being able to barely speak to speaking to thousands on my work in civic innovation and community-focused design and becoming a prominent voice on urbanism and practice. At this time in my career, I had challenged myself with expanding the practice to assume new roles developer and contractor in addition to architect. This was not due to the hubris of a few published projects and plans, but rather a response to lack of access for building back neighborhood corridors and strengthening small businesses. The lessons learned from developing popup retail projects, writing new legislation, and being deep into construction changed the way I viewed the ecosystem of design and untapped potential impact architects can have.

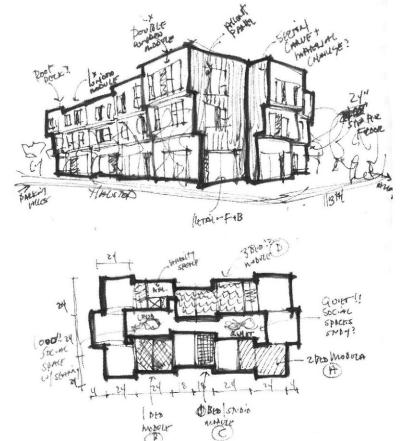
The firm is now 16 years old. A tempestuous teenager with strong emotions, a deep love for community work, and a frustration for the conflicts that are inherent within the intersection of design and policy. Our work has expanded past Chicago with community driven projects across the Midwest from recreation centers, affordable housing, public plazas, and even another pop up shop. This range of the practice allows us to imagine new futures and take the risk to speak them into existence.

MY FINAL THOUGHTS

One Chapter, Many Stories

My journey is not solitary. I have been able to push past the self-doubt over drinks with a core group of fellow woman firm founders, enhance client design visions with my talented staff,

ARCHITECTURAL SKETCH



The Rise is a new construction permanent supportive housing development focused on young adults. The exterior steps out across each floor to allow more space for larger units and subtle shifts in scale. The typical floorplan mimics the stepped concept with an interior corridor that expands to include informal social spaces outside of the units. This early concept sketch was later refined into the 5-story, 42-unit development currently seeking permit.

ABOUT KATHERINE DARNSTADT

Katherine Darnstadt is the founder of Latent, a Chicago-based architecture and urban design practice advancing social and spatial justice through context driven design. Since 2010, she has partnered with communities to transform local assets into shared futures. Their work spans cultural, civic, and neighborhood spaces, including public plazas, adaptive reuse renovations, housing, neighborhood plans, and unique design explorations.

She and the firm have been published, exhibited, and featured widely, most recently as the Architectural League of New York Emerging Voices, contributor to the RIBA 100 Women Architects book, winner of several Architizer A+ Awards, and Architect’s Newspaper Best of Practice for Small Firms in the Midwest. She taught at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Northwestern University.

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As of 2025, there were approximately 116,005 registered architects in the United States. Women represent approximately 20% of licensed architects, while Latinas represent 2%, a rise from 1.7% in 2023 and less than 1% in 2021.

To create change, Alicia Ponce founded Arquitina - a first of its kind national 501(c)3 organization designed to go above and beyond the fewer than one percent of licensed Latina architects in the US while creating equitable and inclusive opportunities in the industry.

The success of the award-winning *Latinas in Architecture Volume I*, beckoned the stories in Volume II and now Volume III. *Latinas in Architecture* offers a glimpse of the Latina experience in the architectural profession.

The stories in this collection stretch from the United States to Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, Colombia, El Salvador, Argentina, Cuba, Uruguay, and Puerto Rico. They reveal a remarkable truth: Latinas possess a unique and unwavering grit. Some are daughters of immigrants; others arrived in the U.S. by choice, or driven by necessity in the face of natural disasters or civil unrest. Yet, across borders and circumstances, we carry ourselves with pride and determination — building architecture that is by everyone and for everyone.

