

HPW INSPIRING WOMEN SERIES: ZENOVIA TOLOUDI

Do you have advice for professional women that are seeking a career in the architecture and design sector?

The most important thing is to build a portfolio of creative work. To distinguish oneself among many creators, one needs to focus on being authentic. Instead of looking into current trends and what others are doing, it is better to focus on the ideas and values one can bring, and to make work around them.

While women in design thrive in more-or-less equal terms when they are young/students (at least in the environments I have experienced), things get harder as women reach higher positions in their careers, and most significantly when they become mothers. Solidarity with other women (as well as other underrepresented groups), mentorship, and open discussions about this ongoing situation help a lot.

Recognition takes time to occur. And not everyone has access to systems of selection, and promotion. But lately things have become more open. We all need to reinforce openness, and to stay connected through democratic processes and transparent environments.

Your installations and exhibitions are on display around the world. Which one is your favorite?

The Yellow + Blue installation at Carleton University, Ottawa expands my analysis on the public space crisis through a proposal that combines both playfulness and inclusion. Playing with transparency, colors, light, and mirrors, Yellow + Blue interrupts the routine of students, faculty, and staff to reveal the hidden dimensions of daily life on campus. The piece constantly redefines the relationship between the natural and the artificial/manmade, creating a spectrum of images for the viewer, merging the plaza, the architecture, people, with nature, light, colors, as well as with the unexpected and the unfamiliar. Yellow + Blue is conceived as a small labyrinth, viewed up-close or from afar, it presents the possibility of hiding and getting lost, hoping to unpack each person's labyrinthic self, while reinforcing the collective self among people of a place. It will soon be relocated at the Canadian Centre for Mindful Habitats.

Where do you derive inspiration from for your architectural installations?

The inspiration comes from a variety of sources. Many of my projects are conceived as alternative approaches to problematic situations, which I often point out myself. I work on a sort of "problem-solution" mode. For the "problem" part, I observe the everyday life and physical environment we inhabit, identifying what we might lack, or where we need to intervene. For the "solution" part my inspiration comes from imagination and fantasy, as well as my/our Greek heritage and cultural identity.

In the beginning of my career, my projects have been more adaptable to a variety of contexts – I think due to the era of globalization, and because I have been "nomad." While I still operate globally, I now let the context and specificity of a project to take more space and voice.

How could you define your architectural approach? Do you have a signature style?

I don't believe in an intentional creation of a signature style for making my work. For me, style occurs naturally, while working with limited means or resources -- style is what appears as the effortless result at the end of this process.

Inevitably during my 20+ years of practice, there are certain ideas that re-occur, values which persist. The element of play is a dominant one. Most of my projects, even if they are addressing a problematic situation, they are playful. I work with scale, light, materiality, I pay attention to the senses, and how my work is perceived by the spectator/user.

What are your career goals for the next 10 years? What do you envision for your future career trajectory?

Most of my installations/exhibitions have been taking place in galleries. But lately I have been interested in grounding them in public experiences. Creating public interventions in real spaces that people use every day, such as lobbies, offices, and outdoor spaces allows me to see how the art becomes part of existing architectures and daily life, and how art can become more publicly available. I curate the experience of users/visitors/spectators to help them perceive this public-ness through types of design that emphasize elements such as repetition, infinity, and/or illusion.

What impact has your Greek heritage had on your career?

Tremendous! First, I was born and grew up in Alexandroupolis, Evros, Greece. Living next to the border allowed me early on to consider the "other" side. Also, being in the periphery of the country influenced me to appreciate the small things, ideas and initiatives that are not part of what is considered as center or mainstream. At the same time, being close to nature provided me with freedom and space for creativity.

As many Greek artists and architects, I have been influenced by Greece's history, culture, and architecture. Most significantly, my research on public space and the potential of the Ancient Agora re-actualization in present time. I study and design projects that link architecture and public space to democracy. I take inspiration from the Ancient Greek structures of public space as well as the ways in which the physical environment relates to democratic actions of people. I expand this interest to the design of public architecture, which I define as an architecture that houses and promotes community. For example, in my Silo(e)scapes futuristic project, which is a hybrid of a seed bank, a sharing economy and a museum for Mediterranean plant species that may disappear, I integrated even more consciously some of the Greek elements, nature, architecture, as well as music.

From the Greek culture and philosophy, I hold on to the ingenuity, the spirit of freedom, the critical eye, and the pride.

I have worked closely together with my (Greek) father, George Toloudis, architect, engineer, and inventor who had influenced my work on many levels. Architecturally, to matters of form, structure, construction, materiality, concept, and function to name a few. And philosophically, on focusing on the inseparable of who you are professionally and what you do every day in real life. He was a big believer of making the impossible, possible. We discussed the realization of bottom-up visions through the solidarity, faith, and contribution of other people as a key element of an ideal society.

My (Greek) mother, Maria (Sidiropoulou) Toloudi, gave me strength and confidence, as well as feminism, important tools for any woman to operate within a challenging, and unfair world. We have endless discussions around architecture, my work, society, the self, all the difficult philosophical and existential dilemmas: As a poet, she has deep intellectual and artistic contributions, and an amazing insight to connect one small thing with a bigger matter. She has been, and still is a role model for me.

How can our members follow you and your projects?

Thank you for your very interesting questions and for giving me the space to share my ideas and thoughts! You can follow me at @ztoloudi on Instagram and my website is <https://zenovia.net/>.

**WHO HAS INSPIRED YOU IN YOUR CAREER? LET US KNOW AT
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