

Member Profile

Nonya Grenader



Clockwise:
Nonya Grenader.
Grenader, Danny Samuels, and students at the ZeRow House in 2009. Photo by Jeff Fitlow.
The ZeRow House at Project Row Houses in Houston in 2013. Courtesy Nonya Grenader.
Textile Mill. Photo by Nash Baker.

Architect and educator Nonya Grenader first became involved with RDA while she was teaching at the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts (HSPVA) in the early 1980s. For a gala, she contributed a toy that was both a table centerpiece and an auction item. Her early experiences with RDA were exciting, as the organization was “this incredible, synergistic thing,” she remembers. She joined RDA’s Board of Directors in 1997, serving first as a board member and then Secretary, Vice President, and President-Elect before leading RDA as President in 2007–08. Grenader has taught at Rice Architecture since 1994, but last year marked an important milestone: she retired as Professor in Practice after the Fall 2021 semester. She is missed in M.D. Anderson Hall, but she isn’t gone, as her work as an architect continues.

A native Houstonian, Grenader grew up in a two-bedroom house off Dixie Road near what was then a Nabisco factory. Her family was artistic—there were regular trips to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston to see sculpture and attend art classes. Architecture found her early on. After undergraduate education in the subject at the University of Texas at Austin, Grenader worked for Michael Graves in Princeton, New Jersey, and then Will Cannady and Morris Aubrey in Houston. She began teaching architecture at HSPVA in the late 1970s before later earning her MArch at Rice Architecture. She completed her coursework as a mother of two, balancing studies with family.

Grenader joined the faculty of Rice Architecture soon after graduating. Together with Danny Samuels, she developed a foundational curriculum for the first two undergraduate architecture studios. Also with Samuels, Grenader founded the Rice Building Workshop (now Construct) in 1996, a program that challenges architecture students to build what they designed. Notable early projects were done for Project Row Houses, close to where she grew up. One achievement of many was the realization of Rice Building Workshop’s ZeRow House on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., as part of the Solar Decathlon in 2010. Under the leadership of Grenader and Samuels, more than 600 students went through the program over twenty-two years.

In her professional work, Grenader has realized of a string of elegant homes in Houston. She also led the adaptive reuse of an old textile mill in the Heights dating back to 1894; the work was done in five phases over twelve years and included contributions from her husband, Jonathan, and their son Sam, who is also an architect. (Jonathan, trained as a structural engineer, was one of

the building’s owners.) Grenader’s career earned her numerous awards and jury invitations. She became a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects in 2000.

Clients, colleagues, friends, and students alike hold Grenader in high regard. Jacki Schaefer reflects that “living in a house designed by Nonya Grenader is like receiving a precious gift. Her warmth and kindness are reflected in the open, light-filled spaces, which seek to amplify—and not overshadow—the residents.” Val Glitsch describes Grenader as “one of Houston’s true architectural treasures. She is known by her friends, clients, and students as generous beyond all reasonable measure.” Natalye Appel says that she “was thrilled to take Nonya’s place one semester during a sabbatical, remembering it as all fun and games ... but I was so wrong! Nonya only made it seem effortless, as she does with all of her endeavors.”

Cite has long benefited from Grenader’s contributions. Beginning as an Editorial Assistant for *Cite* 31 in 1994, she then joined *Cite*’s Editorial Committee in 1995 and remained until 2007. Her first article, on Houston’s West End Ball Park, appeared in *Cite* 34: Culture Zones (Spring 1996) and was followed by many subsequent texts. Grenader guest edited *Cite* 39: Texas Places (Fall 1997), *Cite* 44: Deconstructing the Rice (Spring 1999), *Cite* 54: House home (Summer 2002), *Cite* 57 (Spring 2003), and *Cite* 63 (Spring 2005). In the Texas Places double issue, coedited with Bruce Webb, she interviewed author Larry McMurtry after approaching him at a reading. *Cite*’s pages constitute a “very specific time and place in Houston and Texas,” Grenader says. The authors “designed community and the culture and the city. It spoke to so many facets of the city, some obvious and some hidden. It seemed to take on important issues, and sometimes you had to really fight for that.” Her guidance for the future of the publication? “Keep looking closely,” she advises.

Grenader’s interest in the house powered her private practice, the Rice Building Workshop, a themed issue of *Cite*, a long-running seminar at Rice Architecture, and, most visibly, her tenure as President of RDA. Under her leadership, the 99K House competition, organized with AIA Houston, prompted 182 designs for small, affordable homes from architects around the world. The schemes were exhibited at AIA Houston in 2008 and appeared in a dedicated publication. The winning house, designed by Hybrid/ORA from Seattle, was built on Jewel Street in Fifth Ward.

While Houston still possesses the structural problems of Grenader’s youth, there have been improvements. One important change is in the identity of today’s architecture students—once dominated by men, now there are more women than men in the field. “I have sheer optimism about that,” she remarks. “Everything needs to continue, and people need to be nurtured and challenged.”

In remarks prepared on the occasion of Grenader’s Lifetime Achievement Award from AIA Houston in 2017, Samuels said that her work “can be characterized as a patient search, always evolving and improving from what went before, resulting, at a time when most architects’ buildings compete for your attention, in quiet and subtle buildings of the very highest order in concept and realization.” Grenader’s legacy of generosity as an architect, educator, and person is one that all of us should keep learning from. As Schaefer says, “The world needs more Nonyas.”

—Jack Murphy