



RiceDesignAlliance

The Rice Design Alliance, formed within Rice Architecture in 1972, facilitates an actionable understanding of how design influences the built and natural environments.

RDA empowers academia, architecture/engineering/construction practitioners, and the broader Houston community to transform our city into a better place to live and a model for twenty-first-century design.

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Time: A Farewell



In 1988, when I started working as Executive Director of the Rice Design Alliance, Houston was a very different place. Much of what we take for granted now was considered crazy or unlikely back then. For example, many thought that Houston was just too hot to have life in its streets and parks. Many thought that the bayous were scary, stinky, and ugly. At the center of Hermann Park was a “mud hole.” The preservation ordinance had no teeth. Freedman’s Town was being demolished and Project Row Houses did not exist. “Sustainability” was not a catch word. The idea that a majority of people would want to live close-in was considered far fetched. The oil bust had just hit and the high rises Downtown, as path-breaking as they may have been, were called “see through” because they were so empty. Houston seemed doomed to be a one-industry town where finding public life, in the words of Philip Lopate, was like “chasing a unicorn.”

Well, Houston has changed. And I’m so proud that Rice Design Alliance has been an important part of turning many of those assumptions on their heads. The most exciting times were when we held design competitions. For example, the Heart of the Park competition helped spur a master plan by Laurie Olin that changed that mud hole into the beautiful reflection pond that it is today. There are so many other examples, big and small, that started with an article or a lecture or a civic forum or a conversation at one of our parties. In the last few years Houston has been held up nationally for its green transformation, and I believe that we had something to do with that.

And you know what else changed? Back in the day, Nonya Grenader was a Rice Design Alliance intern, when she was a graduate student at Rice Architecture. Later she joined the faculty and became president of the Rice Design Alliance, initiating an international design competition for the design of a 99K affordable house.

None of this could have been accomplished without the support of Rice University, Rice Architecture, the Rice Design Alliance Board leadership, and countless members and volunteers. I enjoyed working with the deans who have supported our mission, including Jack Mitchell, Paul Kennon, Alan Balfour, Lars Lerup, and now Sarah Whiting.

Rice Architecture faculty have supported Rice Design Alliance by serving on the board, chairing and participating on committees, and several have served as president along with Nonya, including Drexel Turner, Peter Papademetiou, Jim Furr, and Jay Baker. Rice Design Alliance has also benefitted from the help of our talented student interns.

All in all, it has been a wonderful collaboration between Rice Architecture and Houston’s architecture and design community. Thank you for the honor of serving as the executive director. I leave you in expert hands of Rice Design Alliance staff members Raj Mankad, Courtney Tardy, Angie Chen, Raquel Puccio, and Cathy Bauer. The next executive director will have an excellent team to work with, and I look forward to many more ways Rice Design Alliance can work towards improving the quality of life in Houston.

Linda Sylvan

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