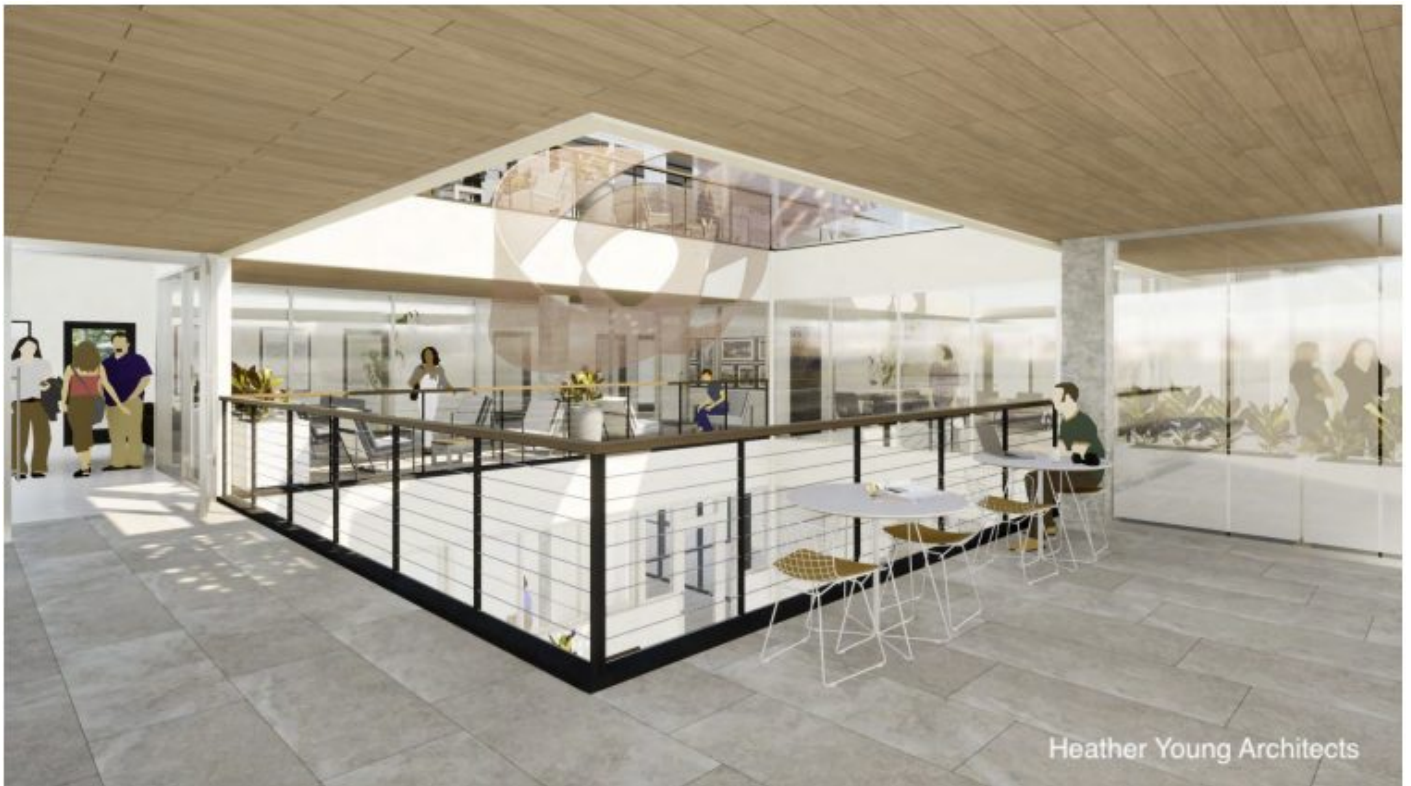




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Moving Beyond the Hero Architect

COMPANY: Heather Young Architects, Palo Alto, CA | www.hyarchs.com (<https://hyarchs.com/>)

CONVERSATION WITH: Heather Young

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In exploring the website of an award winning architecture firm like Heather Young Architects (HYA), you expect to find stunningly photographed projects, creative staff bios and a well-crafted design philosophy statement. HYA doesn't disappoint, emphasizing client appreciation for how a "collaborative design approach exceeds their expectations, paving the way for unique projects to unfold." But [www.hyarchs.com \(https://hyarchs.com/studio/team/\)](https://hyarchs.com/studio/team/) also includes an uncommon salute **gratefully acknowledging "the contribution of our past partners, employees, interns, summer interns, and collaborators."**



Collaboration includes more than just working well with clients. Asked about the unusual acknowledgement, Heather Young pointed to the **myth of the hero architect** embedded in so much of architectural education in the past, that one person is the genesis for a vast body of work over many years. "The last 15 years or so people are starting to acknowledge it is such a collaborative industry – not just staff but client partners, city partners, consultants, contractors. The hero architect is no more." HYA's website reinforces those contributions by naming those who have helped them succeed.

Earlier in her career, Heather Young was working for an internationally acclaimed architect, traveling for 24 hours on site visits to Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong. "It always challenged me that **I was the voice** of this very talented international architect but somehow my point of view from my safe little home in Connecticut was relevant halfway around the world." She decided she needed better connection to community, and moved to California.

"Now most of our site visits are within 1-10 miles, and sometimes we even bicycle to them."

In California she worked for another firm until the 2002 "dot com" bust resulted in firms cutting
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was working on a pro bono project for the Girl Scouts at the time. Young went to the partners
and asked about plans for the pro bono project for Girls Scouts of Santa Clara. She'd invested a

lot of emotion, asked if she could take the project, and **launched her own practice**. They also said “take the campus client with you,” so Young had paying work with smaller TI and space planning.



That was almost 20 years ago. “That’s how it happens. If you can survive a dot com bust or major recession like 2008 or a global pandemic, that’s an indication you’re where you need to be and doing something right.”

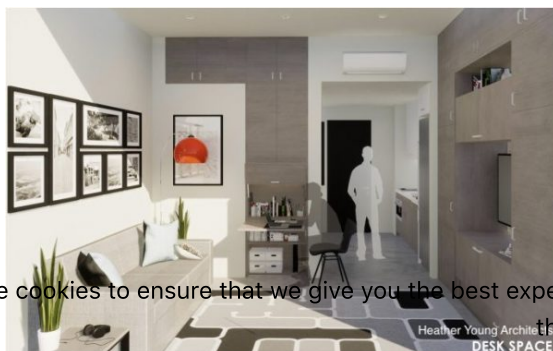


Work with the Girl Scouts was the springboard for Young’s **community activism**. Young has served as past Chair and Board member of the Palo Alto Architectural Review Board and past President of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) San Mateo County Chapter. She has also been active as a Commissioner with the California Architects Board and a Visiting Team Member for the National Architectural Accrediting Board.

Heather Young Architects portfolio displays a **broad range of styles**. “Our work is about responding to the local context as well as the client’s desires,” said Young. “We may have a recommendation stylistically, but if it doesn’t resonate with them it won’t be a successful project.”

When the shutdown hit in March of 2020, Heather Young Architects was fortunate to have excellent IT support as they sent staff home with their computers and monitors. Everyone has been working on a VPN portal into the server. Because the company was already using Archicad in a teamwork fashion, teams were up and running seamlessly as if the server were not miles away.

In addition to [Archicad \(https://archvista.com/why-archicad/\)](https://archvista.com/why-archicad/) as a foundational tool for design teamwork, the firm has adopted GoogleMeet, Zoom, Google Docs, GoogleSheets, all sorts of collaborative software. “Couldn’t have done anything like this if not already firmly vested in Archicad, Graphisoft and BlueBeam. Tom and Tracie were great, they were right there helping us out.”



Like all of us this past year, online connection has been helpful but **seeing people face to face is still essential to building community**. Last summer, Young held weekly socially distanced boxed lunches for staff to get together outdoors. She looks forward to a return to the monthly user

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groups [ARCHVISTA \(https://archvista.com\)](https://archvista.com), used to organize with 14-16 people from firms around the region, hosted four times a year in her Palo Alto office.

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It's been a long journey from the girl who built dollhouses, to the teenager tuned in to the power of architecture in high school, to an early adopter of environmental stewardship and green design. "I was destined for this profession," said Young. "I've been ecstatic to explore all the possibilities of architecture beyond the doll house, beyond residential to commercial and mixed use."

Written by Sue Lani Madsen, AIA Member Emeritus, Freelance Columnist

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