

Tessa Smith on accessible career paths and passive home building



Tessa Smith
Principal &
Co-owner
Artisans Group,
Olympia, Wash.

As a young girl, Tessa Smith was fascinated by watching her father, a drafting teacher at the local community college, set up his studio in the family laundry room to draw. He also was a carpenter who made furniture and fought back decrepitude in the family's Craftsman home with many remodeling projects. Between spending time in her dad's workshop and making dollhouses and Lego cities, Smith became enamored of building. She was home schooled by her mother—"She was brilliant and extremely grueling when it came to school"—and enrolled in college at age 15. She took her father's drafting course, liked it, graduated with a technical trade degree at 17, and was hired at her first drafting job by claiming she was 18.

While working full-time drawing, she attended the local liberal arts college and pursued a non-standard bachelor's degree in sustainable architecture, design, and fine arts. Before graduating, Smith landed at Artisans Group, developed an interest in Passive House, and became a certified Passive House consultant at age 22 and eventually a co-owner. To complete the licensure process, she accrued work service hours by hiring an architect to oversee

what essentially was an internship at her own company. Smith became a licensed architect, and her firm is building Passive Houses with prefabricated walls and roof assemblies at just 5 to 10 percent more than the cost of an equivalent-sized code-built tract home.

Q Your career path for becoming an architect was non-traditional. Can someone do today what you did to become an architect?

A I feel that the voice I am supposed to have in our industry is to encourage training and experience. I'm really saddened to see the [architecture] community go away from alternative pathways to licensure because [Washington] is one of the last states where you can have a non-conforming degree like mine and become an architect. I think that is profoundly sad because those who would have the talent and drive but not the financial means to attend an NCARB (National Council of Architectural Registration Boards) supported school can't become architects. I get it that the profession is not something anybody can do. It should be difficult and one should be qualified. But a few years ago, less than 11 percent of licensed architects in the U.S. were women because the industry is geared to full-time employees who don't take the time off for family or travel. So you have an entire industry based on a certain kind of way you rise in the ranks that was discriminatory to women and to anybody who doesn't travel the exact path. In recent history there used to be a lot of ways to become an architect. I believe the industry has

lost something in its more myopic approach to licensure. I do feel myself becoming an advocate for young women, and I would definitely attend any [legislative session] in our state that would propose to remove the path I took to become an architect because I think it is critical to the health of our industry.

Q What kind of reaction have you received from that point of view?

A On a personal level of advocacy, I find that most architects want employees who can problem solve; who care and get along with other people. That one star student who is an incredible designer has a place too, but more often than not [architects] are going to want someone who is going to fit in with their company culture. I don't feel a lot of resistance toward alternative licensing paths from most of the architects I know, but most of the architects I know are in the Passive House community, and they're sort of thinking differently anyway. They're open-minded people who don't want to build a house the same way it's been done for the last 200 years if it doesn't make sense. So I feel like they're ripe ground for change.

Q You were drawn to Passive House because you got tired of all the green washing. What was going on then?

A I don't want a product that is no different than what I could buy 10 years ago. That is what most of the houses that claim to be green are today.

For the complete interview with Tessa Smith, see probuilder.com/tsmith