

Julia Donoho

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Julia Donoho, AIA, Esq.

Julia Donoho, AIA, Esq., author of Julia Morgan, FAIA, Recipient of the 2014 AIA Gold Medal, is the co-founder of the Julia Morgan Foundation. While serving on the board of directors for the American Institute of Architects (AIA), she successfully nominated Julia Morgan for the Gold Medal, the highest honor of the profession, and now is conducting deeper architectural analysis and research into her education, early works, and mature production. For 30 years, Donoho has worked as an architect and construction manager, and now as an attorney, Donoho is an advocate for the profession of architecture. Recent articles include "The Value Proposition in Architecture," "Architectural Design Can Drive Real Estate Values," "Inscribing Number 70 in Stone," and "A New Era of Women Rising in the Architecture Profession." Previously she published Smart Ideas: Community Charrette and Urban Design Competition for NW Santa Rosa. Donoho currently serves on the Strategic Council of the AIA, on the board of The Jefferson Society, and on the board of the Beverly Willis Architectural Foundation.

Summary

After graduating SUMMA CUM LAUDE from Princeton, and completing her MArch there with thesis advisor Michael Graves, FAIA, Julia Donoho, AIA, spent time in private practice, has worked extensively in the public sector, and has had eye-opening experiences as a community planning commissioner and in other community positions. Now as Sonoma County (California) Senior Project Manager, Donoho is ready for her next adventure, and is poised to become a member of the California Bar.

Donoho says she decided to pursue a law degree to better understand the legal ramifications of land-use laws and their intersection with property rights, zoning rules, and politics.

The notion to enroll in law school gained traction as she served on the planning commission of a small community in Colorado. "Citizens and politicians who may or may not have background or training decide a lot of things without involving design professionals," she says. "I saw that there was a need to become more active in that arena."

"While I was a planning commissioner, we wrote a law and the first time that it was discussed in any way we had 400 people arguing about it. It was heated, and it was only a small community of 20,000. To have 400 people show up at 9 p.m., and argue for five hours about the land use—it was eye opening to me."

After that meeting, Donoho continued the discussion with one of the lawyers about what the law said. The lawyer tried to persuade Donoho that what was written took precedence, while from Donoho's perspective, what was intended was more important.

“As an architect you think land use and zoning are important, and as a politician you think that a person’s property rights are important. I wanted to understand even better all the legal and political ramifications. I accepted a job in county government in construction management and went back to law school.”

A Higher Order of Organization

Donoho attended Empire College of Law in Santa Rosa, Calif., at night, graduating last June 2008. Donoho’s scholarship in law school follows her interests and experience. “I’ve written a piece for the Law Review on a case [HERNANDEZ V. HANFORD] in which the California Supreme Court said that planning commissioners and city officials can write land-use laws that have a direct and intended economic impact or affect on economic competition.” The case, which proceeded to the California Supreme Court, reinforced Donoho’s belief that there must be a better method for cities and counties to plan their land development in coordination with each other, in a way that moves communities forward with a bigger picture in mind.

“The next thing I want to do with my law and architecture degrees is write an article about general plans, a mechanism for all land-use laws in cities and counties,” Donoho says. “How you bridge the gap between cities and counties creates disparities in zoning; add in the political boundary and suddenly it’s all changed.” She hopes that a statewide general plan that follows more riparian boundaries would help address issues like watersheds, which are already hotly contested.

Rather than a piecemeal process, Donoho says “a general plan addresses all that, including demographics, population trends, natural resources, agricultural, really the whole aspect of the community planning. Then it projects forward the data and gives direction as to where to implement future development.

She cites as an example California which has written a new law to control urban growth and suburban sprawl. “They are just imposing this on all of the cities and counties to rewrite their general plan for the transportation and housing elements. They are not given a big picture. That’s where I want my architectural understanding to come together with my legal degree to put an architectural voice into the issue.

For the future

Donoho made a run for local elected office and says she may do so again. Right now, she is bridging both fields in many ways, including working on a competition to bring transit-oriented development to an area of Santa Rosa that will be served by commuter rail, which the local AIA board, of which Donoho is a member, supported. She says the competition is good for the city, which does not have funds to support the program, as well as for the architects who may benefit from the opportunities that new development may present. "There are a bunch of different, large entities that will plug into how this works. Architects can bring people together, have a voice, and create a vision that each of those people may not be able to do."

Donoho says of her law school experience: "Going to law school terrified me because it is all words and ideas. I was an engineer growing up. Architecture gave me the bridge to get out of that kind of thinking, and law has allowed me to enter more the realm of ideas, thought, and discourse. As an architect I could have made plenty of arguments for something one way or the other, but in understanding how to make changes in our society given our legal and political structure that extra education is essential for what I want to do next. And what I want to do next is shaped by getting this extra education."

"I don't see anybody being a lawyer and going back to being an architect. There have probably been one or two. But being an architect, getting some experience, and then getting a law degree? Awesome."