Architectuul / Wikipedia / Columbia University
Arts & Humanities

How Norma Merrick Sklarek Paved the Way for Black Women Architects

While the nation was consumed with civil-rights struggles, Sklarek ’50GSAPP, the first Black woman to earn an architecture degree from Columbia, was breaking down walls and building a legacy.

By
Paul Hond
|
Feb. 07, 2024
Architectuul / Wikipedia / Columbia University

It was May 1978, the International Olympic Committee had selected Los Angeles to host the 1984 Summer Olympics, and the LA Department of Airports had no time to waste. Authorities expected hundreds of thousands of visitors to fly in from all over the country and the world for the two-week event, far more than the Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) could handle. This anticipated spike in traffic required major renovations, including a new domestic terminal. To build it, the department hired the architectural firm of Welton Becket & Associates.

Norma Merrick Sklarek ’50GSAPP was ready. As tough and tenacious as she was charming and refined, Sklarek had joined Welton Becket on January 1, 1980 as a vice president, the first female licensed architect in the firm and the first hired to a senior position. She brought with her twenty-five years of experience and a host of other firsts: she was the first Black woman to get a degree in architecture from Columbia; the first to become a member of the American Institute of Architects (AIA); and the first to be licensed as an architect in New York (1954) and in California (1962).

The Terminal One project at LAX was particularly demanding. Though Sklarek would not design it, she would guide the project from start to finish. It was her job to bring

the plans from the drafting table into material existence. That meant calculating the labor and equipment costs, preparing contracts, translating design concepts into construction documents, and issuing instructions to the contractor (including the types of materials and hardware to be used and the coordination of engineering elements like electricity, plumbing, and ventilation). It was also Sklarek's job to make sure the building met structural, environmental, zoning, and safety codes, and to solve countless problems on the fly.

Sklarek had always been driven to tackle complex problems. In 1955 — the year Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery, Alabama bus — Sklarek got her first architectural job at the New York-based firm Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. At the time, the firm was struggling to build the sixty-story Union Carbide Building at 270 Park Avenue. What made 270 so tricky was that it had to be built over the subway: the support columns had to fit between the tracks, with the load of the upper floors taken up by horizontal "transfer beams" above the tunnels. Sklarek pored over the engineering, mechanical, and electrical drawings, learning everything she could, and before long, more seasoned employees began coming over to ask her questions. Her responsibilities grew, and she soon gained a reputation for managing difficult projects on tight deadlines.

By 1960, the year of the Woolworth's sit-in in Greensboro, North Carolina, Sklarek was breaking new ground. She moved to Los Angeles to work for Gruen and Associates, a firm run by Victor Gruen, an Austrian-born architect who, having fled the Nazis, set up shop in Southern California and invented the shopping mall. At Gruen, Sklarek rose to director of architecture, and for the next twenty years she managed such large-scale projects as the thirteen-story California Mart (1963), an apparel-industry hub located in the fashion district of downtown LA; the eleven-story, steel-frame US Embassy in Tokyo (1976), for which Sklarek shared design credit with her collaborator, the architect Cesar Pelli (who later designed the World Financial Center in Lower Manhattan); and the audacious, 750,000-square-foot, glass-skin Pacific Design Center (1975) in West Hollywood, known as the "Blue Whale."

But for all her success, Sklarek was frequently met with looks of skepticism when introducing herself to clients as the person in charge of the project. "When she walked into a room, she would run into some incredible prejudice," says Sklarek's son David Merrick Fairweather, an attorney in California.

Terminal One was no different. Sklarek had sensed that the manager of the Los Angeles Department of Airports — the client — harbored certain unspoken misgivings about her. As usual, Sklarek let her work speak for itself.

There were multiple Olympic-related projects underway at the airport, part of a $700 million renovation (more than $2 billion in 2024), but Terminal One was the only one that progressed on schedule. “It had to be ready. And they were having monumental problems on these other projects,” Sklarek later explained in a 1990 oral history conducted by UCLA. “We all had the same types of problems to deal with, but somehow I was able to avoid slipping into the potholes and going under.” Eventually, the airport manager had to come to Sklarek and ask for her help in getting other projects’ plans through the building department — a Herculean task.

On January 23, 1984, Terminal One was completed, ahead of schedule. A month later, Sklarek’s husband of eighteen years, the German-born architect Rolf Sklarek, died at seventy-seven. With Rolf gone, Sklarek had started pondering her own mortality. She felt she needed a change, so she left Welton Becket and, nearing sixty, started her own business. A one-woman operation, Sklarek worked from her house in Pacific Palisades, but quickly found that she didn’t like working alone. And so in 1985 she formed a partnership with LA architects Margot Siegel and Kate Diamond. Their firm — Siegel, Sklarek, Diamond — was smaller than what Sklarek was used to, but it was still the largest wholly women-owned architectural firm in America.

“My mother came up professionally during the Civil Rights era,” says Fairweather. “And she herself was a civil-rights hero, but completely unsung.” Fairweather refers to a striking photograph circa 1960 in which Sklarek is holding forth at a Gruen and Associates conference table, surrounded by colleagues, all of them older white men in dress shirts and dark ties.

Sklarek was highly respected at Gruen — she would become responsible for hiring and firing the men in those smoke-filled conference rooms — but when dealing with clients in the US, or in Japan, China, or Korea, she endured all manner of slights, rebuffs, presumptions, doubts, deprecations, and suspicions. “I think it’s absolutely impossible to understand the level of prejudice and difficulty that she faced,” says Kate Diamond. “I’m sure she felt every one of those little cuts. But Norma, being the sweet, lovely lady that she was, would have smiled politely. Norma had a backbone of stainless steel. And regardless of what was happening, she would work her way

through to the answer she needed to get to.”

Sklarek was born Norma Merrick in Harlem in 1926, the only child of Trinidadian immigrants. Her mother was a seamstress who taught her how to make her own dresses, and her father was a doctor with a home office at Seventh Avenue and West 112th Street, where his patients included the singer Ethel Waters and the pianist Art Tatum. Dr. Merrick taught his daughter light carpentry, and they did home-improvement projects together.

To get into Hunter College High School, a top academic all-girls school in Manhattan, prospective students had to take a test in math and English. Sklarek took the tests and got the highest math score in the city. At Hunter, more than one teacher betrayed resentment at the fact. “I used to feel that these teachers, and people, generally—white people, generally—thought of all Blacks as being inferior human beings, and that I was going to show them differently,” she said in her oral history, with a laugh. “That was one of the motivations, I suppose, that I had in school for working hard.”

Sklarek loved math and physics, but Dr. Merrick wanted her to go into medicine. Sklarek knew that she was going to have a career and that she would be independent — “I was not going to have anybody else to support me” — but she didn’t want to be a doctor or a lawyer. Then her parents suggested architecture. Sklarek knew nothing about it, and had no role models to look to, but she was intrigued by architecture’s mix of the artistic and the technical.

Her parents pushed her toward Columbia, which offered a bachelor’s degree in architecture. The dean told her that she’d have a better chance of getting into the program if she started at Barnard College and then transferred. With men away because of World War II, spaces were available. So Sklarek entered Barnard in 1944, and after a year she applied to Columbia, thinking that if she didn’t get in, she’d study physics. She got in.

Columbia was, she said, “extremely difficult.” Many of her classmates were much older — returning veterans taking advantage of the new GI Bill who already had degrees or had worked in offices — whereas Sklarek had never seen a drafting table. Of the twenty-five students in the program, ten were women — a record — but with the influx of veterans, ten students were squeezed out, ostensibly for low grades. Eight were women.

Sklarek survived, but it was rough going, and more than once she considered quitting. But when she thought of the time she had already spent, and the time that would be lost, she couldn't do it. Instead, she pushed on, until she hit another wall: a course on structure that involved integral calculus, which she had never taken and didn't understand. She sought help from a family friend, then from other students, to no avail. Frustrated yet determined, she continued hammering away at this strange language, until — finally — she cracked the code. She would later recall this experience, saying that while all that calculus was unnecessary, figuring it out showed her how to "attack a problem either in mathematics or in life that I couldn't solve, and learn not to give up but to keep trying until you get it."

After graduating, Sklarek applied to nineteen firms and was rejected by all of them. She did not give up. She took the civil-service exam and got a job as a draftsperson with the New York City Department of Public Works before moving to the private sector with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. Though she was a skilled designer, she knew that no company was ever going to make her the public face of a project. As she once put it, "When one goes above a certain level, one is representing the firm. And the policymakers of the firm, or those who are in power positions in the firm, feel more comfortable with having architects represent them who look and seem like them . . . They are probably more comfortable, and they just don't think of minorities or women as being in that kind of a role."

Architect Marshall Purnell, past president of the AIA, has noted that when Sklarek entered the field, "it was unheard of to have an African-American female who was registered as an architect. You didn't trot that person out in front of your clients and say, 'This is the person designing your project.' She was not allowed to express herself as a designer. But she was capable of doing anything. She was the complete architect."

While Sklarek knew as well as anyone the bigotry and sexism in the profession, she had also found a way to channel her talents and her comprehensive knowledge of the building process into a vocation that, for her, was deeper and more satisfying than design. "She would say that design is the easy part," says Fairweather. "She was in charge of production: she had to take the drawings and make them real."

Kate Diamond saw Sklarek's abilities up close. "She was clearly a technical genius," Diamond says. "When Norma would turn in a set of documents to the building department, they would come back with at most a couple of corrections. When men

would send the similar scale project into the building department, it would come back with five pages of corrections. Norma knew that she could prove her value quantitatively by delivering construction documents that could be built and completed with minute change orders, on schedule, and within budget — measurable things that proved her value to a firm."

Sklarek at a Gruen and Associates meeting, circa 1960 (Gruen Associates)

Siegel, Sklarek, Diamond opened for business in 1985, on the heels of the Terminal One project, when Sklarek was "at the top of her game, and kind of at the top of *the* game, technically and professionally, in Los Angeles," Diamond says. It was Sklarek whose track record of client satisfaction helped the fledgling all-women firm score some of its most significant commissions, including for buildings at the University of California, Irvine, and four elevated light-rail stations for the Los Angeles Metro Rail.

Says Diamond, "Norma taught me, and still teaches me, and I always quote her when talking to young architects: 'Understand that construction documents are a great translational dictionary that takes the ideas from the architect and puts them in terms that people in the field can build. And if you don't know the language, and you aren't consistent with your language, and you don't think through that language, you don't serve construction. And you don't serve architecture."

Sklarek soon found that working at a small start-up, even one she co-owned, left her hungry for the bigger jobs that had been her bread and butter. She left the firm in 1989 and joined the Jerde Partnership as principal of project management. At Jerde, she worked on a true behemoth: the 4.2-million-square-foot Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota, the largest shopping mall in the US. It would be Sklarek's last major project.

After thirty-seven years as a working architect — and after four marriages, two children, and dozens of buildings — Sklarek retired. She spent her later years traveling the world, cultivating flowers, speaking at universities, and training and mentoring young architects. In 2008, the AIA bestowed Sklarek with its highest honor, the Whitney Young Award, named for the civil rights activist who, at the AIA convention in 1968, had challenged architects to use their education and abilities for the social good. The award was established in 1972, and Sklarek was the first woman to receive it. "A positive force of change," the citation read, "she is truly the 'Rosa Parks of Architecture.'"

In her acceptance speech, Sklarek said, "During my architectural career, I have found that hard work and perseverance always win in the end. It is a philosophy I was raised with. It is the way I have lived my life … I stand here as living proof that no matter what your race or gender, architecture is one field where your hard work, perseverance, and talent can be recognized and rewarded. So don't let anyone try to tell you otherwise. I never did!"

Norma Sklarek died in 2012 at age seventy-five. Her legacy can be found both in her work and in her words. "My mother always instilled in me that as a Black person, you had to not just be smarter, but you had to work twice as hard just to reach the same place as white people," says Fairweather. "And as a Black woman, you had to work three or four times as hard."

Fairweather recalls driving around Los Angeles with his mother and seeing her buildings. There's the 97-acre South Coast Plaza in Costa Mesa, the largest shopping center on the West Coast; Topanga Plaza, the first enclosed shopping mall in Southern California; Fox Hills Mall (now Westfield Culver City), the first tri-level mall in LA; the Leo Baeck Temple, off the 405; the Blue Whale; and many more.

Sklarek's legacy extends to education as well: she taught architecture courses at UCLA and USC, and lectured at universities around the country, including Columbia

and Howard. More recently, in 2020, Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Preservation, and Planning announced the Norma Merrick Sklarek Scholars Fund, which supports full-tuition scholarships over three years. And last year, Barnard College held its inaugural Norma Merrick Sklarek Lecture.

"Norma was the young woman who opened doors," says Diamond. "She trained white men and Black women and everyone in between. She loved architecture and she wanted the profession to change. She would never have been the loudest voice. But she was an extraordinary presence. And she left us with the memory of someone who hit her head on many glass ceilings, and broke through them with absolute grace."

Read more from ***Paul Hond***

Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >

Read more from ***Paul Hond***