

# CANADIAN ARCHITECT





# AIA Canada Journal



## President's Letter

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**C**onference season is upon us! We have recently enjoyed the return of the in-person conference of the RAIC, an organization to which many of our members also belong, and find ourselves now anticipating coming together at the AIA conference in San Francisco for more learning.

This month, we bring you a Q&A session with Darby Lee Young, founder of Level Playing Field. In conversation with our Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, Pauline Thimm, Darby discusses ways that we are moving toward greater equity in the built environment—and where we still need improvement. She touches upon the importance of viewing architecture as both an art and a science, so that code application, instead of being merely prescriptive, actually facilitates more equitable access for all. As a resource to support this work, we also highlight the AIA's Community on the Environment (COTE®)—a group that has expanded from an exclusively climate-focused Knowledge Community to now include a framework for building performance criteria, which offers metrics for measuring access for all.

In May, we hosted our first in-person event in my hometown of Calgary, and it was wonderful to connect face-to-face with members. We are looking forward to hosting more events across Canada in the coming months: watch your inbox for invitations! ●

## AIA Knowledge Community Spotlight: COTE®

**T**he Committee on the Environment (COTE®), founded in 1990, is an AIA Knowledge Community working for architects, allied professionals, and the public to achieve climate action and climate justice through design. Founded on the belief that design excellence is the foundation of a healthy, sustainable, and equitable future, its work promotes design strategies that empower all AIA members to realize the best social and environmental outcomes with the clients and the communities they serve.

While this Knowledge Community was first established to focus on the traditional sense of 'environment' as it relates to climate change, it has broadened its scope to include social impact. There is now as much synergy with LEED criteria as there is with WELL, Fitwel, and other metrics for occupant health, equity, and wellness. It continues to evolve to close the gaps between the aspirational and the quantitative.

COTE® is perhaps best known for its annual Top Ten awards program for sustainable design excellence. It also offers a dedicated awards program for students, recognizing ten exceptional studio projects that seamlessly integrate innovative, regenerative strategies within broader design concepts.

One of the most impactful tools that COTE® has established for measuring sustainable, resilient, and inclusive design is the

AIA Framework for Design Excellence, formally adopted in 2019 as the successor to the previous COTE® Top Ten Measures. The intention of the Framework is to provide guidelines to help organize our thinking and to facilitate conversations with our clients and the communities we serve. AIA Canada employs these 10 principles for evaluating submissions to its own Design Excellence Awards program.

The ten categories, explained in greater detail on the AIA website and within the COTE® SuperSpreadsheet for evaluating projects are:

1. Design for Integration
2. Design for Equitable Communities
3. Design for Ecosystems
4. Design for Water
5. Design for Economy
6. Design for Energy
7. Design for Well-being
8. Design for Resources
9. Design for Change
10. Design for Discovery

As you will read on the following pages, we recently had the opportunity to speak with Darby Lee Young, founder of Level Playing Field, to explore the Well-being, Integration and Equitable Communities categories and ways to better support people regardless of age, size, or ability to freely use all spaces of a building to the greatest extent possible. ●

## NEWS

### Welcoming Brian Wall, Secretary

We would like to welcome our newest member to the Board of Directors, Brian Wall, Architect, AIA, MAA, AIBC, AAA, SAA, OAA, MRAIC, in the role of Secretary. Brian is an architect with 35 years of experience in the industry. Currently, he is the managing partner of gw architecture inc., a firm with offices in Winnipeg, MB, and Kenora, ON.

Brian started his career as a self-employed Certified Architectural Techni-

cian and later earned the title of Architect by studying with the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada. Understanding the business of architecture was an easy fit, but the creative nature of architecture came less naturally. To address this hurdle, Brian opened a studio in his office that features the works of local and international artists. Studying the forms of artists fuelled his desire to create more. His practice includes healthcare, commercial, retail, and industrial projects, and he con-

siders each project as an opportunity to impact how others experience the world.

### AIA Conference on Architecture

AIA's annual Conference on Architecture takes place from June 7-10, 2023 in San Francisco, California. The program includes seminars, practicums, tours, and keynotes by speakers including the Right Honourable Jacinda Ardern, former Prime Minister of New Zealand.

## Darby Lee Young

Interview by Pauline Thimm



Neil Zeller

**B**orn with cerebral palsy, Darby established Level Playing Field in 2015. With over 16 years of experience working as an accessibility strategist, she contributes an applied understanding of Universal Design and international accessibility guidelines and standards to all her work. Darby is committed to combining her unique lived experience and history in various political appointments to passionately advocate for lasting inclusive environments that benefit everyone, regardless of age or ability. To date, she has applied her expertise in over 200 projects for clients including the Canada Post Corporation, TAZA Development, The Canadian Museum for Human Rights, and many others.

### How did you get involved in consulting for the building industry? What brought you to this work?

When I worked for the Vancouver Olympic Committee, leading up to the 2010 Olympic Winter Games, I saw how issues in designing the built environment for our able-bodied Olympic athletes were going to be five times more challenging in order to also support the Paralympic athletes.

Coming out to Vancouver, as a person with a disability I was faced with the reality of not being able to visit places like restaurants. I needed to take 20 to 30 minutes just to research how I could safely get to places in advance to see if they were accessible.

I got to the point where I just said to myself, "Okay, I'm going to teach myself. I'm going to go work for a building code firm, get into architectural design." I didn't go the university route to study design, but instead used my unique lived experience to see how I could support making buildings more inclusive for people like me. And that's exactly what I did.

I did that type of work for a couple of years, until I joined the Advisory Committee on Accessibility for the City of Calgary. A couple of city councillors there asked me to step down and start a company so that they could pay me to do the advising. So I started Level Playing Field (LPF) and sure enough, my first contract was for the City Hall Municipal Building in Calgary, Alberta. And here we are now, eight years later: it's been a ton of fun and we're working on projects across the country.

### Your business obviously became an instant success and proves the huge need for your expertise. Over the eight years you've been running your practice, what have you seen in terms of evolution in the understanding and implementation of accessibility in design?

We still have those everyday conversations with firms who insist, "We do it in-house and we design to code." It's trying to get people to see past code. The code is 30 years behind how we want to live—so if we keep designing just to code, then we are far behind.

I think there's been a big shift, though. In the past eight years, people are starting to get it, and now they reach out and carry consultants like us as part of their team automatically, instead of only relying on clients to specifically ask for it.

### What should owners consider when enhancing inclusivity and accessibility in terms of the investment required? How can the business case be made?

If you're inclusive, then you allow everyone to show up—and that is good business for everyone.

I think back to the story of the shop in Toronto that had a step up at the entrance. Somebody asked if they could add a ramp outside so that people like me could get in. The response was that they had never had

persons with disabilities come to the store, so there was no need. Well, maybe if they had a ramp, they would! It's an example of the type of thinking we often still see.

It is not unusual in celebrated architectural design to see features like a prominent, grand staircase at the entrance with the ramp and elevators tucked away. This kind of design doesn't highlight inclusion. For me, as a person who can't really do stairs, seeing stairs highlighted as the focal point does not provide a warm and welcoming feeling. That's an example of privileging an ableist society.

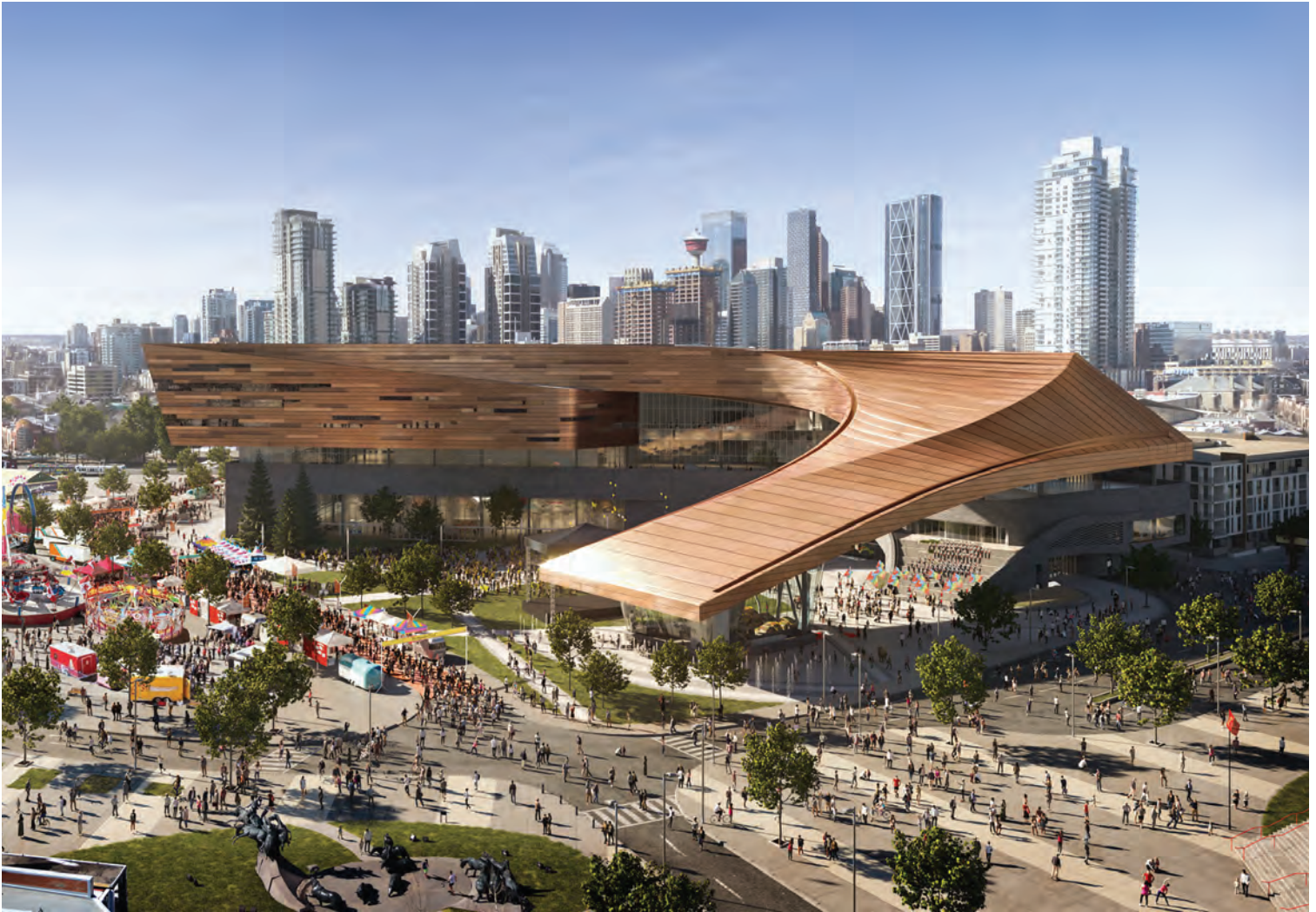
Another situation that often occurs is arriving at an entrance, when everybody wants to use the nearest and most convenient doors. But someone with mobility challenges will have to use the furthest door, because the nearest doors involve travel up stairs and don't include a ramp.

### What changes could make it more welcoming?

If you want to feature that grand staircase—let's do that staircase, but up the middle have a glass elevator, or feature accessibility in some other prominent way. And attention to adequate wayfinding and signage is important so getting to that ramp or elevator is easy to do for those who need. Make it so that when we're all going to the same place—let's have an equal experience in getting there.

We understand that some situations require more careful consideration. We deal often with heritage buildings. LPF's offices are in the Vintage Towers in Calgary. I chose to locate our offices here in part because I was drawn to the unique history of the building. But it is also important to us that when somebody visits us here, they feel welcome from the point of arrival. At Vintage Towers, there's a ramp and the stairs at the entrance, and they are located together. You don't need the extra effort or challenge or get a second-class feeling because it's an ableist building. Rather, you feel included when you arrive on site.

I love character buildings—our Palliser Hotel, our Calgary Tower, the historic university buildings we find on many campuses. I don't want to get rid of them because they are not accessible in their original design. I want to make them safe and inclusive.



**Darby Lee Young consulted on enhanced accessibility features for an addition to Calgary's BMO Centre. The project is designed by Stantec, Populous, and S2 Architecture, and will augment the Centre's capabilities for hosting international conferences, exhibitions and trade shows. It is scheduled to open this summer.**

We need to make them so that everybody has that same access instead of that secondary, back entrance feeling.

**The goal, as you've stated, should be to make everyone feel like they are welcome. Where there's a will there's a way, but of course there are always costs associated.**

There are ways to make accessibility accommodation, even for heritage buildings, feel intentionally integrated as part of the building. But of course, everything costs money. And in our experience, one of the first things that gets cut from projects are enhanced accessibility measures.

**When you come across that in your work, how do you how do you manage that?**

Well, we must have discussions early on. When it comes to a value engineering process, it's all a matter of what is best for the project, and delivering accessibility goals based on who and what the facility is going to be used for. Then it's having the hard conversations: here are the must-haves versus the nice-to-haves. There's not really a one-size-fits-all approach; it is really about having careful conversations that also consider priorities of inclusivity.

More recently, we're hearing a lot of push-back to changes to the national building code with the minimum turning radius increasing from 1500 millimetres to 1700 millimetres. Most of the world is now using power devices, and the prior code requirements were written for the use of a manual chair. I can tell you that I can't turn around in 1500 millimetres—

I can't even do a full turnaround in 1700 millimetres. But at least that gives me a little more room to get my scooter in and maneuver a bit—instead of needing to climb from the chair to the toilet seat, for example, because there's not enough room.

It's a fight like this every day for so many people, me included.

**These stories of everyday indignities are something many of us cannot relate to.**

People like me take 20 minutes to look up wherever we are going to see if and how we can enter, and if it is possible to use a scooter to use the washroom. No matter where we go, it's a fight.

Also, a lot of times when we think about accessibility, we only think of those using a



wheelchair. We tend to forget about the hearing or vision impairments. We also forget about everyone who experiences invisible disabilities. What about the ones that we don't talk about at all: those with autism, Down syndrome, what about the neurodiverse? Even the international symbol of accessibility only uses an icon of a manual wheelchair.

We've got to remember people are people, and we've got to see people first versus their disability.

### How do we go about becoming more aware?

We need to keep having conversations around accessibility so we can truly design spaces for everyone. We need to hear from the people who experience this to understand where they are coming from.

Everybody is unique and nobody's perfect, and sooner or later, whether you're just crossing the street and you roll your ankle, or you go skiing and fall down—you may also become temporarily disabled. We need to start thinking about this reality so we can design for everyone.

### How do we get people on board?

The Rick Hansen Foundation is doing a good job of opening the door to conversation, awareness and action—to getting people to talk about accessibility and pursue their certification process. The Rick Hansen process is still based on minimum requirements required by code. It's a more user-friendly way of talking about accessibility as required by the code. The next challenge is building an understanding that there's way more to it: programs like Rick Hansen are just a starting point. We're hoping as this gets more traction, there'll be better access to information about even deeper accessibility issues.

**A tool that the AIA has launched and continues to evolve is their Framework for Design Excellence. This Framework sets out to tie aspirations to measurable design strategies, with metrics. Evaluating a design's impact on Equitable Communities, for instance, looks at things like walk scores, and tracking how many and what kind of community engagement activities are used. What else should we be measuring? How do you know if your building is truly inclusive?**

The challenge is that some elements can be contradictory: for example, prioritizing stair-

use as a means of encouraging exercise is also ableist, and goes against the seven principles of Universal Design, so we need to find ways to be inclusive in every way, for literally every type of body.

In order to understand or evaluate if you've done it properly, you have to be able to demonstrate it through understanding the experience of being there; it has to be considered from the moment of arrival through to departure, the full experience. That includes considering your route travelled, and your full time spent there, needing to use facilities, or whatever you need to do in that place and at every moment of that journey. At the end of the day, you really just have to go there to understand if it is working. It's not something you can necessarily evaluate in a spreadsheet.

And we've got to remember the range of abilities is experienced differently, all unique in their own way. Everybody's use of the space is completely different. So, what I require might be different for somebody with vision or hearing loss. If we can strive for a common level playing field for all, we can design so that everybody is included.

### You mentioned the Seven Principles of Universal Design. Could you share more detail about these? Where did they come from? And where can practitioners learn more?

They were developed by Ronald Mace, with a working group of architects, product designers, engineers, and environmental design researchers at North Carolina State University. They are available online and they are principles that are considered standard across the board.

In practice, we often see clients skip principle No. 5: tolerance for error when defining goals. The principle requires "design that minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended action." People don't seem to really understand what it means. It's about being aware of aspects of the design where there could be potential for somebody to be injured, such as when considering placement of push buttons. That means being thoughtful about position in relation to door swing so that users are not in the door swing path to reach the button. Or, when considering water faucet options. For instance, powered faucets with automatic temperature control are much better than standard faucet controls in terms of preventing instances of people with challenges potentially burning and injuring themselves.

### Practitioners coming to this for the first time and feeling really committed to do the right thing might feel overwhelmed. What are some small steps they can take immediately in their work?

Getting familiar with the Seven Principles of Universal Design is a big one. Seeking learning opportunities, having conversations with people who have lived experience to share, stopping and thinking when you go out somewhere: how would somebody with disabilities do this? Imagine yourself in someone else's shoes. That's my best advice.

### Is there a project you are particularly proud of? Do you have a dream project?

We've been working on the BMO Convention Centre at Stampede Park in Calgary. We're really hoping it'll be a leader in accessibility because we've added enhanced accessibility features that haven't been value-engineered out. It should be very warm and welcoming without needing added effort from disabled users. We looked at the experiences and considered things like wayfinding from the minute of arrival, to using the washrooms, enjoying the whole park, and then heading back out safely. I'm excited for it to open in 2024 because I'm hoping it will be a leader in creating accessible and inclusive spaces for all.

I would ultimately love to work on a sports stadium that is fully inclusive. I imagine a facility that accommodates sports like sledge hockey, also known as para hockey, and that supports the ability to hire persons with disabilities within all departments across the facility—like team services, which means doing the laundry, looking after the bench, etc. It also means being able to take multiple friends to a game and being able to all sit together, instead of being limited to only two people in the accessible seating zone. It would also have the proper parking accommodations, proper washrooms, and all staff trained to treat us all as just people—regardless of ability.

People are unique in their own ways, and we need to include everybody and not be afraid to ask tough questions because those questions need to be answered and addressed by making the world more accessible and inclusive for everyone. I'd also encourage designers to include advanced levels of accessibility in their budgets. Good design costs money. And good design includes designing for all. ●