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## “Just Do It” – AIA Puerto Rico Component and the Women Who Lead It

Diane D. Greer

When Pilarin Ferrer, AIA, contacted me last winter with a story idea, she said that she “felt compelled to tell our story.” That story turned out to be about the last six presidents of the Puerto Rico component of the AIA...all of them women. Pilarin said that in these tough times it is no small feat to lead a component successfully and she hoped that what has happened in Puerto Rico will encourage other women to take the reins of their components. She added, very sincerely, that the men in the Puerto Rico component have always seen their female counterparts as equals and supported their ideas, goals and plans without reservation or hesitation. In the Puerto Rico component, it isn't pertinent to talk about minorities because, as Pilarin says, “the component is one big minority.” Component decisions are not made on the basis of gender, color or any other distinction, but rather on one's capacity to perform the necessary tasks to move the component and the profession forward. For the past 18 years, those people have all been women.

The six women who have served as leaders since 1991 are from all walks of life. They are married, heads of households with young children or sons and daughters in college and even a grandmother. All are clever, intelligent, well-educated women with a variety of interests, great leadership skills and an abundance of energy. Most are currently working as architects. Looking back on her presidency, Pilarin admits it took a lot of planning and multi-tasking to make her term in office a success. But, in the end, it was worth it. Her sincere advice, she told me, to anyone who is thinking of moving into

a leadership position is, quoting a successful ad campaign, “Just do it!”

Each of the six architects discussed in this article was asked to submit a statement about herself, not an official resumé, but a personal testimony about her leadership role in the profession and the importance of serving the component. As always, space limitations necessitated abbreviating these writings, but I think the reader will note a common thread of total commitment and service to the profession of architecture.

### **Beatriz del Cueto, FAIA**

*“Being the president of an AIA component is not a one-person deal!”*



I was born in La Habana, Cuba, but have lived most of my life in Puerto Rico. This beautiful island, “Isla del Encanto,” has become my adopted homeland. When I was about 13, I decided I wanted to be an architect since I admired the work of my father, a mechanical engineer. I entered Miami-Dade Junior College in the pre-architecture associate degree program, but during my first semester I acquired a new passion, architectural history. I contin-

ued my studies in architecture at the University of Florida, specializing in the newly founded concentration: historic preservation.

In 1976, I returned to Puerto Rico and joined the firm of Henry Klumb, FAIA. In 1979, I landed the position of State Historic Architect in the Puerto Rico State Historic Preservation Office. I worked there for three years and married Agamemnon Gus Pantel, an anthropologist and archaeologist and together we applied for and were admitted to ICCROM, the International Center for the Study of Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Property in Rome. In 1986, we founded a private consulting firm working on projects related to the island's cultural property. In 2002, I was the first woman in Puerto Rico to be elevated to the AIA College of Fellows.

For a long time, I had been involved in the administration of the profession working for the Architects Association of Puerto Rico and sitting on two governing boards of AIA Puerto Rico. But, in 1990, Jorge Rigau, FAIA, asked me to run for the post of president-elect of the component. In 1991, I became the first woman president.

Being the president of an AIA component is not a one-person deal. With the help of many active participants and an enthusiastic board of directors, I was able to see many of my goals accomplished. My main interests were the creation of a middle-school workshop dealing with the natural and built environment, site visits and activities related to historic preservation projects and women's roles in architecture in our region.

“Women's Roles in Architecture”

was the theme of the annual AIA PR Convention in 1991. Two activities formed the core of this event. One was an exhibit and catalog entitled, *Women Architects from Puerto Rico, the Caribbean and Florida: their Work*. The other activity included lectures by renowned women architects including Ann Beha, FAIA, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, FAIA, Maya Lin and Zaha Hadid, Hon. AIA. The exhibit premiered in San Juan, traveled to galleries and universities in Florida and closed at the Pratt Institute's School of Architecture.

I continue with my private practice as Principal of Pantel, del Cueto & Associates, which is focused towards historic preservation, archaeology and traditional architecture. I am also an independent researcher, consultant and lecturer and Director of the Architectural Conservation Lab at the Polytechnic University of Puerto Rico.

**Iris Gonzalez Alfonzo, AIA**

*"As the second woman president of AIA PR, I dedicated all my efforts to promoting the profession in the community; promoting the advantages of membership to non-member architects and to providing interesting and challenging continuing education alternatives for members and non-members."*



Iris has a background in costume design and theatre history, but she holds a bachelor's degree in environmental design and a master's degree in architecture from the University of Puerto Rico. In 1997, she was elected president of AIA Puerto Rico. That same year, she served as coordinator for AIA National's Education Committee Seminar. Her work with the AIA has been extensive, including coordinating the Regional and Urban Design Committee Seminar in 1993 and serving as a delegate at Grassroots in 1993 and 1997. She has been a professor and visiting juror at the New School of Architecture, University of Puerto Rico. Iris currently works with McCullough Dominguez Architects.

As component president, Iris' goals were to promote the profession of architecture, to teach people about the benefit of contracting with an architect, to inform people about the difference between architecture and engineering services and to promote the continuing education program. "As a member of the Board of Directors for almost 10 years, I dedicated all of my efforts to promoting the importance of the Honor Awards program and to diversifying the program by creating additional classifications, such as students, who had not been included before."

**Laura Cordero Agrait, AIA, CSI, CAAPPR**

*"I was one of two women, in a class of 60, to graduate from architecture school."*

When I arrived at the College of Architecture at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, I was surprised to find that there were only three other coeds in my class, a fact that took some getting used to. In 1966, I was one of only two females in a class of 60 aspiring architects to



graduate. In 1970, I moved with my husband Luis Agrait, to Austin, Texas and joined the prestigious firm of Page Southerland & Page where I worked mostly in the construction document phase of large health-related projects.

After more than a decade on the mainland, I returned to Puerto Rico with my husband and young son. My experience with health facilities proved invaluable in locating work with a small firm where I was responsible for all phases of a project, including construction. This provided for some quick on-the-job learning while getting used to architectural and construction lingo... in Spanish! In 1983, I established my own practice and later joined with two colleagues to form Agrait Bermudez Betancourt Arquitectos.

Joining the AIA in 1982, I quickly became involved in a variety of activities. I was selected to participate in an exhibition of work by women architects at the 1998 National AIA Convention in New York. In 1991, I collaborated in the planning of a symposium and exhibition of work by female architects from Florida and the Caribbean. I was first elected to the component's board of directors in 2002 and in 2004 I became president.

My tenure as president gave me the opportunity to promote educational meetings intended to facilitate securing learning units, to promote participation by the local American Institute of Architects Students (AIAS) components in professional activities and begin the installation of a component website with the goal of paperless communication, now achieved. With the help of the regional directors, I was able to organize the first regional meeting during the AIA Puerto Rico convention. Hosting visits from then-AIA president Eugene Hopkins, FAIA and CEO Norman Koonce to see sites of architectural and environmental interest around San Juan resulted in a meeting of the AIA National Board in San Juan the following year.

Being a member of the AIA, and especially having the opportunity of presiding over the local component, proved to be a most valuable experience. I met so many exceptional colleagues through networking at the local and national level. It was hard work and involved a lot of multitasking, but the overall satisfaction was priceless.

Laura retired from the firm in 2006, but has continued her work as a consultant. She is finally realizing her lifelong dream of building a small country house in the mountains surrounding El Yunque rain forest where she can look out over the hills and valleys to the Atlantic Ocean beyond.

### **Sonia López Tristani, AIA**

*“I first thought of becoming an architect when I was ten years old.”*

I was born in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico and I first thought of becoming an architect when I was about 10 years old. I did not have a clue as to what the profession was about, but

my father watched me draw the façade of our future home and he told me that since I was good at math and could draw, “I had the perfect combination of skills to be a good architect.” In 1977, I began my studies, at the age of 17, at the only school of architecture that existed on the island at the time, the Rio Piedras campus of the University of



Puerto Rico. I joined the AIAS and after four stressful years and long hours of hard work, I completed a Bachelor’s degree in environmental design. Two years later, after I completed a thesis entitled “An Architectural Documentation Center for Puerto Rico,” I received a master’s degree in architecture.

Upon graduation, I began working with Luis H. Bonnet & Associates in San Juan. For 10 years, I was in charge of the design and supervision of projects including the remodeling of the executive offices of the Public Buildings Authority and several branch banks.

In 1994, I married Edward Sinz, a Puerto Rican mechanical engineer who graduated from Georgia Tech. We have three children. My husband and I became partners in S & L Development in 1995 when we finished the remodeling of the Puerto Rico Justice Department by convert-

ing an industrial building into government offices. For the next 10 years, we remodeled other abandoned industrial structures.

During my term as president of the component I became involved with the U. S. Green Building Council’s (USGBC) organizing committee in promoting sustainable development and “green” building, thus advancing one of my original objectives. On September 7, 2005, the USGBC’s Caribbean component was founded. When the year of my presidency was over, I was invited to become secretary of the first Board of Directors of the new USGBC component. I helped coordinate the component’s first Annual Symposium & Assembly where I was elected to a three-year term as programs & events director. In 2008, I coordinated the Caribbean Green Expo, the USGBC/Caribbean Component’s Annual Convention and Exhibition.

Although I have been practicing architecture for 25 years, my greatest achievements are my three children, Angelica, William and Richard. Angelica is studying architectural engineering at Penn State University and the boys are still in high school. They are my pride and joy.

### **Pilarin Ferrer, AIA**

*“I turned to our neighbors for inspiration and ideas in order to get a renewed Caribbean perspective on the practice of architecture.”*

After two years of art history at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, I transferred to the School of Architecture of the University of Puerto Rico in 1981. There were 80 freshmen, 16 of whom were female. Seven of the women made it to graduation. Striving to make it in a traditionally male-dominated profession was probably our first and foremost achievement. Today, it is women



who are the majority in many architecture schools.

After graduation, I worked in various architecture firms, but since 1993 I have been in the office of Mendez, Brunner, Badillo and Associates. Most of what I do is for the U.S. government and due to its confidential nature I cannot discuss my work.

In 2002, I was honored with an AIA Puerto Rico Honorable Mention for my work on the Arcibo Observatory Learning Center. The following year, I became involved with our AIA component, holding several positions before being elected president in 2006. My greatest contribution to AIA Puerto Rico is having set the bar for the Honor Awards program. As a board member, I had organized the awards program for six years. I am proud to say that it is now a program of unquestionable integrity and one that architects look forward to each year. I see the Honor Awards as a way to learn from the work of colleagues all over the world and to acquaint jurors with our work, with the expectation that they will return home with a good impression of the Puerto Rican people and their architecture.

As president, I tried to fortify relations between our island and others in the Caribbean Region. Whenever possible, I invited archi-

tecs from the Caribbean Basin to attend planned activities, including Florida, Curacao, Aruba, Martinique, St. Lucia, French Guyana, Cartegena de Indias, Columbia and Yucatan, Mexico. It was very important to me to expose our members to what other cultures similar in size, climate, challenges and geographical location were doing and to learn from their experiences. So I turned to our neighbors for inspiration and ideas, rather than to the big cities of the world.

In order to keep members and the community aware of our endeavors, I made great efforts to involve the local press in component projects. From time to time, I still write for local newspapers and last year I collaborated on an article about “Tropical Modernism in Puerto Rico” that was published in *La Vanguardia* newspaper in Spain. In 2007, I was an invited speaker at the convention of the Association for Preservation Technologies (APT) World Forum held in San Juan and in 2008, I was a speaker at the AIA Florida Annual Convention.

I am currently part of the Liaison Commission of the Colegio de Arquitectos y Arquitectos Paisajistas de Puerto Rico, working on several events. I continue to believe that it is important to give back to the profession. My plans for the future include seeing my sons, Francisco, 24, and Gonzalo, 20, through architecture school and finding time to finish writing a cookbook. I plan to become more involved with the Caribbean Federation of Associations of Architects (FCAA) and to help strengthen relations between Puerto Rico and colleagues in all of the Caribbean nations. It is the difference in language, culture and ideas that makes this part of the world so unique and it is something that enriches us as a region and as individuals.

### **Diana Luna, AIA**

*“In these challenging times, surviving needs to be redefined to imply positive thinking and achieving something better than what we have.”*

I grew up in the urban center of Guayama, a small town in the south of Puerto Rico, in a wooden house that was built in 1882. The 12-foot high ceilings, cross-ventilation and abundant architectural details were all part of my daily life. When I decided to study architecture, one of my main goals was to redefine quality of life through the architectural spaces and concepts that I knew. Walking to school and other sustainable activities were an essential part of that way of life.



Historic preservation and urban conservation were priorities in my professional development. As I worked on my thesis for the master’s degree in architecture, I developed a plan for an historic district in my hometown. When I graduated, the mayor of Guayama gave me my first job and as a consequence of my work, the historic district of Guayama was established by the government in 1992. Since then I have been working for state and local governments helping with the protection of historic buildings and the revitalization of

urban centers. In 2002, I established the first Urban Office for Puerto Rico's government.

Through the years, I have been balancing professional, social and personal development. Public and social service has been an integral part of my life as an architect. Having my own practice has given me time to raise three children – the main project of my life. I am thankful for the opportunity of being the sixth woman to serve as president of

AIA Puerto Rico. In these tough times, we are faced with the challenge of achieving sustainability. We must prioritize the way we work and redefine architecture and quality of life in the best interest of the future.

In these challenging times, survival is a word to be redefined to imply positive thinking and achieving something better than what we have. It is so interesting that we as architects use the problem solving process in our own lives that we do

in our work. As a cancer survivor, I learned to apply the concepts of analyzing, visualizing and exploring all the alternatives and choosing the best one made a big difference. I redefined the word “surviving” as achieving something better than what we had. We, as architects, need to be reminded of what a great contribution we can make to society, not only with our architecture, but with our intellect and our ideas.



*Photographed in the courtyard of Colegio de Arquitectos y Arquitectos Paisajistas de Puerto Rico, left to right: Laura Cordero Agrait, AIA, CSI, CAAPPR, Beatriz del Cueto, FAIA, Iris Gonzalez Alfonzo, AIA, Sonia López Tristani, AIA, Pilarin Ferrer, AIA, and Diana Luna, AIA. Group photo and individual portraits by Rafael Luna.*