



Among the first female Deans at the University of Virginia, **Karen Van Lengen** led the School of Architecture from 1999 to 2009, solidifying its place as an eminent institution for the comprehensive study and design of the environment. A supporter and teacher of sustainable principles,

Van Lengen co-founded UVA's first comprehensive program on environmental sustainability

Several collaborative student and faculty projects emphasizing sustainable design have won national awards. Van Lengen emphasized these themes in partnership with her established aesthetic rigor of design concepts. She brought and developed the dialogue between "Ethics and Aesthetics" to the school, the larger University and to several professional communities.

Van Lengen's recent research has focused on the exploration of sound and communication as an integral part of the new public realm. As

a University Research Fellow (2012-14) at the Institute for Advanced Technologies in the Humanities, she created an ongoing web-based project entitled "Soundscape Architecture," launched in 2014, to celebrate the aural qualities of space and place. She received a Jefferson Trust Grant to work with students and other collaborators, to capture the sonic qualities of the Academical Village, leading to another website entitled "Listening to the Lawn." A recent project with James Welty, entitled "Open Gates", celebrates the unique sonic qualities of the Academical Village, created by the 40 gates that populate these

landscapes. All of these sound projects have been exhibited and collected at major national museums.

As Dean, she founded “Campbell Constructions,” a design program to renovate and expand Campbell Hall and its contiguous landscape, using her own faculty and alumni as the architects and landscape architects for the 13 projects. They included new additions, renovations, and teaching landscapes that have completely transformed the life of the school. This highly publicized project has served as an example for other schools and institutions.

In 2006, Van Lengen founded “Women’s Work,” a popular University-wide lecture series that promoted the scholarship of women faculty members from all units of the University, with the ambition to create a more substantial network for women in the advancement of their research.

Before coming to UVA, she chaired the Architecture Department at Parsons School of Design in New York City, while also running her own practice, Karen Van Lengen Architects.

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### WHY DID YOU COME TO UVA?

I came to UVA in 1999 to be the Dean of the School of Architecture. I came from New York City, where I chaired the Department of Architecture and led my own architectural practice. When I arrived with my family, it was a major shift in our lives and our environment. I had lived in New York City for almost 30 years, so coming to live in a small university town was very different.

At the time, I had been offered a job to be the Dean of Architecture at Cornell as well. I chose Virginia due to the complement of related disciplines and programs including planning, architecture, landscape, history, and preservation that were all located in an open plan building, conducive to their potential integration. At that time, I believed, and I still believe, that the future of a healthy physical environment must be designed comprehensively across those disciplines. This was a school that had already begun that synthesis, so it was ripe for development and continued research. I also firmly believed that the role of aesthetic design was crucial in this partnership with ecology and environmental conditions, so I opened the School-wide discussion of the relation between Ethics and Aesthetics that continues to resonate today.

### WHAT WAS UVA LIKE WHEN YOU ARRIVED? HOW HAS IT CHANGED AND/OR STAYED THE SAME?

It was a university that primarily looked to its own traditions more than looking outward and forward. It has changed significantly since that time, with new travel opportunities, new collaborative research projects, and with a much more diverse student and faculty community. These changes have been significant and positive. In keeping with one of the significant traditional principles of the university, our students, faculty, and staff

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## In Her Words | Karen Van Lengen

continue to shape our commitment to public service as core principle in a working democracy. The historic architecture of the Academical Village is our reminder of the importance of public life in each generations' rejuvenation of our shared cultural and environmental values.

### **HOW DO YOU THINK DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF YOUR IDENTITY, INCLUDING BEING A WOMAN, IMPACTED HOW PEOPLE RESPONDED TO YOU IN YOUR POSITION?**

I began my architecture journey when there were not many women in the field. I graduated from Columbia, and one-quarter of my class were women. That was quite unusual at the time and can be attributed to the strong advocacy of our Dean, James Stewart Polshek, who championed the inclusion of women and cultural diversity in the profession.

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When I completed my professional degree at Columbia, I went to work at the office of I.M. Pei & Partners, where I was one of four women in an office of 200 people. On the one hand, I was special; on the other hand, I was aware that I had to work really hard to not let anyone down. Luckily, I worked almost exclusively with I.M. Pei himself and had an exceptional experience there. I became the first Design Associate in the firm, and after six years I won a Fulbright Fellowship to study architectural history in Italy. When I

returned, I decided to explore my own architectural tendencies, and so I started my own office. That's when I felt the huge prejudice against women. When one is part of a large team or office structure and doing well, no one cares if you are a woman. But when I led my own firm, there were many challenging situations. During that same time, I started teaching and that was a positive addition to practice. I continued to both teach and practice during my time in New York.

At UVA, I was the first female Dean of the Architecture School, and I felt supported by many people. As a female leader, many women faculty sought my advice and mentorship which I was pleased to give. I did note that women in general often take on significant leadership roles in administration and service. They help the entire community as well as their own departments in this capacity. However, they give up significant time for their research and teaching which may be challenging in accomplishing the goals they established when they came to the University. I think we have to be very careful about this as we strive to support women faculty at the University. I tried to be equitable in this area so that women could develop their work in our School.

Another observation I had at the University was that women were not successful in creating networks to help one another. I don't know how men acquired that instinct, but they did. Women would be well served to develop these connections, as many opportunities may grow from these relationships. This was one of the core reasons that I founded "Women's Work" to promote the work of women and give them the opportunity to develop these networks across Grounds.

## WHAT SUPPORTS DID YOU HAVE?

None of us know enough when we jump from one level to another. When I was Chair at Parsons, I had a wonderful woman, Sharon Haar, who helped me learn my job there. And when I came to UVA, there were a lot of people who helped guide me especially in my early years. It is very important to know what one knows, as well as what one does not know, and then ask. In asking, I found so many helpful people; Barbara Nolen, Karin Wittenborg, Pete Anderson, Ariel Gomez, Farzenah Milani, and Robin Dripps, and many others, all wonderful mentors for me here at UVA. In addition, I was supported by both our Alumni and Foundation Boards that were instrumental in helping to develop many of our strategic goals of the school. Their overall mentorship was ongoing and very supportive of me and our institutional goals.

I think it helps that leadership at the University today is becoming much more diverse. One needs to surround oneself with colleagues that have different opinions and experiences that can help to inform well thought-out decisions. In the end, one must make these decisions and move with them, but it helps to listen to a broad range of opinions to make more open and comprehensive actions.

## WHAT KIND OF LEGACY DO YOU HOPE TO LEAVE?

I hope to leave the legacy of inspired leadership which has elevated the work and reputation of our school in many ways; from the development of shared and clearly defined values that inform each of our disciplines, to the connective programmatic opportunities at the university, to the establishment of alumni and foundation boards that continue to support and help network our accomplishments, and finally to the inventive and original reinvigoration of our physical environment at Campbell Hall and its contiguous teaching landscapes.

Finally, I wish to add that my legacy as a "transformational Dean" was informed by the work of many Deans before me who had built the foundations for my achievements. In addition, during my Deanship I led a team of loyal colleagues that together built new programs and opportunities that have significantly raised the profile of our institution. I hope that legacy can continue to inspire future leaders in the School.



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