

An Architect Who Forges Ahead in Her Own Lane

Elizabeth Graziolo is a Black female classical architect and owns her own firm. Thanks to her influence, she may soon have more company.

By Jane Margolies

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This article is part of our Design special section about new interpretations of antique design styles.

The University of Notre Dame is known for producing top-notch classically trained young architects, and every year the principals of architecture firms that work in traditional styles make pilgrimages to a spring career fair at the Indiana school to vie for the new talent.

When Elizabeth Graziolo was a partner at Peter Pennoyer Architects, a New York practice with a historical bent, she often attended the career fair on behalf of the firm.

In March, Ms. Graziolo made the trek again, except this year she was representing her own company, Yellow House Architects, which was, not incidentally, the only firm at the event owned by a woman of color, she said. Students lined up to meet her.

“All the girls came to talk to us,” Ms. Graziolo recalled.

In the three years since she started Yellow House, Ms. Graziolo, who said she is 49, has developed a busy practice devoted to high-end residential design in a style she calls “clean classicism,” which amounts to buildings that take traditional forms but eschew excessive ornamentation, and interiors featuring modern and contemporary art and furnishings.

Currently she’s renovating a 1934 Georgian Revival house in Palm Beach, Fla., and embarking on the design for a new community with a culinary focus outside Atlanta. Based in Manhattan with a satellite office in Miami, Yellow House has 23 employees.

Ms. Graziolo stands out in her field because she’s a Black woman and also because she embraces a style that in recent years has been sucked into the culture wars, with former President Donald J. Trump attempting to mandate traditional forms for federal buildings and, now, Republicans in Congress taking up the cause.





Ms. Graziolo decorated this model apartment of an Art Deco office building on Wall Street in Manhattan, which was converted to condo use. Evan Joseph/Yellow House Architects

Of the nearly 122,000 licensed architects working in the United States in 2022, 23 percent were women and less than 2 percent were Black, according to the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards. Black women? They make up less than one-half of 1 percent.

“I feel lucky,” she said.

But pluck, not luck, got Ms. Graziolo to where she is today. Architecture, you might say, was her salvation.

Born and raised in Haiti, she enjoyed a comfortable childhood, attending top schools and going on vacations to Europe. She had her own maid. But her world was turned upside down when she was 11 upon learning that the man she knew as her loving father, a jeweler, was actually her stepfather; her birth father lived in Brooklyn and put the wheels in motion to have his daughter join him.

He died unexpectedly before she arrived in 1987 at age 13. Unmoored in a strange country with whom she said was an unsympathetic stepmother, she vowed to get out of that home as soon as possible. She had always been an outstanding student and hit on the idea of graduating from high school after her junior year and going away to college that much sooner.

Ms. Graziolo said she was excelling in all her classes except English — French is her native tongue — so she threw herself into learning the language of her new land, taking E.S.L. classes at night and enrolling in summer school.

She set her sights on the Cooper Union, a pioneering New York university that didn’t charge tuition at that time. When she couldn’t apply to its engineering school — no one had advised her to take the required SAT — she put in an application to the school of architecture. She was just 16 when she got in.

Once there, she fell in love with the subject. The curriculum was “super conceptual,” Ms. Graziolo said — one assignment was to analyze a juicer — but the classes opened her eyes to the built environment and the impact that design has on people. When she graduated in 1995, Ms. Graziolo recalled she was one of only two Black students in her class. The college said it did not keep statistics on race back then so could not confirm her recollection.

Ms. Graziolo spent the first few years after graduation working what she described as crazy hours for Cicognani Kalla Architect, helping with new houses in the Hamptons and apartment renovations in New York. She then took a job at Mr. Pennoyer’s firm, not because of any particular interest in traditional architecture, but because she had heard the staff kept reasonable hours, which would give her time to study for the licensing exam.





Ms. Graziolo designed the entry foyer at this spring's Kips Bay Decorator Show House, which was held in a Beaux-Arts mansion. For the staircase leading up from the foyer, she used plasterwork, adding whimsical squiggles on the walls. Marco Ricca/Yellow House Architects

But she thrived at the firm, soaking up classicism on the job and on the learning trips to Europe it organized for the staff. She rose in the ranks. With each new project — an Upper East Side townhouse renovation, an upscale community in China, condo towers in Manhattan — she acquired confidence. After 18 years at the firm, she wanted to start one of her own.

Ms. Graziolo called it Yellow House because yellow is her favorite color — she uses it to polish her nails — and she felt it suggested a more collaborative approach than a company bearing the founder's name. (Learning about Vincent van Gogh's painting "The Yellow House (The Street)" and his dream of turning his home into an art colony sealed the deal.)

Ms. Graziolo started her firm with four projects. Currently, she said she is juggling 15 and travels several times a month to job sites around the country.

Practiced in ground-up construction, Ms. Graziolo has recently become more interested in interior design. She decorated the model apartment of an Art Deco office building in Lower Manhattan that was converted to condo use and took charge of the entry foyer at this spring's Kips Bay Decorator Show House, held in a Beaux-Arts mansion in an uptown neighborhood.

She painted the foyer's paneling black and inset plates of wavy black glass handmade in France. For the staircase leading up from the foyer, she turned to the ancient craft of plasterwork but used it in a contemporary way, adding whimsical squiggles on the walls.

Her personal residences likewise straddle new and old. After a divorce 14 years ago, she moved with her two school-age children to Battery Park City in Lower Manhattan, where the architecture of her 1980s apartment building is nondescript, but the Hudson River is steps away and her views of the water make her feel like she's "living on a boat."

Her Italianate weekend house, on the other hand, dates to the 1840s and was designed by none other than Andrew Jackson Downing, the influential landscape architect and co-author of books on residential architecture. The house is in the upstate New York town of Hudson, which appealed to her for its architectural and cultural diversity.

"My children are Black," said Ms. Graziolo, who is a member of the National Organization of Minority Architects, or NOMA. "I wanted them to feel comfortable."

Some minority architects have found the recent efforts to mandate classicism particularly problematic because of the style's association with columned, slaveholding plantations in the antebellum South and, more generally, the idea of white supremacy.

"It's triggering and traumatic for some people," said Kimberly Dowdell, a Black architect who is the director of strategic relationships at the design firm HOK, past president of NOMA and incoming president of the American Institute of Architects. But Ms. Graziolo said that as an immigrant, she doesn't have the same associations that an American-born Black person might.

"You encounter racism, but you don't tie it back to that," she said.

A trustee of the nonprofit Institute of Classical Architecture & Art, Ms. Graziolo admires classicism for its symmetry, proportion and deference to human scale — pinpointing the ideal height for a windowsill, for example. She is inspired by the photographer Pieter Estersohn's Greek Revival house in Red Hook, N.Y., and she cares about preserving historic buildings. But she opposes governmental efforts to "dictate" an architectural style.

"There are some beautiful modern structures," she added.

Her former boss, Mr. Pennoyer, was at the Notre Dame career fair this spring and succeeded in nabbing a few graduates. "It's a small world, firms that do work like ours," he said.

Ms. Graziolo's fledgling company couldn't compete with more established outfits like his, and she was able to hire only one person. But not surprisingly, given her knack for finding alternative means of getting a job done, she has discovered other ways to recruit — and sometimes give aspiring Black architects a leg up.

Ms. Graziolo, who is a trustee of Cooper Union, makes time to meet with students at her alma mater.

"She has served as a mentor and role model, particularly for young female architects," said Laura Sparks, the university's president.

Ms. Graziolo has also forged a connection with Mississippi State University through an initiative of the Design Leadership Network, and she has had Black students of its College of Architecture, Art and Design interning at Yellow House.

Cole Arrington, 20, a junior in the college who is Black, spent three weeks this summer at Ms. Graziolo's New York office and said he was glad his first internship was at a firm headed by a minority executive.

"I hope to follow in her footsteps and one day start my own firm," he said.

On a recent visit to a project that was wrapping up, in a farmhouse-style house from the 1980s in Ulster County, Ms. Graziolo ticked off items on a punch list.

Yellow House not only gave the clients a two-story addition that included a spacious kitchen that opened to their lush backyard, but the firm also created a proper entry foyer, redid the roof and heating system, added robust architectural moldings and reconfigured the upstairs so that every bedroom has its own bath.

Yellow House also added an oval window near the bottom of the staircase to the second floor, bringing natural light to the space and providing a peek of pink peonies and the green field beyond. On the site visit, Ms. Graziolo stood with her back to the window, facing the stairs.

"Do you know what's bugging me?" she asked.

Her sharp eye noticed that the contractor had installed baseboards that didn't match — the one on the left was higher than the one on the right, leaving the space slightly off-kilter. "It all goes back to classicism," she said. "There needs to be a balance."

A correction was made on Sept. 1, 2023: An earlier version of this article misstated the connection of the 19th-century landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing to the design of Central Park. He was an inspiration to the designers of the park, Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted, but was not a designer of Central Park.

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