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As Incoming Dean of the College of Architecture, Art and Planning of Cornell University, Meejin Yoon Shares Her Insights From Her Own Experience as an Architecture Student



By [Shane Reiner-Roth](#)

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Meejin Yoon. Photo by Andy Ryan.

At the beginning of the upcoming Spring semester, Meejin Yoon is the newly minted dean of the [College of Architecture, Art and Planning of Cornell University](#). According to the Cornell Chronicle, Yoon is the first woman named to the position since the college was formed in 1896.

Based in Ithaca, New York, Cornell University is distinguished by both its relative distance to any major city and carrying the only professional undergraduate degree in Architecture among the Ivy Leagues. As a graduate of that program, Yoon quickly drew the attention of the review board for the newly opened dean position at the prestigious university. "Her time as a student at Cornell was formative," Provost Michael Kotlikoff said, "and continues to inform her work as an architect and an academic."

Yoon is no stranger to hard work: after graduating from Cornell, she went on to receive a Masters of Architecture from the [Harvard Graduate School of Design](#); then developing a practice with [Eric Höweler \(Höweler + Yoon Architecture LLP\)](#) while also teaching at the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology \(MIT\)](#), where she soon became the head of its architecture program.

As a practitioner and academic, Yoon's research primarily concerns the role technology plays in both the construction and daily functionality of the built environment. In the following interview, Yoon recounted that she fostered this research interest by taking classes at MIT's Media Lab while simultaneously teaching in the school's architecture program. Yoon also shared how she plans to introduce new architectural scholarship to the other fields in Cornell's arsenal during her deanship.

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Briefly describe Cornell's current pedagogical stance on architecture education. How would you characterize the program?

It has been 20+ years since I studied architecture at Cornell in the early 1990's for my B.Arch degree and the education I received there was not only formative but I draw on it today. The studio culture I experienced was intense, challenging and enabling—there was an intense mixture of exploration through making, as well as a robust culture of representation. The faculty were extremely committed teachers who were focused on pedagogical questions and remain among the most committed teachers I have come across in the world. The impact of the [Texas Rangers](#) was still strong and brought a strong formal agenda to the school with protagonists like [John Hejduk](#), John Shaw, Werner Seligmann, and Lee Hodgden. I had a chance to take a class with [Colin Rowe](#)—I believe it was the last course he taught at Cornell.

Looking at Cornell today, from the outside, I'm excited to see how it has evolved and how it will participate in the larger discourses and debates in not only architectural education today but the field at large in the future. My understanding is that the department of architecture at Cornell has retained its excellence in design education at the undergraduate level and made many advancements in its research and teaching driven graduate programs.

Architectural pedagogy at Cornell continues to be deeply committed to processes of design—design as both a speculative and an analytic process. Over the past two decades, Cornell continues to graduate excellent students who are synthetic thinkers and facile designers. I think this is because Cornell's pedagogy of designing and making explores a wide range of technologies, tools, scales, and programs and has both an integrated and exploratory approach to the design process.

I also think there is an appreciation for *context* that is a legacy of the school and that thinking around context has expanded from not only site and culture but into areas of technology, materials, ecology, and politics. Architecture students at Cornell are increasingly working across disciplines and scales in order to address the challenges of the built environment.



Collier Memorial, by Höweler + Yoon Architecture. Cambridge, MA. Photo by Iwan Baan.

You have been teaching at MIT since 2001. What insights from that teaching experience do you think will inform your role as Dean of the College of Architecture, Art and Planning at Cornell University?

I started teaching at MIT at an interesting time—a period when architectural historian Stanford Andersen was the Department Head and digital futurist William Mitchell was the Dean. At the time, the department of architecture was well-regarded for its specialized disciplines: History, Theory, Criticism; Building Technology; the Design and Computation program; and the Center for Advanced Visual Studies. The Media Lab was also part of the School of Architecture and Planning, but despite the program's inspired genesis in the Department of Architecture, there were limited collaborations with the Department of Architecture at the time. When I started teaching my first studio, I wanted to bring in aspects of making and technology, which caught on fire (quite literally) at the school. My student's material exploration in the form of wall installations caught on fire, which activated the building sprinklers, discharging hundreds of gallons of water that flooded the computer lab



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on the 3rd floor. My introduction to MIT was a 'trial by fire.' Fortunately, Dean Mitchell wrote me an encouraging email that this is why MIT has insurance, and that he was happy to see me stirring things up in the department of architecture. I took his email as an encouragement that experimentation and the risks that come with it are a part of MIT's ethos.

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I also learned that as a faculty member I could take classes, so I signed up for a class at the Media Lab, called *How to Make (almost) Anything*. This class, taught by Neil Gershenfeld, exposed me to a completely different pedagogical stance on technology. Neil's course taught everything from micro-controllers and basic programming to rapid prototyping—it was essentially a crash course for the personal fabrication revolution. This was 2002, and the digital fabrication wave had not yet hit architecture schools. As part of the course, I designed the *Defensible Dress*, an interactive wearable 'skirt' that used micro-controllers and shape memory alloys to create a porcupine-like structure around the body to define personal space.

MIT changed my thinking about the role of technology in architecture, from something that was necessary but subsumed by formal and material considerations, to something that could be instrumental, transformative, and active.



Meejin Yoon speaking at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Photo by Andy Ryan.

During my time as a faculty member at MIT, we had important leaders who brought with them different perspectives on the discipline and great energy. Deans Bill Mitchell, Adele Santos, and [Hashim Sarkis](#) brought an intellectual leadership and focused attention to different areas of the discipline. Department Heads Stanford Anderson, Yung Ho Chang and [Nader Tehrani](#) each moved the department in significant ways.

When I became department head in 2014, I had already been at MIT for 13 years. I had worked closely with Nader and Yung Ho, and I had benefited from the leadership and mentorship of Adele Santos. I felt instinctively that MIT could develop its own unique core design curriculum by building on its own strengths and working across discipline groups. I encouraged what I called Cross Studios, which combined a design studio with another discipline, such as Computation, History/Theory, or Building Technology. These studios produced work that was informed by expertise from another discipline group, and yielded unique projects that constituted design research.

At MIT, I understood that the specialized discipline groups were assets that could benefit all students, not just PhD and Masters of Science students but M.Arch and Undergraduate students as well. We led the efforts to create a Design Minor for all MIT undergraduates and recently launched a renewed Bachelors of Art and Design as well. I am interested in expanding the role of design beyond the formal, toward a meaningful engagement with social, cultural, political and technological issues and—ultimately, engaging and fostering expertise to have relevant impact in the world.

Thinking about Cornell, I would say that any “project” begins with an understanding of what is already there, what the assets are, and where the opportunities lie within its own context. What strengths can be amplified? What connections could be made stronger? My goal is to learn deeply about the college and its three departments, build on existing strengths, and work with the departments to envision its future—one that will be engaged and impactful as a leading college of architecture, art and planning.

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What lessons about student culture have you learned from your time as a student of Cornell's AAP program (and as an architecture student in general)?

My first impression of the Cornell AAP program was when I visited the studios in Rand Hall as a prospective student in 1990. It was around 8am and I was walking through the studios, and I saw a couple of students still in their sleeping bags drafting at their desks. I wondered what it could be that drove and inspired them to work all night? So, my first encounter with student culture at Cornell was one of *intensity*. Design studios at Cornell were and are places of intense exploration, testing, making, and real discovery. Studio is a mode of knowledge that is necessarily hands on, messy, engaged, debated, tested and constructed. It is hard to learn without doing, and doing in a context of equally intense coaching, critique, and conversation.

The other thing about studio culture is that it is also social. It produces an *esprit de corps*, between students and with faculty. The experience of a design studio is a kind of alchemy. Real time collective creative learning in design studios is how the design disciplines are distinct from other disciplines. Studio teaching produces its own social dynamic. The intensity of studios and the format of reviews, critiques and presentations, forges a set of skills that build the capacity to articulate a design to a larger audience. Architecture requires many of these skills: the discursive, the polemical. It also requires conviction, intensity and chutzpah.

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disciplines.*

And, as we've seen, studios can both produce a culture that is creative and catalytic, as well as create conditions where power dynamics can lead to unwelcoming and hostile learning environments. The #metoo movement and the "[shitty men in architecture](#)" list has day lighted conditions that may not be unique to architecture, but it has certainly prompted a re-thinking and re-assessing of both the studio and the professional work environment. If the power dynamics in work environments have their origins in studio culture, then that deserves careful evaluation and thinking as well.

I believe that architecture is a social and cultural medium, not purely an aesthetic or technological one. It is an interface between individuals, it frames interactions, it is a platform for social life, a backdrop for civic structures, and has the capacity to be identity forming, community structuring, socially transformative and politically enabling. The social and power relationships around the work environment and the design studio are part of that dynamic and can no longer be ignored. The conceptualization of the college and the social environment that it produces will be part of the design "project" of my deanship, and the inherent questions around education and agency will be a part of that.



Bridge House, by Höweler + Yoon Architecture. McLean, VA. Photo by Jeff Wolfram.

What plans do you have to strengthen collaboration within the department's various programs?

I am looking forward to working with the college's different departments, Architecture, Art and Planning. The potential for cross-disciplinary engagement is very exciting. As I described with the Cross Studios I implemented at MIT, I could imagine opportunities to bring expertise and topical platforms across departments. It is a challenge to make meaningful contributions to the large scale and complex issues facing the world—e.g. rapid urbanization, [climate change](#), and [resiliency](#)—and these issues cannot be tackled from within any one discipline. What is architecture's response to resiliency without an understanding of the larger ecological and social forces that act on it? How do we tackle questions of housing and urbanization without understanding how cities are organized, connected, financed and planned? How is technology transforming the work environment and disrupting the spatial boundaries between work and home, city and periphery, here and there? These are complex questions that implicate architecture, urbanism, landscape, engineering, workspace, art, and culture. The expertise to address these difficult and interconnected challenges exists both within the college's departments, but also across Cornell University. I can imagine cross disciplinary collaborations with the College of Engineering, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, the College of Human Ecology, and Cornell Tech in New York City.

You also run a design practice in Boston, [Höweler + Yoon Architecture](#). How do you balance your practice with teaching?

Being simultaneously engaged in practice and the academy has been an essential part of my development as an architect and as a teacher. Early projects in my studio were informed by my collaborations with colleagues at MIT and the Media Lab. Material interests from our practice, like thermoforming plastics and robotically carving stone, influenced the design studios at MIT and vice versa. Research projects like the [Audi Urban Futures Initiative](#), which was conducted in our practice, brought together expertise from urban design and transportation planning, which then informed pedagogical questions about the cross studio initiative.

Our practice has always benefited from having close collaborations with colleagues at Harvard and MIT. We have also brought former students into our studio and have continued to build on productive dialogues that began in academic seminars. Over the last 17 years, we have built a body of work and elaborated a number of research initiatives that could not have been conceived without a strong association with both MIT and Harvard.

While we have built strong connections with our teaching institutions, we have also maintained the independence of the practice from, say, a research lab at MIT. Höweler Yoon Architecture is not tied to a single institution—I co-founded it with my partner Eric Höweler, who is an Associate Professor at the Harvard GSD. We take on projects that are research oriented, but are commissioned by clients, cultural institutions, or non-profits. In many cases we can bring some of our research interests into the various projects and firm benefits from having access to these academic interests.

In terms of personal time, I make a deliberate effort to block out periods of time to dedicate to academic administration, to academic teaching and research, as well as time for the practice and our family. I also have an exceptional partner in life and in practice. None of it would be possible without Eric.



Meejin Yoon with Eric Höweler. Photo by Andy Ryan.

Do you think it is important for the leader of an architecture school to still to be a practicing architect?

There are many models for leadership of architecture schools, (Tschumi's deanship at Columbia vs. [Wigley's deanship at Columbia](#) to name two very different approaches) and I speak from my personal experiences as a practicing architect. I find the ability to *span* between practice and the academy an asset in my own roles as department head at MIT and principal at HYA. I hope it will be a productive perspective to have as Dean of Cornell AAP. I find that each role enriches and enhances the other. My role as a practitioner raises questions of implementation and the application of disciplinary knowledge. My role as academic asks questions of the profession about its larger role, measurable impacts, and the future of the field.



Downtown Crossing Plaza, by Höweler + Yoon Architecture. Boston, MA. Photo by John Horner.

What do you think are the biggest challenges facing students today?

I believe students are engaging with the world in different ways, and they are hungry for disciplinary knowledge that will help them be effective in the world. My sense is that they are very informed about the difference between institutions and very deliberate in their choices, both of institutions and degree programs, and even courses. Our students will graduate and take on complex challenges that could not have been anticipated 10 or 20 years ago. Technology will be just one of many factors to address these design challenges. Social changes will continue to amplify these issues such as urbanization, income gaps, social justice, and the future of work. Lastly, the environment has become an undeniable precondition for almost all design inquiry, and designers will need to take on issues of climate change, energy, resource scarcity, material sourcing, embodied energy, carbon sequestration, etc. What these all have in common is that they do not fit neatly into a single category or discipline. Design cannot be left to designers in isolation. We need to both *expand* design practices and expertise as well as enable designers to work collaboratively across disciplines. The issues that we face are too complex, the technologies too intricate, and the consequences too important. Reaching across disciplines, from a position of strong disciplinary knowledge, is the best way to address and contribute meaningfully to these challenges.

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By the end of your tenure, what will you have hoped to strengthen about the school?

I see a lot of strength and potential in the existing programs of Architecture, Art and Planning. The AAP New York City and Rome programs are also enriching assets. I see potential to expand collaborations within the college as well as collaborate across many of Cornell's colleges (Engineering, Agriculture and Life Sciences, and Human Ecology) as well as with Cornell Tech in New York City.

I believe Cornell is already a unique place to think collaboratively about how design can be an instrument for imagining the future and enabling change. I hope to strengthen its capacity to make an impact.

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