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A Vision for Transformative, SUSTAINABLE ARCHITECTURE



Written by Vicki Damon

Leers Weinzapfel Associates (LWA), a trailblazing architectural firm based in Boston, Massachusetts, has long been known for its commitment to public architecture that enhances communities and contributes to civic life. Founded in 1982 by two women, Andrea Leers and Jane Weinzapfel, the practice quickly rose to prominence by focusing on projects that serve the public good.

Over the years, LWA has earned a national reputation for excellence in design and leadership in sustainable building. In 2007, the firm became the first women-owned practice to

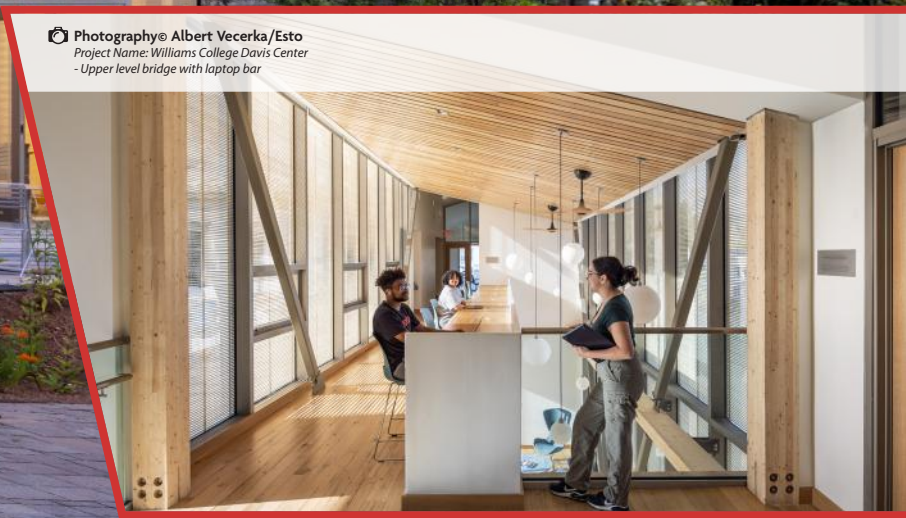
receive the prestigious American Institute of Architects (AIA) Architecture Firm Award, a milestone that signified both its design legacy and cultural influence in the field. With a diverse and collaborative team at the helm, including Principals Josiah Stevenson, Tom Chung, and Ashley Rao, the firm continues to expand its impact through civic, academic, cultural, and infrastructure work.

"Public architecture has always been a core focus of our practice," Chung says. "We're interested in projects that make a difference in people's everyday lives." »

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Photography © Albert Vecerka/Esto
Project Name: Williams College Davis Center
- A highly visible central stair connects all levels within the Davis Center's Rice House + Addition, encouraging active movement.



Photography © Albert Vecerka/Esto
Project Name: Williams College Davis Center
- Upper level bridge with laptop bar



Photography © Albert Vecerka/Esto

Project Name: University of Massachusetts Amherst John W. Olver Design Building
- View of Commons - The daylight central commons showcases all the various activities of the building: studios, offices, classrooms and seminar rooms, as well as wood shops and digital fabrication labs.

► LWA's work spans a broad spectrum, from performing arts centers and academic buildings to urban infrastructure. The consistent thread is a design approach grounded in site, material, and purpose. "Whether it's a campus precinct plan or a chilled water plant, we approach each project with the same rigor and intention," Chung explains. "We want our buildings to feel grounded in their place and responsive to their users."

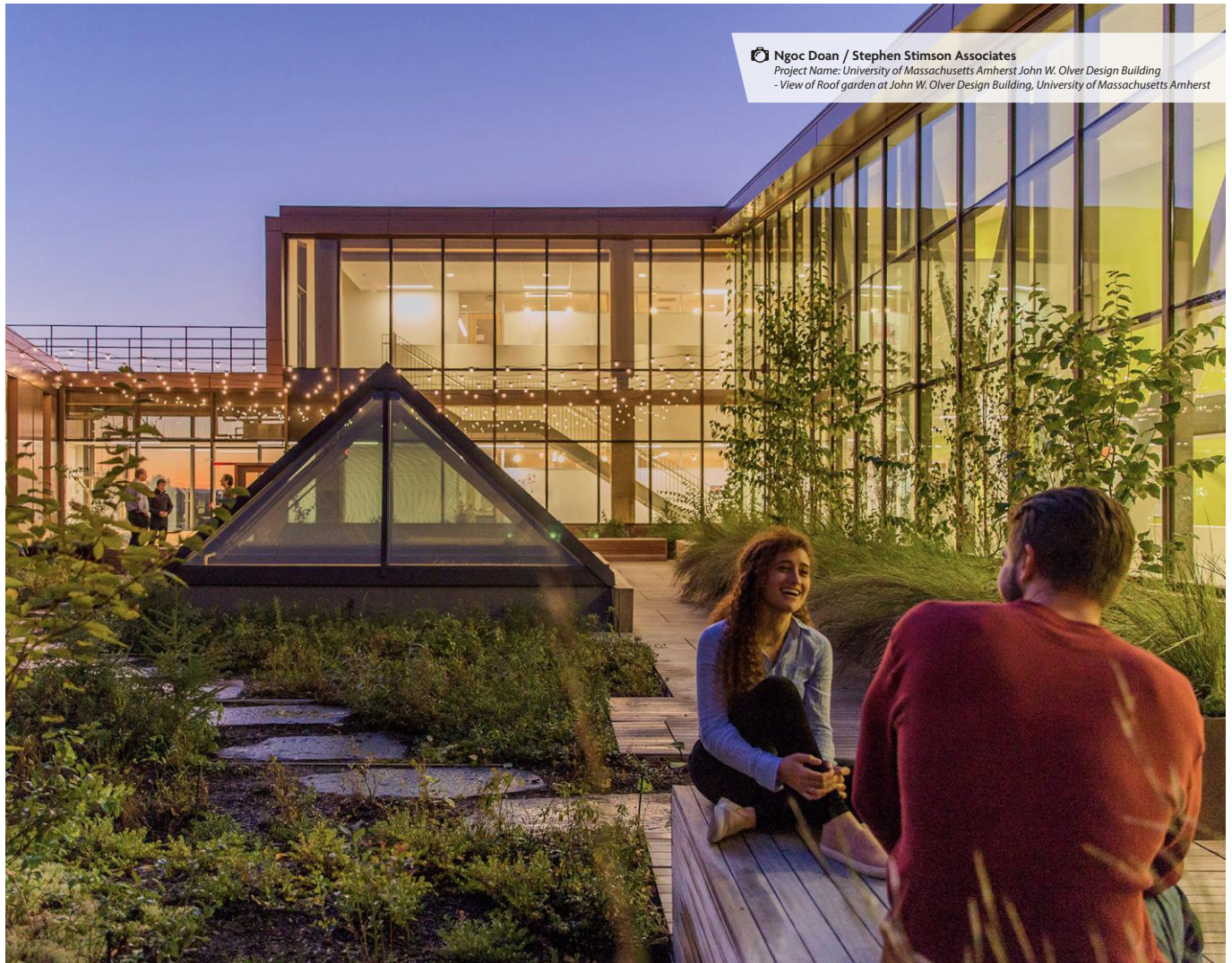
A strong example of this philosophy in action is the John W. Olver Design Building at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Designed as a hub for interdisciplinary learning in architecture, landscape architecture, and building construction technology, it stands out not only for its pedagogical mission but for its innovative use of mass timber construction. "The Olver Design Building was one of the first academic buildings in the U.S. to use cross-laminated timber at this scale. It embodies our approach to merging environmental responsibility with design excellence," says Chung.

The project also showcases the firm's commitment to sustainable building strategies. From a structural standpoint, mass timber offers a lower carbon footprint than steel or concrete

and reflects the firm's forward-thinking approach to environmental stewardship. "We're moving from doing less harm to doing more good," Chung explains. "It's not just about reducing carbon footprints; it's about regenerative design, about creating buildings and landscapes that give back more than they take."

Beyond technical innovation, the Olver Design Building demonstrates LWA's deep understanding of community and pedagogy. "We worked closely with the faculty and students to understand how they teach, how they interact. The atrium became this vibrant social heart where students from different disciplines naturally cross paths. That kind of spatial integration is key to how we think about architecture."

The theme of connectivity between people, programs, and place runs throughout LWA's work. This is perhaps most evident in Adohi Hall at the University of Arkansas, a student residence constructed with cross-laminated timber. "That project was about pushing the boundaries of what a residence hall could be," says Rao. "It challenged us to think holistically about material, community, and site."

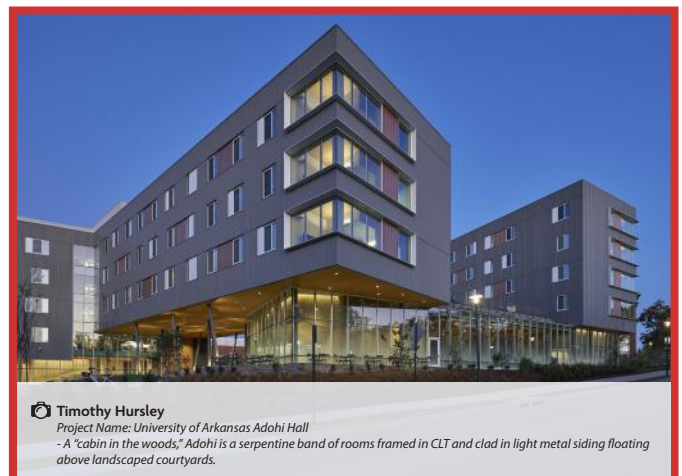


Ngoc Doan / Stephen Stimson Associates
 Project Name: University of Massachusetts Amherst John W. Olver Design Building
 - View of Roof garden at John W. Olver Design Building, University of Massachusetts Amherst

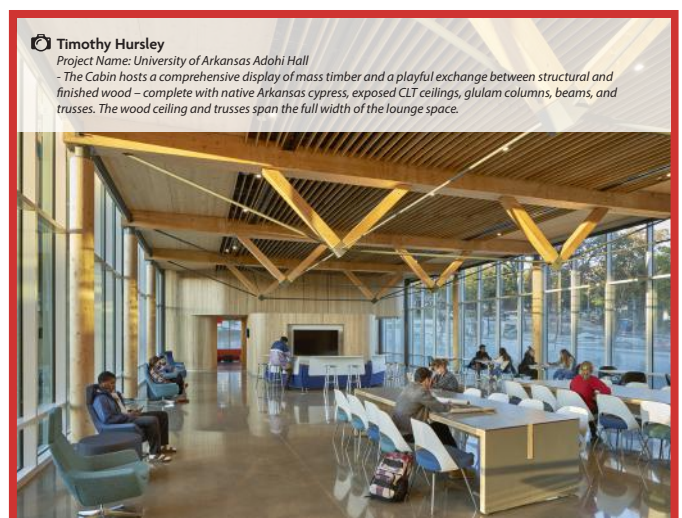
Designed in collaboration with Modus Studio and Mackey Mitchell Architects, Adohi Hall is both a living space and a learning laboratory, reflecting a new paradigm in student housing that supports wellness, sustainability, and creative engagement. “We designed it to be porous, to allow students to engage with nature and each other,” Rao explains. “The landscape moves through the building, and there are shared spaces where students can gather informally or work collaboratively.”

Chung believes that architects have a responsibility to think beyond the building envelope. “Sustainability is not a feature; it’s a lens through which we view everything. It’s embedded in how we site the building, how we select materials, how we plan for energy use,” he says. This commitment to environmental ethics is not just about checking boxes; it’s about influencing the culture of building from the ground up.

This philosophy also shapes how LWA collaborates with clients, particularly large institutions who want their built environs to reflect their ethos. Rather than focusing solely on standalone projects, the firm often partners with universities on broader, campus-wide strategies, approaching design as a means of aligning infrastructure with long-term institutional goals and values. ▶▶



Timothy Hursley
 Project Name: University of Arkansas Adohi Hall
 - A “cabin in the woods,” Adohi is a serpentine band of rooms framed in CLT and clad in light metal siding floating above landscaped courtyards.



Timothy Hursley
 Project Name: University of Arkansas Adohi Hall
 - The Cabin hosts a comprehensive display of mass timber and a playful exchange between structural and finished wood – complete with native Arkansas cypress, exposed CLT ceilings, glulam columns, beams, and trusses. The wood ceiling and trusses span the full width of the lounge space.



▶ Another significant project that embodies the company's values is the Harvard University District Energy Facility. On the surface, it's a plant for power and chilled water, a utilitarian structure that most firms might treat as invisible. But LWA elevated the design, turning it into a piece of civic infrastructure that reflects the university's climate goals. "The idea was to take something that's often hidden and make it a teaching tool," says Chung. "It's a visible marker of Harvard's commitment to sustainability, and it shows that even the most technical buildings can contribute to the public realm."



Internally, LWA's culture is rooted in collaboration and inclusivity. "We're not a firm of corporate hierarchy," Stevenson says. "Everyone's voice matters here, and that's reflected in the work. Our best ideas often come out of deep collaboration across disciplines, generations, and roles."

This egalitarian ethos has been essential to LWA's ability to grow while remaining nimble. As architectural practice becomes more interdisciplinary and technologically complex, collaboration is more crucial than ever. "We're constantly learning from each other," says Stevenson. "There's a real humility in the way we practice, and I think that creates space for innovation."



That spirit of openness extends to community engagement as well. LWA often facilitates workshops, public forums, and design charrettes to include stakeholders in the design process. “We see architecture as a dialogue,” Stevenson explains. “The more voices we include, the better the result.”

Looking ahead, LWA is expanding its portfolio to address some of the most pressing challenges facing cities and campuses today. From decarbonization and climate resilience to housing affordability and infrastructure equity, the firm is leaning into its public mission. “Architecture is ultimately about people,” says Chung. “If our work can help communities thrive socially, environmentally, and culturally, then we’re doing our job.”

More and more, the firm has also been exploring adaptive reuse and urban revitalization projects that breathe new life into neglected sites. “We’re very interested in working within existing frameworks and rethinking old buildings and underutilized urban fabric. There’s so much potential in reimagining what’s already there, especially as cities look to become more sustainable and equitable.”

LWA’s leadership in mass timber design continues to inform this work. “We’re seeing a real shift in the industry toward

low-carbon construction,” Chung says. “Mass timber is not just a material; it’s a catalyst for rethinking how we build. It requires early collaboration, precision, and a different kind of craftsmanship.”

Chung is deeply committed to mentoring emerging architects, particularly those drawn to socially and environmentally responsible design. He believes that today’s students are highly motivated to create meaningful change and sees it as the profession’s responsibility to help channel that enthusiasm by equipping them with the skills and frameworks to lead the next generation of sustainable design.

As LWA approaches its fifth decade in practice, its mission remains clear: to design with purpose, to lead with empathy, and to serve the public realm with integrity. Under the guidance of the firm’s Principals, LWA continues to demonstrate that architecture can be a force for positive change—beautiful, impactful, and deeply human.

“Every project is an opportunity to create something meaningful, to uplift a community, to care for the environment. That’s what motivates us every day.” ■

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