



Innovative Architects

HIDDEN HEROES OF HISTORY

Listen to the story: <https://jonincharacter.com/innovative-architects/>

Helen Liu Fong and **Norma Merrick Sklarek** were two **architects** who broke through gender and racial barriers to become influential leaders in **architectural design**.

Helen Liu Fong – A Pioneer in Space Age Architecture

Helen Liu Fong knew she wanted to become an architect at the age of 12. She began her career as a secretary at an architecture firm, then rose in the ranks during the 1950s and 60s to become a go-to leader in the field. Ms. Liu Fong drew up new career blueprints for women who wanted to join the male dominated profession.

Ms. Liu Fong was a leading figure in the **Googie architecture style**, which was inspired by jets, cars and the space age. The space age was a period of time when space exploration and technology were brand new and in the forefront of people's minds.

During her career, she focused on designing and styling the inside of buildings. She became known for daring color choices and attention to the little details like doorknobs, lighting, and even silverware.

She really cared about how people moved through space and was known for making restaurants, cafes, and other buildings eye-catching. For example, in the car-obsessed town of Los Angeles, restaurants started to take on design features that resembled the cars themselves. She wanted folks who were driving or walking by to feel invited into her buildings.

Ms. Liu Fong innovated new angles, shapes, and even neon lights through her designs. These were all things that became part of her signature style and influenced a lot of other architects and designers.

Norma Merrick Sklarek – A Career Filled with Firsts

Norma Merrick Sklarek was born in Harlem in 1926. She was always very good at mathematics and science in school, so her father encouraged her to use those skills through the study of architecture.

She went on to graduate from Columbia University's architecture program as the only Black student, and one of only two women in her class. She then became the first African American woman to pass her **architecture license exam** in New York and California, officially beginning her career as an architect.

She faced prejudice both at school and in her career, which meant she was treated unjustly for being a Black woman. But she was determined to triumph over the obstacles that others placed in front of her.



When looking for her first job as an architect, Ms. Sklarek went to 19 different offices and was turned down for work before she got her first job in New York. She never gave up!

Her career excelled and she became the first Black woman to own her own firm alongside two women named Margot Siegel and Katherine Diamond.

Ms. Sklarek was part of a number of significant projects throughout her career. She is most recognized for designing two buildings—the United States Embassy in Tokyo, Japan and the Terminal One station at the Los Angeles International Airport.

Ms. Sklarek mentored aspiring architects, lectured at prestigious universities, and coached architecture students for their state licensing exam to help them pass and become architects. In her honor, Howard University offers its students an opportunity to receive the “Norma Merrick Sklarek Architectural Scholarship Award.”

Another architect named Roberta Washington, who was born in Ms. Sklarek’s hometown of Harlem, once said *“She was an example to other women that it was possible to be yourself and accomplish what she did.”*

Glossary

Architect – A person who plans, designs, and oversees the construction of buildings.

Architectural design – By the simplest definition, architecture is the design of buildings, executed by architects. However, it is more. It is the expression of thought in building. It is not simply construction, the piling of stones or the spanning of spaces with steel girders. It is the intelligent creation of forms and spaces that in themselves express an idea. (source: *Britannica Kids*)

Googie architecture style – A type of futurist architecture influenced by car culture, jets, the Space Age, and the Atomic Age. Features of Googie include upswept roofs, curvaceous, geometric shapes, and bold use of glass, steel and neon.

Architecture license exam – Known as the Architect Registration Examination (ARE), it examines a candidate’s knowledge, skills, and ability to provide the various services required in the design and construction of buildings. A person must pass this exam in order to become a licensed architect.

Give it Some Thought

- Both Helen Liu Fong and Norma Merrick Sklarek had never-give-up attitudes. How did this character trait help them throughout their lives?
- What does it mean to be an influential leader? What kind of skills do you think someone needs to become a leader in their life and career?

Use Your Imagination

Before an architect works on a project with a client to build a new home or building, they'll work with the client to create a "mood board." A mood board is a collage of images and text that illustrates the vision for the home or building.

- If you could design a space, what would it be and who would it be for?
- How would you achieve your vision?

Bring your ideas to life by creating your own mood board:

Materials: large piece of cardboard or paper, collage materials (magazines, art papers, fabric scraps, wallpaper, paint samples, tiles, washi tape, etc.), markers, scissors, glue.

Step 1: Write down a few adjectives to describe the mood you would like to create in your design. Think about the colors, textures, materials, and styles of furniture or décor that match this idea. For example, for a relaxing space, you might choose neutral colors, lots of plants, natural materials, comfortable chairs, and soft lighting.

Step 2: Gather images from magazines, newspapers, or the Internet, and any other material samples that capture the look you have in mind. You can also draw your own.

Step 3: Compose these pieces on a large board or piece of paper, or, if using online images, create a document on your computer. Add descriptive words and notes to help explain your design ideas.

Project from Center for Architecture's K-12 Educational Resources – For more activities, go to centerforarchitecture.org/k-12/resources/