

Architect Joyce Owens first woman to receive AIA Florida Gold Medal of Honor

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Joyce Owens has received the Gold Medal of Honor – the highest recognition the American Institute of Architects Florida chapter can bestow. COURTESY PHOTO

Architect Joyce Owens, FAIA, RIBA, is a pioneer.

She shatters figurative glass ceilings while designing literal buildings, both commercial and residential, as principal of her Fort Myers-based firm, Joyce Owens Architecture/Studio AJO.

And at the recent annual Florida convention of the American Institute of Architects, held at The Breakers in Palm Beach, Ms. Owens received the Gold Medal of Honor – the highest recognition the AIA Florida chapter can bestow.

It is the first time in their 110-year history that the Gold Medal's been given to a woman, though, she notes, they've only been bestowing the award for the past 50 or 60 years.

"It's hard to imagine that in 2022, I am the first female in Florida to receive this medal," Ms. Owens says. "It is incomprehensible.

"I was honored. The whole event was overwhelming.

"I am very confident in what I do, but this gives me an extra boost. Move over, boys," she jests.

As to how receiving the Gold Medal will change things, "I'm hoping this award will help me reach a broader audience," she says. "Hopefully there will be more

people I get to address and advocate for my profession.



While Joyce Owens is the first woman to receive the Florida AIA Gold Medal, she hopes she's the first of many more to come.

"Personally, it gives me the confidence to be more direct and more willing to speak my mind. As a woman, it is public recognition that I am as able in my profession as any man."

The award was given to Ms. Owens for the design work she's done in the U.S. and UK, as well as for her leadership in the AIA at a local, state and national level. (She had an architecture firm, Azman Owens Architects, in London for 10 years and designed for people such as fashion designer Alexander McQueen, magazine editor/fashion icon Isabella Blow and politician Boris Johnson before he was prime minister. She was president of AIA Florida in 2017 and has served on its state board.)

"Most important to me, I was recognized for advocating for our profession," she says. (Ms. Owens is on the AIA's national Public Outreach Committee.)



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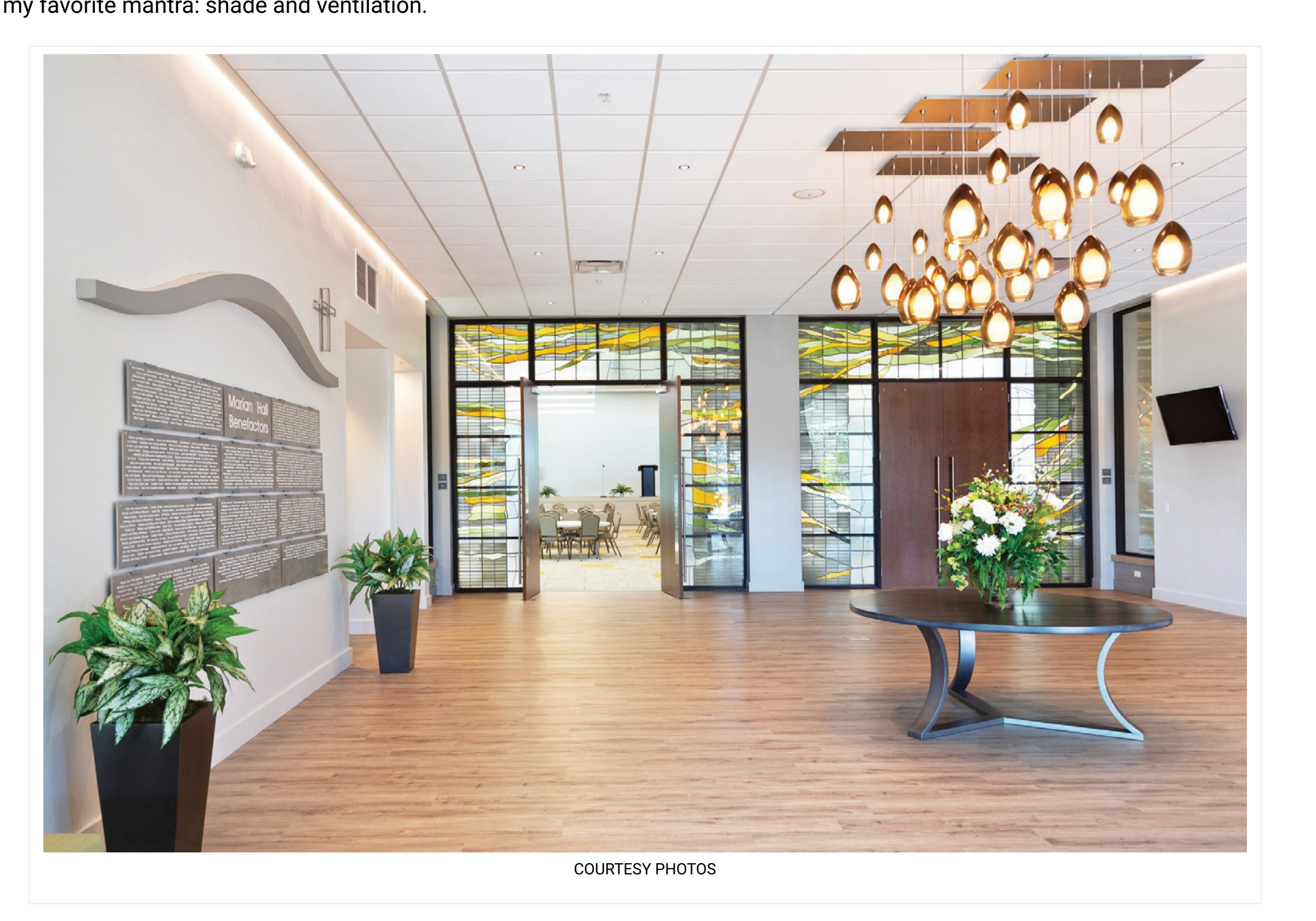
"The public doesn't understand the value we can bring to our communities, at a personal and at a broader level. Our training is so holistic about community design, and dealing with spaces and places. We have to understand how we can help communities make towns and cities better places."

Architects have always known how to build for climate change, she says, and that's always been a priority, especially in sub-tropical Florida with its heat and humidity.

"But now developers are starting to come around," she says. "There is an economic value in designing for the future of our communities and our planet."

She focuses on coastal architecture, working locally mainly in Sanibel, Captiva and Naples, but all over the country, as well as in the UK and Italy.

"This region of Florida is subtropical," Ms. Owens notes, "and that demands a different response to the climate, which includes my favorite mantra: shade and ventilation.



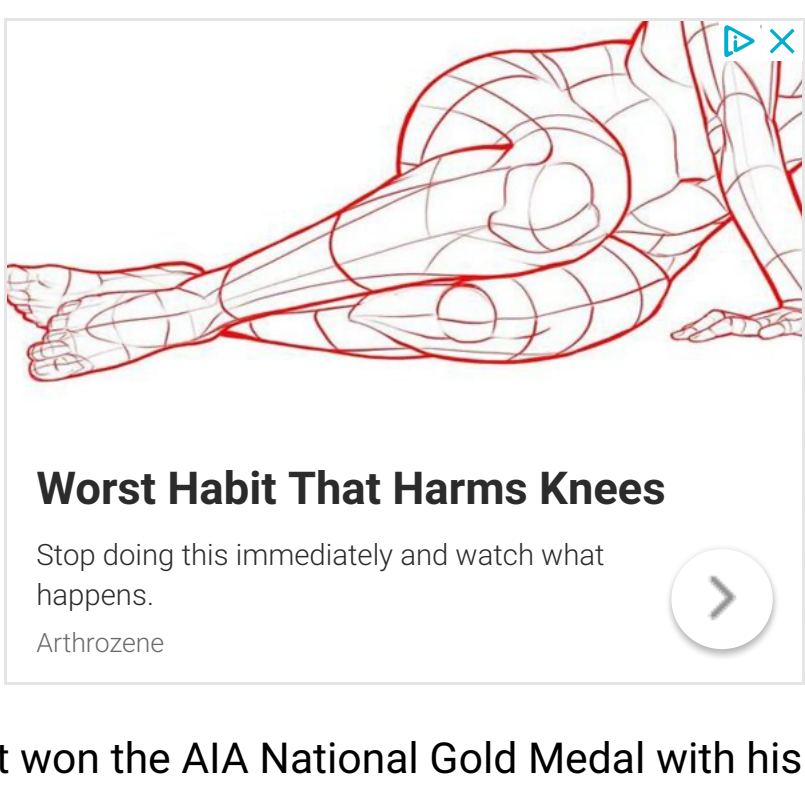
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So we can reduce our dependency on energy. We live in a very humid and hot climate that is incredibly rainy, and our buildings must respect and respond to South Florida.

"So I always keep that in mind when I design. Always. It's my first priority."

She also feels strongly that architects should speak clearly about their profession and refrain from jargon.

"Jargon and complexity and vocabulary that architects use can be confusing," she says. "I am an advocate for plain English. Because how else is the public going to understand what we're trying to communicate?"



Architect Lawrence Scarpa FAIA, who just won the AIA National Gold Medal with his wife, fellow architect Angela Brooks FAIA, was one of the people who nominated Ms. Owens for the award. "For more than two decades, Joyce has ... created award-winning work that is refreshing and new, yet fits into the vernacular of the SW Florida region, a place of rich literary heritage and strong contemporary architecture," he wrote in his nomination letter. "She has significantly advanced the standard of design with both her advocacy and building that are rooted in their place and possess spirit, clarity and a respect for the landscape and context."

This award comes on the heels of Ms. Owen's 2020 AIA Medal of Honor for Design; receiving both awards in the span of two years has never happened before.

Foundation stone

Ms. Owens didn't always want to be an architect.

When she went to college at Perdue University, it was with the plan to become a veterinarian.

"I wanted to be a vet because I loved animals," she says. "And at college, I realized there was a lot more to it than just dogs and cats."

So she floundered a bit, she says, taking classes in accounting and economics, because she was good at math and science.

Then she signed up for an elective class in Residential Design Drafting.

"I took a drafting course because my Catholic high school did not allow women to take drafting classes," she explains. "Maybe if they had, I would've found out sooner that I wanted to be an architect.

"It was a eureka moment: oh my God, I forgot that I had an artistic side to me. It was a beautiful day. The windows were open and a breeze was coming through, music was playing and I was in a beautiful old building. I was drawing, and I was so happy. I knew: this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. I'd forgotten that I'd always been artistic."

So she changed schools, studying architecture at Notre Dame University.

"They sent me to Rome for one year," she recalls. "It changed my life, forever. Literally. The opportunity to study ancient and medieval and Renaissance architecture makes you understand the essence of architecture: balance, proportion, scale."

A quarter of the students in her classes were women, "but no one was daunted that it was a male-dominated field," she says. But not even half of them became licensed architects.

Ms. Owens was one of the exceptions.

Even now, she says, approximately 20% of architects are women, nationwide.

"Women practice architecture differently," she says. "I'm a mother, and when my son was young, I needed more flexibility. I raised my son while a business owner.

"Day to day, women tend to work differently than men. The way we approach things is very collaborative. Women tend not to take credit for their employees' work, they're willing to share the limelight and willing to hear other people's ideas and incorporate them into the process.

"That's not saying that there aren't male architects who also do that."

While she's the first woman to receive the Florida AIA Gold Medal, she hopes she's the first of many more to come.

"Hopefully we will see more women and more minority architects," she says. "It has been a male-dominated profession for centuries.

"Architects know the value of good design. We are problem solvers.

"We can lead to a better future." }