



JUNE GRANT

"I HAVE A NEED TO MAKE IT"

JULIETTE HARRIS

AT AGE 20, JUNE GRANT MIGRATED FROM JAMAICA TO THE U.S. with an undergraduate degree in business administration. But she also was drawn to architecture. Since the age of five, she'd been fascinated by the evolution that occurs on building construction sites.

This child from a family of teachers and economists in country without an architecture school made her way to the profession through a circuitous route. She enrolled in Baruch College in New York City where she pursued a dual path — economics and art. Graduating magna cum laude with a second degree in investment finance, she was also armed with the tools to create a portfolio to apply to schools of architecture.

"I could have easily continued on to graduate school to study architecture. But a large part of me wanted to utilize what I had studied and be part of the energy of the investment industry," she recalls. "I had a lot of fun and it was a shock to many when I announced I was going to grad school to study architecture. Everyone, everyone, thought I would go on to pursue a Ph.D in economics. However, for three years I had been sculpting and welding."

Being accepted into the Yale University School of Architecture was an elation but she was disappointed by the narrowness of the curriculum there and at other American architecture schools. There was little acknowledgement of non-Western cultures and art forms. She found solace in the library studying designers such as Candela, Otto, Beihnisch, Grimshaw, Hadid and Benjamin. "My attraction to them was purely structural technology and social observation," she says. As an only child she had been an avid reader and books became her sanctuary again.

Her final year at Yale was pivotal. She felt pressure to define "her voice" architecturally. In 1999, the term "computational design" was not on anyone's lips. She struggled to express the beauty she saw in the relationship of AI, automation and communication, and was intuiting how a spreadsheet or digital sketch could be just "as valid as a hand-drawn line." By the time she graduated, she had a keen interest in relational data, robotics, material science and structural technology.

Looking back, she observes that everywhere she's been employed, she has "pushed, questioned the technology being used and initiated change in favor of incorporating more advanced design and analysis tools."

(left) NASA Ames Research Center's Sustainability Base.
June Grant, design manager for the AECOM design team for this project
Photo: NASA



Interior views, GE Global Software, San Ramon.
June Grant, design architect for the AECOM design team for this project
Photo: Cesar Rubio

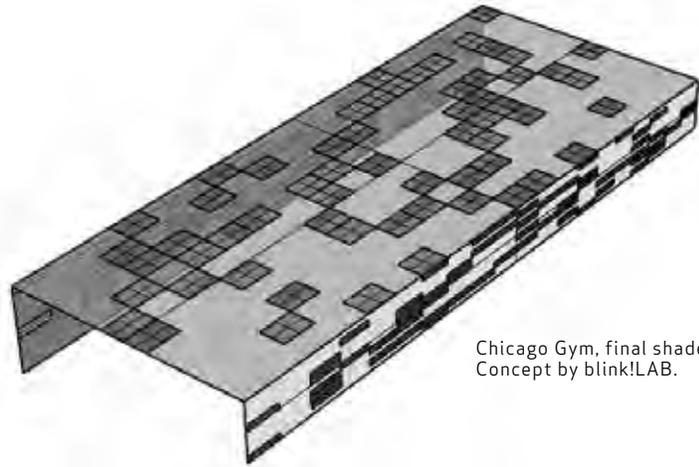


The “push” continues. Her small firm, blink!LAB, is committed to making and rapid prototyping and is a member of TechShop. Grant purchased a 3d printer for her office in September, is investigating a laser cutter, and proudly admits to not having one piece of office equipment that most businesses find essential: “I simply haven’t found a need for a printer and its cartridges etc. With PDF’s who prints? Kinkos is a short, five minute drive and I’d rather use the latest technologies to communicate matters 3D.”

Grant’s undergraduate training in studio art has supported her skillful use of new technologies. “Without doubt my training in sculpture and the fine arts has been helpful. While painting involves the creation of depth of field from a typically flat plane, a sculptor has to approach the subject not simply from 360 degrees but also spherically — the view from above and below. As a result of needing to physically see from all angles, I’m more inclined to work in both virtual 3d and physical 3d space. Both the digital and physical model are imperative. I have a difficult time grasping the quality of a space just by the act of sketching. I have a need to make it.”

Between 2003 and 2008, blink!Lab, an Oakland CA-based firm, was successful but, like many practices, was impacted by the economic downturn. Between 2008 and 2013, Grant was an associate principal at AECOM, the largest architecture, engineering and construction management firm in the world. At AECOM, she had the full experience of working with a multi-disciplinary team.

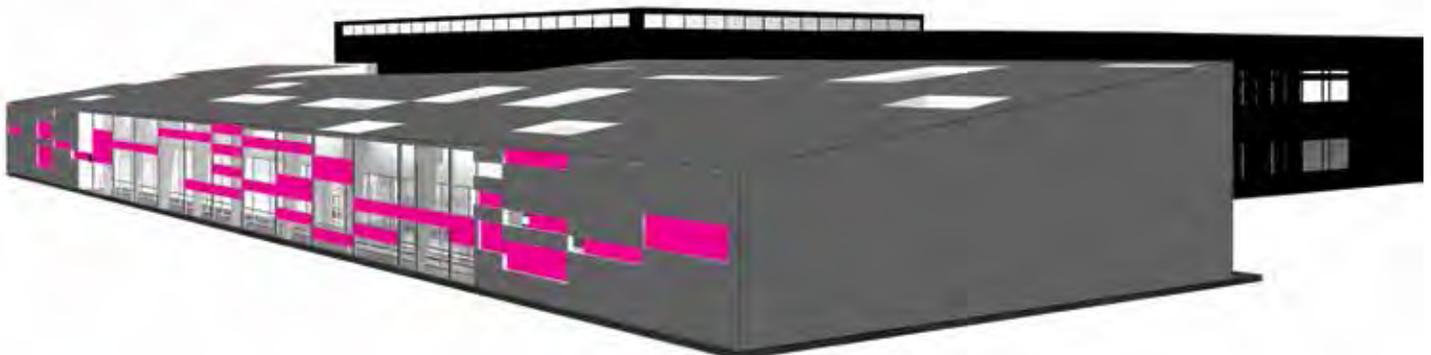
She led the design team for the NASA Ames Research Center’s Sustainability Base — a net positive energy building. Other notable projects include the design of GE’s first Silicon Valley software tech office workspace. She is also recognized for providing a vision for sustainable integration of utility infrastructure into the urban fabric, particularly as it relates to low-income neighborhoods. Throughout, it is clear what Grant means by “smart design for smart buildings with intelligent interface.” She sees technology as a means to



Chicago Gym, final shade structure. Concept by blink!LAB.



Views of Chicago Gym. Concept by blink!LAB.



strengthen the connection between architecture and social and environmental concerns.

NASA's description of its facility glows with visionary wonder:

Imagine working in a building designed in harmony with its environment. A building where you can work by natural daylight and breathe fresh air; one designed and constructed to LEED Platinum standards and decorated with materials that are beneficial to your health. And one so smart and intuitive it knows exactly how much energy you're using — and adapts itself based on weather, season and work patterns. Out of this world? Not any more.

NASA's Sustainability Base is unlike any other government building ever created. Using NASA innovations originally engineered for space travel and exploration, the 50,000 square-foot, lunar-shaped Sustainability Base is simultaneously a working office space, a showcase for NASA technology and an evolving exemplar for the future of buildings. Welcome to NASA's latest mission on Earth.

GE San Ramon is one of seven global research centers of the corporation. The inventors at the facility work on projects such as making aircraft engines more efficient, developing gas turbines, and refining medical imaging.

In 2013, Grant was asked to join Steinberg Architects in San Francisco as director of design and principal with a goal to introduce new design approaches and technologies to the 35 year-old institution.

Today, June Grant is back at her own firm, blink!LAB architecture. She believes in the value of self-guided research as a resource that feeds practice. As a result blink!LAB's approach is to question and examine without boundary. "There is an element of freewheeling as any software or tool is acceptable," she explains. "The plurality of technology is at our fingertips. So it's easy to test and learn almost any software. But all that exploration is to apply to real design problems. And by extrapolation, the concept of borderlessness is reflected in an open-ended, multi-disciplinary research-based approach to innovation in sustainable practice."

She views her practice a blend of research and evidence-based ideas and holistic designs as a way of having the built environment serve the client and also tell a story. "I believe there are some of us who are naturally creative," she says. "We are always thinking of design solutions. There is simply a need to create. But some of us see more — a need to make a statement beyond surface. We have a point of view that is provocative; an opinion, challenged by the need to tell a story, to create what we believe in."

So, if buildings could talk, Grant believes the best ones have more to say than stating their function as shelter devoted to some purpose like habitation or education. They would acknowledge the stories that occur on their premises: "People arrive, mingle, say goodbye, wait and then depart. These are all moments in the story."

Buildings with such eloquence seem almost magical in her view with as many personalities as their makers and inhabitants and subsumed in the larger stories of city and nation. "Grand



June A. Grant

Central Station in Manhattan has a story of grand romance of train travel. The Great Hall collects and then disseminates through warrens of mysterious passageways." And of course there are the legendary lovers who arranged to meet under the station's grand clock. "The Pompidou (Centre/

museum), in Paris, on the other hand, is a trumpeted statement against the past, with its brazenly exposed infrastructure and celebration of technology."

Grant tries to approach each of her designs with a few fundamental questions: "Who are you? Where are you going? What do you want to be in five years? What is the full potential of the client as manifested in a building?"

She uses advanced design technologies to create sustainable, effective and beautiful architectural designs that build on her experiences in working on the NASA and GE projects. For example, she says that augmented reality is a large component of how she communicates with clients today. "From webgl websites to custom apps, the key is bringing the designs closer to the client. Clients are able to interact with models as easily as anyone does on Google Earth."

One of her favorite fabricators is DIRRT Wall Systems. "Being able to design a smart wall real-time and have it fabricated within millimeter precision was the key to GE's success," she points out.

"Our focus at Blink," she explains, "is architecture, materials and fabrication using smart geometry, smart technologies, smart design, new building technologies and intelligent interface. Architecture is a creative challenge. Every design should be based on in-depth research into materials, technology, craft, financial considerations and social psychology."

And now June Grant will apply this formidable array of creative and technical resources to her interest in working on building in Oakland. She views the Bay Area as "an incredible hot-bed of data, innovation, intelligence, creative-minds on every corner."

Juliette Harris is an independent writer and editor. Her clients include the Hampton University Museum for which she serves as a consulting editor for the print *IRAAA* and editor of the *IRAAA+* webzine, a source of regularly-updated news and features on African Diasporic visual art and design at <http://iraaa.museum.hamptonu.edu>