

WTC 'Innovation and Wonder' with Aileen Fuchs

[00:00:00] **Angela Gardner:** Hello, everyone. This is Women Talk Construction, and I'm Angela Gardner, one of your co hosts, and I am here with Christi Powell, the other co host. How are you today, Christi?

[00:00:17] **Christi Powell:** Good. How are you doing, Angela?

[00:00:18] **Angela Gardner:** I'm great. We have already had three wonderful conversations, and we are about to have our fourth today with Eileen.

I mean, wait till you hear about her and what she is doing at the National Building Museum. But I'm going to open up this conversation with, I love to sometimes share with some of my peers about our guests that are coming on just to, you know, because I just think they're all amazing. And so one of my, my friends who has some young kids, she immediately sent me a text or a video text of her kids visiting the museum last summer and Legos.

They were so excited. And I know, I think I've actually been to. Several events there in DC, um, at the museum. So, what about you, Christi? Have you been to some events there?

[00:01:13] **Christi Powell:** I have been to one, and I want to say that my favorite, um, experience was the first time I was in there, because when you walk in, it's just grand.

Right. Everything is grand and it's beautiful. And it's all lit up too. Right. Yeah. And I know not everybody that listens to our podcast knows a lot about construction, but the millwork in that place was just, Oh, wow. Just beautiful, beautiful pieces of millwork and, um, artisan, um, artistry. Yeah. They're artists that put those things together.

It was beautiful. We had a, I'm not sure. I can't remember exactly what we were celebrating. Um, I want to say Kohler

[00:01:53] **Aileen Fuchs:** It was.

[00:01:54] **Christi Powell:** yeah, Kohler, um, actually that we were celebrating his Legacy, if I remember, right?

[00:02:00] **Aileen Fuchs:** Yep. 150th anniversary at our, at our gala.

[00:02:05] **Christi Powell:** And so, that gala was amazing. And I literally had to go out with my sister and find an outfit because galas, that was the first real gala I wanted to dress up for.

So, um, I'm, I'm

[00:02:16] **Aileen Fuchs:** not used to, I like to bring the fashion. So yeah, yeah, I am

[00:02:20] **Christi Powell:** not, um, I was not that girl for many years. So, you know, Stepping into this role, I've had to learn how to dress a little bit. So. What is your favorite part, Eileen, about the National Building Museum? Because coming from you, you know all the details, right?

So I would love to know what, what's been one of your favorite memories of the National Building Museum? Well,

[00:02:42] **Aileen Fuchs:** well, first of all, thank you for having me. It's really exciting to speak, uh, speak to you both today. Christi, it's so good to see you again. And I was really honored to be asked to, um, to, to talk with you today.

There's so many things I could say like, let me zoom out, I think, from like the building perspective. If you haven't been there before. The National Building Museum was built in the 1880s as our as the pension Bureau for the museum for the for the country. Right? So, like, you're coming out of the Civil War and.

All these union soldiers that need to process pensions, they want to make this big grand building. And simultaneously when they're building the building, the federal government in DC is sort of being like, you know what, we need like a big, awesome space for big events. Probably the first event that they had there was Grover Cleveland's inaugural ball.

And since then we host the inaugural balls like for almost every presidency. So the building itself, when you walk in ahead, the largest interior Corinthian columns in the world. I mean, and so it's one of those things where just your jaw drops. It's a national historic landmark in a, in a town full of incredible monuments and beautiful architecture and buildings.

It is still the building. It's still a stunner. You know, there's a terracotta freeze around the whole building. So it's, it's amazing. And I think, I guess that ties to

probably my, maybe my 1 of my favorite moments was when I decided when I was decided to take the job. I was, I've been appointed. I was never going to move to D.

C. I'm a, I'm a New Yorker. And I came in and my, I wanted to show my kids the museum and, and they were in New York. I had ran a botanical garden. So they had all these gardens to run around and they were sort of like, it's going to be one building. You know, I have six, they were six year old at the time, six year old twins.

And they walked in the door and they opened up and they just looked up at the columns and they just took off running around like airplanes. They were all around there and they're like, Oh, they get it. They get it. It was a really, really good moment to understand how people. experience that incredible, incredible space and scale.

It is beautiful. So

[00:04:44] **Christi Powell:** tell us a little bit about your role as president and executive director of the National Building Museum. That's a pretty big lift

[00:04:51] **Aileen Fuchs:** that you've

[00:04:51] **Christi Powell:** taken on as a role because you gotta, you gotta have your hands in a lot of things every single day. And what, what do your responsibilities entail?

[00:05:02] **Aileen Fuchs:** It is a incredible role. And, and I mentioned that I would, I didn't see myself moving to DC, but it wasn't until, you know, that this opportunity came across and I said, and I said, you know, that's not for me. And one of my mentors was like, this is, this is you, the National Building Museum is looking for its next leader.

And it's you, and there's a bunch of reasons why, you know, and, and once I really looked at it and I, I was like, wait a minute, like, This museum is, we are chartered by Congress. We are legislated to be our country's, our nation's museum for how we design and build. And I thought at this moment in time, you know, when we're coming out of COVID, when we're facing climate crises and equity and public health, and literally how we are going to build our buildings and our communities is going to shape.

It's just, it's, it's crucial to humanity. I mean, it's not that dramatic to say how, what a big, big deal it is. I felt such a calling. I'm like, I have to do this. And so for me, like, you know, being the head of the museum, it's really about setting the, setting the vision, you know, and, and, and deciding what the, what the priorities are.

And I think, you know, a museum that's about the quote, the built environment, built environment is so huge, right? It's so huge. And people don't even know what that means. Like we asked visitors, does the built environment affect your life? And they're like, not really. And you're like, Were you on a road? Do you live in a house?

Do you go to school? So, so we realized we have to break it down a little bit more. And so, you know, I kind of created our, our four, our four institutional pillars. Those pillars for us are equity, environment, innovation, and wonder. And those are the four sort of impact areas we think we have in the ways that we'd like to talk about why building matters, how we can empower and inspire, you know, Our, our next generation of design and build thinkers, like to, you know, how we can get more people into that.

And then how we can also bring together, I think one of the strengths of the museum is our convening power. We bring together people from across every vertical of the industry. Like, you know, it's the architects, the developers, the materials, the supply, the zone people, the community, but like, and have real conversations across the board.

So to kind of de silo the big picture of how we can kind of. And so for me, and it's also it has to be human centered stories like people and as a museum and as a museum professional, our business is storytelling. Like you have to make these things matter to people, but, and people, people want to know what, what matters to their daily life, you know?

And so you have to, We have an opportunity to really like tell those stories that, that make people look around their world very, very differently and see how and why things are built the way they are and how they can get involved. So my, my, you know, I, I get to kind of really set that vision and work with a lot of incredible people across the industry, including my incredible board of directors.

And yeah. You know, then really, I see myself as a leader empowering my great, my leaders to do their best work, whether it be in operationalizing the

institution itself, creating great exhibitions, writing great curriculum. And always, you know, raising money. So, yeah, I

[00:07:56] **Christi Powell:** love that your story and, and your role is actually going to spark a lot of interest in young women that are listening to our podcast.

I hope that's really what it's all about, right? Is there listening to you with your visionary mind and with your young spunky, like, this is what we're going to do. This is what we need. This is the vision that we're going to have and that you're leading a change in the museum because of your creative, your creative mind.

A lot of, a lot of young girls can't see themselves in a position like the title says, but they can see themselves in a position like what you just said. And I thank you for that. I thank you for sharing that with the audience.

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[00:09:30] **Aileen Fuchs:** Oh, no, that's, that's such a privilege to be able to, to inspire. Mm-Hmm. young women. I think it's, I mean, we. I won't even preach to this choir because you guys are the choir about how much more we need women in, in, in the building industries, you know, but I think I say to any and all women, you know, you, you are so much more qualified than you think you are for so many things, you know, and you really have to like intentionally, I think as women, like dig, dig a little deeper, think a little more creatively about everything you've done in your life, whether it be me.

Whether it's school, whether it's being on a, on a, the captain of your soccer team, whether it was, you did improv, whether it, whatever it is, all of those are skills that you you've acquired to bring yourself, be ready where, where you are right now to do whatever's next. Like we just have to kind of, I think work harder at that mindset that men do not to make a big generalization, but I think, I think we do, we have to tell it, we have to tell ourselves a great story about ourselves to really position ourselves for the next great opportunity.

Yes.

[00:10:28] **Christi Powell:** I love that.

[00:10:29] **Angela Gardner:** Oh, yeah, I love that. You are so much more qualified than you think with your extensive experience in cultural institutions and botanical gardens, which, by the way, I love to go visit those. How do you see the role of the National Building Museum in promoting architecture and design?

Because that's so important, you know, in the building industry. How do you

[00:10:52] **Aileen Fuchs:** see that? Yeah, I mean, the museum has, I would say, traditionally been a, a space for elevated thought leadership around architecture and been very, very design heavy, you know, I think our, our most legacy program is something called spotlight on design.

And, you know, if you look back in when people used to convene in person all the time, like, let's, you know, in the public programs in the, in the 90s, you know, you had hundreds of people that would come and. You know, listen to I weigh way or whoever was whatever when Stark attack was an actual term, you know, we really brought those folks in and we had that.

But I think design intent and design thinking is something that we do. We break down well, across every sort of spectrum of our audience, and we sort of see ourselves. If you, if you talk about quote unquote workforce development, we see we're not a training center or something we do, but we, we are an exposure point, right?

And those exposure points can be super, super, super critical, you know? So one of our, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Like one of our, our programs that I've had for a long time is called city by design. And we're, we're elevating that right now, but for a decade, it's bringing in like recycled materials and, you know, toilet paper rolls, et cetera, and dividing designing cities together.

And, We have so many programs like that, that put you as a youth, you know, in, in the, in the seat of a designer and to, to start thinking about the fact that those, those choices are made and those choices profoundly affect your life. And then, you know, as we get to it, like classes that are many of our programs are, you can get continuing education credits through etcetera.

And so you're, you're kind of getting to be in in conversation with and hearing and learning about process also design. Like, we're a very process based. Place, you know, we don't want to we don't just show the finished product. We really like to talk about how things how things are made and designed, you know, and and kind of connect that together to then how they're built and what that back and forth is.

And so I think, you know, I think I think the mandate is huge. I mean, I take it there. I say to myself every single day. This is we are literally chartered by Congress to be the nation's museum to talk about this. Like, we have to tell a national story and we have to we have to really, really Think about how profoundly impactful that is, how the design of the built environment around you right now, especially when we're undergoing, I call this time period the greatest transformation of urban life since World War II when you're looking at what's happening in cities right now.

All that is now a rambling way of saying, I think, I think our, our mandate is high and I think our opportunities are huge. And I think we do a really excellent, excellent job. I think of, of approaching it from a bunch of different audiences and a bunch of different ways. And that's a difficult task. Yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely.

And, and yes. And before this, you know, you mentioned botanical garden. I was, I had the privilege of being the CEO of Sun Harbor Cultural Center and Botanical Garden and that, you know, the landscape design of that was also incredible. And that was also a lot about historic preservation. It, which a lot of my work has been about, it's been about adaptive reuse of historic of kind of sweeping historical sites or landmarks and like, how do you turn it around for cultural activation?

And so that's also like, an incredible aspect, right? Of of of design and design build challenges right now of, you know, kind of. Meeting, um. More current sustainability mandates, but while while preserving some of the, you know, incredible architecture that needs to be preserved also. So it's a, it's a, it's a big balance.

There was an incredible opportunity. So

[00:14:16] **Christi Powell:** as a leader in their field, what challenges do you face? Um, obviously you mentioned a few already in creating engaging and accessible exhibits and programs for a diverse audience. You talked a little bit about that, but tell us some of the challenges that you faced and how you

[00:14:31] **Aileen Fuchs:** overcame them.

Yeah. I'll talk about how overcoming, I don't know if I overcame, but, um, you know, and I think also the like, it's a work in progress, right? Exactly. And, but I think straight out the gate, it's, um, It's the, the adage of like, of, um, seeing challenges as opportunities, as opposed to seeing challenges as road, as just roadblocks or, or YouTube, whatever.

So that's what we're trying to do that. But I think, um, in my industry, it's just a totally new world of how people want to assume content and how they want to be together. You know, like a lot of people are just taking in their quote unquote culture from their couch. Like, so what makes you want to come to the museum?

Yeah. Right. Like what, what's the difference? Like why, you know, when, when we're becoming so, or, or we're just, you know, looking at our phone all day. So it's a, it's a really different world and it's challenging a lot of museums, but I, I really like to think, and I think it's human nature to wanna be together.

It's, and I, I, to, to want to collectively. simultaneously experience something to someone. There's a different thing between, you know, you and I being like, Hey, last night, did you watch that show? Yeah, I watched it too. Versus sitting together and experiencing something together. Yeah. Is, is impactful. And so I think, I think I would, I would, in terms of, I think a success where we try to attack both those things.

Um, we just opened an exhibition. in January that we've been working on for years that is a somewhat permanent exhibit. Um, and it's called Building Stories and it's about the built environment through the lens of children's literature. So it's mostly, it's an intergenerational exhibition that is like incredibly nostalgic for all of us, you know, in our, 30s, 40s, and my, my parents, and, and then it's also incredibly impactful for, um, a K 3 audience.

Really, the idea there is, is we, we really look at our, um, we experience the built world around us often early on in the pages of books. where we're finding out who we are and we're trying to determine our place in the world. And I, and I think there's, there's two things there. One is that we created content that we think is appropriate and exciting for multiple generations.

So if you're like, if we're trying to get audiences to come to, to come to something, we're not, this is something, and we're not trying to be something for everybody. Not every exhibit can be something for everyone. Some things are

really targeted, but this is. Encouraging and going to delight a family of many different agents.

So like that's one thing we have to do And then the other thing we did on this which I think is successful is we partnered with the DC public library system So there will be a kiosk about building stories in every war. Those are all throughout, throughout the District of Columbia. And so in order to reach audiences, you have to have more creative strategies and you have to engage with your community.

So this is an example of us, you know, if you're not going to walk into the museum, you are going to walk into your local library and maybe the library will bring you back to the museum. So those are like two ways where, you know, we're, we're kind of, we understand what's going on and we're trying creatively to get more people.

Yeah. I think

[00:17:33] **Christi Powell:** that's going to switch. I think people are starting to realize that

[00:17:36] **Aileen Fuchs:** we need to be together. I completely agree. Yeah. I see the switch happening. Everyone's like, Oh my God, it feels so good to be here.

[00:17:44] **Christi Powell:** Exactly. The energy is totally different than it was before COVID, right? Like the energy before COVID is, Oh gosh, I got another thing to go to.

And now it's like, Oh my gosh, it's so great to see you. Let's get together again for coffee or whatever. Instead of. You know, text me later, send me an email. It's like, let's get together. So

[00:18:03] **Aileen Fuchs:** I agree. I agree. Yeah, I love that.

[00:18:06] **Angela Gardner:** She already answered a couple of our other questions, but actually 1 of them I did want to ask about the collaboration part with other organizations because it's very important that.

You know, others here that you're doing it. And I think that that was that more of a local level that you were doing it when, or was that national

[00:18:24] **Aileen Fuchs:** too? Oh, the, like the library is just a local level, but we have, we have collaborations across like, So that's my

[00:18:31] **Angela Gardner:** question. National who, who do you collaborate with

[00:18:34] **Aileen Fuchs:** nationally?

A lot of trade and industry organizations. I mean, I guess I'll call out to the American Institute of Architects is a great partner of ours, longstanding partner to AIA. Um, and, uh, the National Association of Home Builders is an amazing partner of ours. They, you know, they supported this most recent exhibition and we have a partnership with them where we are The content that we develop like the curriculum and other sort of like out of school network things we're sharing now with them and then they're sharing with their like girls and boys clubs networks, et cetera.

It's like, we're always talking with like, yeah, on both of those levels, like, There's so many values we're aligned on. There's so many things we all mutually care about. So how can we be more collectively impactful and, you know, find, find the ways to collaborate that make, that are helpful to everybody, you know?

And there's, there's so many ways that I'm not, we're a cultural institution. Our point is to like reach people. We're not lobbying. We're not advocating, you know? So there's, there's, there's so many different ways though, that we feel so, I think aligned. And so those are, those are two, and there's many, many like that.

Many more. Yeah. We benefit from the. The thought leadership, like the real access to like. To what's happening on the ground in these industries, you know, what, what do you, what do you need to see more? What does the general public need to know more about, you know, what, how can we, how can we better educate the next generation?

How do we demystify whatever it is, carbon capture to this, to that, you know, like, and, and kind of like, and really work at a big macro level with some of these national institutions to make sure that we're, we're all kind of like moving the needle where we want to. Yeah, it's been incredible, like really, really.

Really incredible partnerships. Yeah.

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[00:20:52] **Christi Powell:** National Association of Women in Construction. I know one of those groups is going to pull together women confidence builders and themselves. And we're going to try to attend an event this year in 2024. So that's our goal for this year. So they, they're a big organization and national organization, but this particular group is Libyan India.

Mandriatta is the president of the NAWIC. I want to say in Maryland, I want to say it's Maryland. Um, you might be right. It might be Metro Washington. It could be

[00:21:23] **Aileen Fuchs:** Metro Washington. She's real

[00:21:24] **Christi Powell:** close. She actually came and met you that day for lunch, Eileen, when I got to meet you too. Anyway, really excited about that.

Really excited about getting our young girls to see what's going on at the National Building Museum. We think that's going to be a real game changer for them to see that building, to see what's going on. Whether it be, I don't, I don't know which event in particular we're going to try to attend together, but it just them seeing the majesty of that building is going to be a game changer for those young girls.

[00:21:58] **Aileen Fuchs:** We just brought in a group of women, young women, rising leaders in the International Masonry Institute, 24 women that came in. And we have this incredible, we also are a collecting institution. We have a, an incredible brick collection. And so. We got them to come in and they got to, you know, check out the collection and see what we do.

And then talk, I told them about my story and everyone was just like, Oh my, I can't even believe this. And you know, it's just, it was just, it's amazing to watch that those light bulbs go off or they kind of, they see us. Yeah. So what are your

[00:22:25] **Christi Powell:** goals and aspirations for the National Building Museum? I'm, we're gonna, we're gosh, we could talk forever.

What are your goals and aspirations for the museum? How can we help you? Get more word out, obviously having you on the show today is probably going to help get some word out right to all the women that listen to our podcast and men, um, and organizations. But also when you're answering that question, Throw in a few things that you'd like to see for the next generation to, to be looking towards for the museum.

What, what are your aspirations for both? Where, where do you see the museum going? And what would you like to see, but also how would you like the next generations to see the museum in the future?

[00:23:10] **Aileen Fuchs:** I think all of that probably wraps around the word of, of relevance. You know, I, I'd like to see, I'd like to, you know, I'd like to lead the museum into increasingly national prominence and, and relevance and, and really be seen as that, as that institution that, you know, if you are interested in designing construction, you know, the National Building Museum.

Yeah. Full stop. You know, like, and, and, and if you are a emerging leader to an established leader, you support the museum. Full stop. Mm-Hmm. . Because, because it's you, you just see it that way. And so. With that comes a huge accountability that I put on myself then to, to deserve that, that relevance, you know, and I think that we're doing that in a really methodical way.

You know, we've had a, we've looked at our audiences from a bunch of different layers. And I think on our family audience between Brick City, which you had mentioned Brick City is the Lego based exhibition, um, this building story is one of the things that we're doing. We have that family audience. And then, um, We have another initiative called future cities, where we have that has a whole bunch of expressions coming out over the next 3 years in terms of really looking at that at.

The future of our vibrant urban spaces across the country, and then a 3rd tier is construction innovation. So we have a, we have a, um. A design concept right now for a construction innovation space. Um, and that's something I think that would be incredibly exciting to work with you all on and to work with any and all young women on, you know, like this is a space that's super, to me, it's like we're the national building museum.

We have, there's a couple of things that we just should have there. And one of those should be a dedicated space. That's about the incredible innovations happening across the industry and make it be better. Exciting and palpable and

accessible to somebody who may be stumbled upon it as we kind of have to do that.

And then and also very, very useful for, you know, for other sorts of like Tourette's or thoughts. But I think that would that would be that's really on us. So I think to attract more people in different ways to understand the pathways within these industries that are really exciting, really relevant and are going to be.

Completely stabilizing and satisfying for you as an individual in your life, you know, for women. And I think part of that also across the board, like I hear this a lot, it's just the, it can't be architecture over here and construction over here. Right, I agree. Like, like

[00:25:25] **Christi Powell:** that is not

[00:25:26] **Aileen Fuchs:** to come together. And it's shocking how much sometimes it's not, and everybody's trying to sort of, um, Solve it in these, like, siloed ways.

And so, you know, where can the museum also be helpful bringing in the bringing those voices and into conversation, I think would be really exciting. And I also think the museum and we, we, we can't be shy from. Tackling big social issues and, and really putting those, those front and center. You know, we, we just, we did a big exhibit about the border wall.

Now that's a political issue as a built environment store, we're looking at prison design, we're looking, we're doing things that are like, I think are going to be. Cutting edge and, you know, allows, allows us to be sort of responsive to the biggest things that are touching all of our lives right now. So I guess that's, that's what I'd like to see us do is really, I think that's a good vision.

Yeah. That's a great vision. It is. Yeah.

[00:26:22] **Angela Gardner:** Lofty one, but you can do it. Yeah. What can we

[00:26:25] **Aileen Fuchs:** do to help? Yeah. I mean, thank you again for inviting me. I have to say in my head from the first time I went to the International Builder Show, which I hope I will see you guys both at. Yes, I will be there. Yay. Yay. It was two years ago.

And there was, you know, I was kind of going around the floor a lot and meeting so, meeting the real builders across our country, right? The salt

[00:26:49] **Christi Powell:** of the earth is what a lot I would

[00:26:51] **Aileen Fuchs:** say 75 percent of them had no idea what the National Building Museum was. And when I said, when I, when I was able to kind of concisely say what we are, Everybody, it was the sentiment.

They were like, Oh, I didn't know we, we had a museum and that almost like I could, I'm like, that's it. That's it. It is. That's what, that's what I want you to think. I want you to understand. I want you anytime you want to bring your kids to Washington DC over the summer to, you know, to come to this museum because I'm going to be, you're going to be welcomed.

It's going to be at a celebration of what you do. And so I guess it's just, you know, helping us get that, get that word out there and keep doing our part to establish that trust and, and be that, be that place and just send it to anybody and everybody, you know, there. Yeah.

[00:27:30] **Christi Powell:** Okay. We can do

[00:27:32] **Aileen Fuchs:** that.

[00:27:34] **Angela Gardner:** We can do it.

[00:27:36] **Christi Powell:** Yes, thank you for being on. We really appreciate you today. Let our audience know. How do they get involved with the museum? How do they get involved with you? How do they find you? How do they support you? So, if our listeners have access to resources, capital, you know, ways to bring millions of people to look at the building museum.

Have a vacation. Go there, go there, visit.

[00:27:59] **Aileen Fuchs:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yes. Well, I mean the, our, our website is easy. mbm.org, that's National Building Museum. So that's always a good, a good start. But also, you know, I'm not shy. My, my email is afus@mbm.org, like you and she does answer it. Reach, reach out, I mean, reach out to, to us.

Um, come at 10 we're, when we are open, Thursday to Monday from, from 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM So come visit, come see what we're doing. We're doing

something. Super cool and fun this summer that I, that I can't say what we're doing, but it's so wildly amazing. Uh, think about world record breaking wink. Nice. So there's going to be lots of opportunities like, you know, come join our mailing list and see what we're doing.

Come visit us. Love it.

[00:28:41] **Christi Powell:** Yep. Thank you so much for being on and sharing the wonderful things that you're doing for our industry. We're really appreciate it. Thank you. Thank you.

Well, that's all for this episode. Thank you so much for listening to the Women Talk Construction Podcast with your hosts, Christy Powell and Angela Gardner. See you next time. Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>