



The American Institute of Architects

AIA Michigan
4219 Woodward Ave.
Suite 205
Detroit, MI 48201

T (313) 965-4100

www.aiami.com

Late this summer, I learned that a dear friend was diagnosed with cancer. She's only a year older than I, and one of my oldest friends. The prognosis is a middling one – they caught it on the early side, and it seems to be responding to chemo well, but it is a rare and aggressive type. She is on round two of chemo; I don't know how many more rounds she has to go. Whatever the case, she will have to be aware and take precautions for the rest of her life. Any time that we're made aware of death through news like this, it makes life that much more poignant. The little things seem big and meaningful. And naturally, it makes one look at one's own life.

My firm, Quinn Evans Architects, was started by Mike Quinn and Dave Evans in 1984 with offices in Ann Arbor and DC. Just 14 years later, Dave Evans died of a heart attack. Lucky for us he and Mike had attended an AIA event about succession planning early in their careers. Nearly from the start they were developing leaders to fill the gap behind them. They set up guidelines for how to bring shareholders in, and set when people need to start selling them to guarantee leadership turnover. Their foresight prepared the firm to weather the storm not only Evans's untimely passing, but successive leadership. We're now on the third generation and preparing the fourth, and have grown to six offices with about 180 staff.

I mention all this because I heard another startling statistic on the news the other day: more than a quarter-million Americans turn 65 every month. Combine this with the fact that the average age of AIA members is 54, and I'm pretty sure that a large number of firm principals and leaders are in that retirement range. Will their firms survive the transition? Maybe. But if they don't have a succession plan, the odds likely decrease. We humans are not very good at looking ahead and envisioning a time when we aren't around. Lack of a succession plan can have wide-ranging ripple effects in a firm, especially loss of talent as people seek advancement, more stability, or better opportunities from a firm that is growing and planning rather than avoiding the hard topics. Making a good succession plan is difficult; it takes time and money and a willingness to have awkward conversations. Yet the process is absolutely necessary to keep a firm going.

As I write this, my husband and I have the movie 'Doctor Strange' on in the background. We've seen it several times so we can ignore it and do our work, looking up only at favorite scenes. This is one of mine, where the Ancient One has been gravely hurt, and she and Doctor Strange are talking to each other in the spirit dimension, watching lighting spread across the sky in slow motion:

Dr. Stephen Strange: I'm not ready.

The Ancient One: No one ever is. We don't get to choose our time. Death is what gives life meaning. To know your days are numbered. Your time is short.

Make your days left on this earth worth it. Make a plan for the future.

Onward and upward,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kristen Nyht".

Kristen Nyht, AIA, AICP, LEED AP