

Marsha Maytum, S.F. architect who used design to nurture humanity, dies at 69

By John King

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[Marsha Maytum](#), a low-key local architect whose work spoke volumes about how design can nurture a more humane society, died on Feb. 10, in San Francisco, of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. She was 69.

The firm she co-founded in 2001, [Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects](#), focuses on buildings that serve varied populations in multiple ways — from more than a dozen affordable housing complexes to civic structures and such cultural destinations as the Bay Area Discovery Museum, tucked into the Marin Headlands near the Golden Gate Bridge.

As significant as any single building was Maytum's determined advocacy among other architects on such topics as sustainable design, and the model she presented as a woman sharing the helm of an office so well regarded that, in 2017, it was named the firm of the year by the American Institute of Architects.

"You can build a building one at a time and, of course, they have impact," Maytum commented in 2022 on the podcast "Design the Future." "We think the impact you can have beyond the property line of your buildings is equally, if not more, significant."

Colleagues praise a friend and coworker who never sought the limelight, but was tireless in aiding younger architects and listening to concerns — justified or not — raised by neighbors worried about change in their midst.

"Her kindness radiated from her," recalled Stacy Williams, executive director of the San Francisco chapter of the American Institute of Architects. "Her generosity with her time, her mentoring and kindness ... everything she did was gracious and so thoughtful."

Such largesse isn't always the case in a profession where the phrase "starchitect" only recently has gone out of vogue.

"She was always encouraging, always supportive," recalled Vanna Whitney, a principal at Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects, who joined the firm in 2005 after being impressed by the idealistic aspect of the work by Maytum and her partners. "She always was the one to say, 'We can build a new kind of firm.'"

The ever affable Maytum played down the strife that can be part of local decision-making, as when her design for a new branch library in North Beach on Columbus Avenue was attacked by opponents who tried to claim that its nondescript predecessor was a precious

architectural landmark. “That’s one of the challenges of working in the Bay Area. We call it hyper-democracy, because everybody has a voice,” she told Architectural Record last year. “But learning about all the different viewpoints, and understanding how they relate, or don’t, is what makes this work super interesting.”

The library that opened in 2014 shows the humanism connecting all of Maytum’s work. The contemporary flatiron with its long wedge shape is straightforward on the exterior but inside, there are light-drenched views of cable cars on one side and the abundantly landscaped Joe DiMaggio Playground on the other. Patrons are immersed in the city, even as Maytum dedicated the glassy southern prow to a reading nook where they could immerse themselves in books as well.

Maytum also had a particular feel for historic restoration, putting old buildings to use in new eras.

As far back as the mid-1990s, before Leddy Maytum Stacy was founded, she led the design effort in San Francisco’s Presidio to convert a dozen hospital buildings from the 1890s into the Thoreau Center for Sustainability, an immaculate effort in historic preservation that far exceeded so-called “green building” standards for the era and now is home to 60 nonprofits, many with an ecological bent.

“We’re always trying to make each design solution solve several problems at once,” Maytum said of another restoration project, which [transformed a 1912 pier at Fort Mason](#) into a seductively austere home for the (now closed) San Francisco Art Institute. Some of this traces back to the University of Oregon, where Maytum — who was born in San Francisco in 1954 and grew up in Los Altos — attended architecture school after having her love for the craft ignited by glimpsing the Taj Mahal bathed in moonlight on a family trip at the age of 15. Several of her professors were architects beginning to explore the design ramifications of what it meant to design with an eye to protecting the earth. In a 2017 interview, Maytum commented how she took from her studies “a deep understanding of environmental design and the importance of working with nature.”

Maytum gained something else from Oregon: a lifelong personal and professional relationship with Bill Leddy, a fellow architecture student. The couple married in 1978 and moved to the Bay Area, getting jobs at different firms but eventually uniting at the small firm of Tanner VanDine and, in 2001, deciding with fellow architect Richard Stacy to create a practice devoted to what Maytum often called “mission-driven work.”

Stacy put it another way this month: “We decided we liked community based and nonprofit clients better than developer clients, frankly.”

Stacy first met Maytum when she was hired in 1982 by Tanner Vandine, where he already worked.

“I was incredibly impressed at how *together* she was, organized and efficient,” Stacy said. “The office was not like that before.”

As the years went on, the honors mounted: Maytum was elected to the College of Fellows of the American Institute of Architects in 2001, a coveted designation, and her work in sustainable architecture earned so many awards that it was no surprise when, in 2019, she was selected to chair the institute’s Committee on the Environment. There was the [firm of the year award](#) in 2017, all the more impressive given that the firm’s size has never topped 38 people.

Through it all, Maytum patiently wrestled with clients and contractors while being open to whatever request for assistance came her way: “Any (design) jury anybody asked her to sit on, she would do it,” Williams recalled.

All this changed in the last half of 2020, when Maytum was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a debilitating disease that slowly takes control of a person’s body and slowly takes away the ability to move or speak and, eventually, breathe.

She continued working during its early stages, but in 2022 she shifted to the role of principal emeritas. Even then, Maytum would offer design tips and advice to coworkers while battling the disease — even showing up in her wheelchair last year to cheer on other firm employees during a fundraising bike ride in Napa Valley.

“This disease really was the ultimate test of her character and, as always, she brought her best self,” Stacy said. “The spark was still there.”

Marsha Maytum is survived by her husband, Bill Leddy; daughter Anna Maytum Leddy; and son Andrew Maytum Leddy; their spouses; and two grandchildren.