Introducing the College of Built Environments
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Student working on circular trellis of the World Cultural Kitchen, a unique meeting place for visitors designed by CBE students for the UW Farm.
The built environment is responsible for producing 42% of the world's annual global CO₂ emissions, making it one of the most powerful influences — positive and negative — on the planet's most urgent environmental and social problems. To reimagine and reconstruct our world, new tools, frameworks, and perspectives are critical.

The College of Built Environments (CBE) at the University of Washington is one of the very few institutions globally where architecture, construction management, urban design and planning, landscape architecture, and real estate reflect the industry’s interconnection within a unified academic structure. As our students, the future leaders in these disciplines, learn and grow side by side, they are well-positioned to play pivotal roles influencing the directions of climate change, economic prosperity and human health.
Meet Dean Cheng

Renée Cheng, FAIA, DPACSA, is a nationally renowned professor in the Department of Architecture and John and Rosalind Jacobi Family Endowed Dean of the College of Built Environments at the University of Washington. Educated at Harvard College and Harvard Graduate School of Design, Cheng received her first teaching award while still a graduate student at Harvard and went on to be recognized with numerous national awards for education excellence based on innovative and out-of-the-box approaches that integrate teaching, learning and research. Dean Cheng began her academic career at the University of Arizona and the University of Michigan. Before coming to the UW in 2019, she served as head of the School of Architecture and associate dean of research at the University of Minnesota.

Cheng has pioneered research surrounding the intersection of design and emerging technologies including work on industry adoption within the built environments of Integrated Project Delivery (IPD), Building Information Modeling (BIM) and Lean. She led the research team and co-authored the AIA Guides for Equitable Practice released in 2022.

Tapped by President Cauce to lead the UW Board of Deans and Chancellors University Initiatives group, she has been using design and systems-based thinking techniques to develop pathways to transform the ways that schools and campuses work together on “wicked problems” such as climate solutions, behavioral health and equitable access to technology.

Cheng teaches classes on leadership and collaboration, has active research on how integrated project teams can be fostered and measured and is a frequent speaker on emerging technologies and the built environment.
CBE’s Approach to Innovation

Our ability to thrive will depend upon a new generation of urban professionals — architects, designers, planners, builders, developers and city leaders — who can respond to the changing needs of our urban populations while developing entirely new ways to imagine the cities of tomorrow.

Solving complex urban problems requires innovation from a new generation of leaders and collaborators. Academic institutions are designed to provide continuity and build on tradition — a structure that works well for incremental change. At CBE, we set the stage for transformative change by leveraging design, critical and systems-based thinking, strategically flipping traditional scripts and promoting intercultural fluency.

► Design thinking can be fostered by valuing ambiguity and seeking both/and solutions instead of either/or. There is a long tradition of design thinking in our fields, some adapted from related disciplines; we apply these principles to built environments.
► “Flipping the script” describes our approach to switching up the interpersonal dynamics within academia. Shaking up the typical relationships between students and faculty, academics and professionals, or junior faculty and senior faculty creates space for fresh ways of seeing old problems. This powerful tool is currently being used for only a few programs, but could be expanded.
► Another mechanism we deploy to increase innovation is intercultural fluency — the ability to work across differences. By respecting disciplinary cultures and lived experiences, we welcome diverse perspectives that open new ways of thinking.

CBE’s Strategic Framework

Two years ago, we completed an ambitious strategic framework. The planning process started in 2020 and was elongated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The change of schedule yielded an unexpected benefit by giving us time to engage more than 80% of faculty, staff, and student leaders and incorporate learnings from the new post-pandemic normal. Completing the process while classes at the UW were still fully remote helped us understand the importance of non-academic supports such as mental health and advising, and deepened our appreciation for the value of in-person hands-on learning. The resulting framework articulated three foundational pillars — Collaboration and Impact, Bold Thought Leadership and Equitable and Just Practices. We see them as interdependent since interdisciplinary collaboration is required in order to align our work on the shared goal of creating a more just and beautiful world.
DEGREES

7
Undergraduate
- Bachelor of Arts in Architecture
- Bachelor of Arts in Architectural Design
- Bachelor of Arts in Community, Environment & Planning
- Bachelor of Science in Construction Management
- Bachelor of Landscape Architecture (BLA)
- Bachelor of Science in Real Estate
- Dual Degree in Architecture and Construction Management

9
Minors & Certificates
Minors:
- Minor in Architecture Studies
- Minor in Construction Management
- Minor in Urban Design & Planning
- Real Estate Undergraduate Minor
- Urban Ecological Design Minor
Certificate Programs
- Building Information Modeling “BIM” Certificate
- Construction Management Certificate
- Certificate in Historic Preservation
- Certificate in Urban Design
- Facility Management Certificate
- Graduate Certificate in Housing Studies
- Graduate Certificate in Real Estate
- Virtual Modeling for Digital Fabrication “VMDF” Certificate

11
Graduate
- Master of Architecture (MArch)
- Master of Landscape Architecture (MLA)
- Master of Science in Architecture (Design Technology)
- Master of Science in Architecture (History & Theory)
- Master of Science in Construction
- Master of Science in Real Estate
- Master of Urban Planning (MUP)
- Online Master of Infrastructure Planning and Management (MIPM)
- Online Master of Science in Construction Management
- Dual MArch-MLA
- Dual MLA-MU Management

2
Doctoral
- Ph.D. in the Built Environment
- Ph.D. in Urban Design & Planning
Our College at a Glance

1,392
Total students

903 undergraduates

489 graduates

145 faculty.

$8-10M average annual research funding secured.

21.6% are first-generation.

11.8% are eligible for the Pell Grant.

18.8% hold the status of underrepresented minority.

Students by department
- Architecture
- Construction Management
- Landscape Architecture
- Real Estate
- Urban Design & Planning

be.uw.edu
MEASURABLE SUCCESS FROM FACULTY AND STUDENT WORK

Students Unleash Untapped Property Value

Since 2019, the College of Built Environments’ Nehemiah Studio has been focused on developing, designing, and supporting real estate, urban design, and community development strategies for Black churches and institutions in Seattle, in partnership with the community-based Nehemiah Initiative.

Working in interdisciplinary teams, students were challenged to speculate about how to envision, design, and finance the “highest and best Beloved Community use” for Black churches and their properties in Seattle’s Central District and the Columbia City neighborhood. As a result, the city of Seattle, based on proof-of-concept shown in our studio work, passed an ordinance appropriate to the density needed to make faith-based development financially feasible.

Furthermore, Nehemiah Initiative leader Bishop Garry Tyson frequently writes recommendation letters for students, fostering strong student-community relationships and highlighting the importance of academic-community partnerships in addressing contemporary challenges. Pastors note that congregants are open and engaged by student questions and report increased awareness of the financial potential of development.

The Nehemiah Studio has won multiple awards for its curriculum design and positive community impact, with its most recent achievement being the prestigious 2023 METROPOLIS Planet Positive Awards, awarded to the studio’s students.
DeJai Mitchell, ’21, (middle) and her classmates worked with architect Donald Kin (right) and the Rev. George Davenport to craft a plan for Peoples Institutional Baptist Church. She later earned a degree in urban design and planning. Photo by Matt Hagen.

RESULTS

$1M
gifts and grants secured to support the community based Nehemiah Seattle non-profit.

13
churches in the Central District have undergone feasibility studies with our students.

4
churches have entered the pre-development phase with professionals.

1,256
affordable homeownership opportunities proposed.
Celebrating Gender Diversity in Construction Management

In the traditionally male-dominated construction industry, women make up only 10.9% of the workforce. In its academic realm, about 13% of students are women and only 25% of the faculty. The College of Built Environments surpasses the national average in representation of women faculty and students.

Years of dedicated recruitment and equitable support for teaching and research have empowered our women faculty members. This aligns with student feedback, highlighting the importance of role models in fostering their connection to the field. Darlene Septelka, an Assistant Professor in Construction Management, exemplifies this with her fifty-year journey of challenging industry norms.
22% of our Construction Management undergraduate students are women.

42% of our Construction Management in-person graduate students are women.

44% of our Construction Management faculty are women.

30% of our Construction Management affiliate and instructors are women.
Student research advances understanding of wood’s environmental footprint

At the College of Built Environments, our students don’t just learn in classrooms; they also put their knowledge to work in the real world. Graduate students like Chuou Zhang, who graduated in 2022 with a Master’s in Architecture and a Bachelor’s in Construction Management, are doing important research that helps nationally renowned companies.

In 2021, Zhang joined the Applied Research Consortium (ARC), a program that connects our graduate students with local firms and faculty for research projects that directly relate to what these companies are working on. The ARC provides students valuable research, practice and education experience, and it leverages research, community and creativity to achieve progress and resilience in our fields and cities.

Zhang worked with ZGF Architects to improve their tool called Upstream. This tool helps people in the building industry figure out the environmental impact of using wood materials to reduce carbon emissions. Zhang, along with Assistant Professor of Architecture Tomás Méndez Echenagucia and Associate Professor of Environmental and Forest Sciences Indroneil Ganguly, made three key improvements: they added a way to track carbon emissions generated by transporting wood from forests to processing plant and job sites, they studied...
how cities handle wood waste and they looked at the designs of mass timber buildings to see how they affect carbon emissions. Zhang’s research was chosen to be developed further with the help of one of the College’s premier research groups, Carbon Leadership Forum (CLF). The CLF provided support and resources to help the team refine their methods and work with other researchers and stakeholders.

Thanks to her work with ZGF Architects, Zhang gained valuable experience dealing with important environmental issues. Her research not only improved her knowledge but also provided practical ways to design buildings that are more eco-friendly. She explained in her final report that understanding the details of how wood is used, whether it can be reused and how it’s managed at the end of its life helps us see the true impact of a building. This information allows designers to make more sustainable choices, ultimately helping the environment.
Connecting to the coastline:
How CBE is helping a local community prepare for a tsunami

Over the past six years, a UW research team led by Dan Abramson, an associate professor in the College of Built Environments, has been collaborating with coastal Washington communities and Tribes to prepare for potential tsunamis triggered by earthquakes.

During a two-day workshop, UW team members, including urban planning students, faculty, tsunami experts, and earthquake geologists, engaged with residents of the coastal town of Westport using an approach called “appreciative inquiry.” This approach helped participants identify shared values, map assets, and discuss how to protect these values from vulnerabilities like tsunamis, land subsidence, or sea-level rise.

Through this collaborative process, the community identified local priorities and strategies, such as a high-ground trail network, bridge reinforcement, ferry connections, historic structure retrofitting, oyster bed restoration, and relocating critical facilities.

The UW team made recommendations, including building versatile vertical evacuation structures, improving evacuation route awareness, and proposing adaptive urban design and land use policies.

Incorporating hazard mitigation into Westport’s comprehensive plan, as proposed by a UW urban planning graduate student, was approved by the Westport City Council. The city now considers various hazards before approving new construction or capital projects.

While the UW’s work in Westport is significant, it is just one part of broader research and collaboration efforts along the coastline. Nearby, the Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe partners with the College of Built Environments to plan for sea-level rise and tsunamis through an initiative called “Coastlines – Camera – Action.”
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The College of Built Environments traces its history to 1914, with the establishment of the Department of Architecture. From 1957 to 2009, the College was known as the College of Architecture and Urban Planning. The formation of the College of Built Environment in 2009 acknowledged that built environments are intricate interconnections between constructed and natural worlds, with profound impacts on society.
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- 1914: Department of Architecture established.
- 1933: Department of Urban Planning established.
- 1967: Department of Urban Design and Planning established.
- 1969: Department of Landscape Architecture established.
- 1972: Gould Hall opened including a 6,000-square-foot wood and metal shop, a photo lab and studio.
- 1981: Department of Construction Management established.
- 2002: Runstad Center for Real Estate Studies established.
- 2003: Ph.D. in the Built Environment established.
- 2009: College of Built Environments established.
- 2012: Washington Center for Real Estate Research (WCRER) moved from Washington State University to the University of Washington.
- 2015: Urban @ UW launched.
- 2016: Livable City Year program launched.
- 2017: Runstad Department of Real Estate established.
- 2021: 
  - Applied Research launched.
  - Aspire Internship established.
  - CBE’s 5 year strategic framework adopted.
  - Youths in the Built Environment launched.
- 2022: 
  - CBE Interdisciplinary cohort join faculty.
  - John and Rosalind Jacobi Family Endowed Deanship created.
  - Mentorship program pilot launched.
  - Office of Student Services and Associate Dean for Students established.