

Diversity in the Workplace

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The pursuit of equality for women in architecture is an uphill, demanding, slow task, lit by individual triumphs but by any conventional measures not unreasonably described as thankless.

Take the statistics. In 2004, a career progression survey of women members of the Australian Institute of Architects (formerly preceded by Royal) investigated why “approximately 40 per cent of architecture students are female yet the number of registered female directors of firms is around 1 per cent”.

This still definitive study from then Queensland University of Technology’s Dr Paula Whitman generated considerable interest. Almost half the women members nationwide responded – almost half of whom again had children with 70 per cent saying this had had a significant or very significant impact on their careers.

Along with family commitments, other career barriers included poor self-image and self-confidence, poor relationship with the industry and its “blokey” culture and lack of professional support, with employers marginalising their work type. More than one in four women architects turned down promotions, mainly because of different career aspirations, including the belief that promotion would not increase their work satisfaction, and placing personal happiness and a balanced life before monetary reward as a measure of success.

The quality of projects completed was paramount, far ahead of the professional gold of publication and public recognition; there are also fewer women than men registered architects, fewer project award winners and fewer (infinitesimal) sitting on boards. The findings mirrored those from a University of West England study in 2002 that long, family-unfriendly working hours, unequal pay, stressful conditions, glass ceilings and more job satisfaction elsewhere were reasons why women go from being a third of architecture students to only 13 per cent of the workplace.

And back in 1986 an Australian Institute of Architects' report on women in architecture to the Australian Human Rights Commission cited the familiar needs: increased participation, equal opportunity and public awareness of women's contribution to the profession.

So the problems traverse countries and decades. Nevertheless, spurred by Whitman's research, then New South Wales Chapter president Caroline Pidcock gave her 2004 award to the most proactive firm in promoting women's workplace equality. Eight firms of all sizes nominated. They addressed Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) employment areas – as relevant as ever – such as flexible and part-time work, recruitment and promotion, work culture, career development and training, and maternity, parenting and childcare. The winner, Hassell, one of Australia's largest firms, made a poster of its female staff for the international Diversecity project that was touring Sydney at the time, increasing visibility if only to the select few visiting the exhibition.

“Did my President's award have a long-lasting impact?” Pidcock wonders. “I think it played a part in awareness raising of how few women are in positions of power in the profession. However, I am not sure the situation is any better now than it was at that time.”

Pidcock has continued to build up her practice and is director of Pidcock Architecture + Sustainability, giving regular seminars and interviews, writing articles, and becoming one of Australia's best known sustainability architects. Such a profile is unusual for women architects – and, it must be said, for men too.

Talking to women architects the work practice issues and attempted solutions remain the same. The women were aged from 30s upward, worked for large corporate practices to running their own business to concentrating on university teaching. They were a mix of mothers (with young children) and non-mothers; all had partners.

National legislation has introduced changes. For example, new national employment standards extend from 12 to 24 months the unpaid paternity leave that employees can request. Paid parental leave, at the time of writing, was proposed by both the Labor Federal Government and Liberal/ National Opposition, though the rates would be different and the whole exercise had become a political battle with the former favouring public funding, the latter a controversial tax on employers. Meanwhile, the pay disparity continues, with the Australian Council of Trade Unions showing that women in full-time employment receive

82.5 per cent of men's pay.

There is no conclusive evidence of such a gap for architects and the same pay for the same work is a stated practice, but a lot of the work and the positions are not identical. For instance, architect Annie Tennant's research for an international property and development company into Australian and US work practices shows that women tend to be in certain types of roles and departments, pink-collar roles in marketing, design, administration. At the other end of the scale, EOWA women in leadership figures indicate that in 2008 women were 5.7 per cent (or precisely 4 in number) members of commercial and professional services boards, one of the lowest representations of industry groups.

"Looking across the country and internationally, it seems that government initiatives such as paid maternity leave and quotas for women on boards (as in Norway) are required to have really meaningful and long-lasting impact," Pidcock says. "It is a pity that it takes regulation of such issues for companies to realise the great advantage of enabling the women of their workforce to realise their full potential. As Norway found, doing so has proven to benefit both the women and the companies."

Not all is doom and gloom. As part of its drive to reflect a new face for the architecture profession as "dynamic, young, innovative and green", the Institute's 2009-10 national president, Melinda Dodson, a principal at GHD Architecture and, turned 40 in November 2009, the youngest president ever, is only the second woman to hold that position. Louise Cox was the first and is now the second woman president of the International Union of Architects. Visits to various relevant ministries, she says, have resulted in the countries being "most hospitable, respectful and treated me equally".

Promotion, however, is possibly the greyest area in the retinue of work practices that could push equality. Although merit is the abiding principle, if someone "is, say, working four hours a day one day a week, it's hard to bridge that gap and make them spokesperson or stakeholder or senior representative of a firm," says Laraine Sperling, who is responsible for marketing and strategic resources at PTW Architects and also chairs the Institute's large practices human resources group.

Even where flexibility in the workplace is apparently accepted, Tennant's research revealed that the "very good examples of job share, phased retirement, telecommuting, general flexibility etc within our business (are) dependent on role, manager and business unit".

Others also referred to the importance of circumstances with unofficial examples of professional development, for example, during skill shortages when there may be the chance to become an acting project manager or, during the economic downturn when staff within large practice group firms, who may have run out of work in one firm, were swapped into another firm for a while to keep them employed. There is no part-time culture in America, Tennant says, suffering, as it does, “from the belief that part-time positions are equated to a lack of dedication or interest from the employee in his/her career”.

And even with the support of a partner and a work routine that allows half-days in the office and going to the occasional conference and event, women still tend to do “the lion’s share” of childcare, as happens with innovarchi’s Stephanie Smith. She also finds that people notice her male business partner more than her and “think the firm is his show”. People’s reactions are important. Hilary Spiers and husband have “similarly responsible jobs” and “he feels at times that when he covers a day when our child may be sick, that the other men in his office judge him a little as to why I am not doing it.”

Firms that see supporting a woman as a “no brainer”, Tennant says, more often than not are already “highly regarded for their treatment of staff/work life balance”. Exceptional firms – exceptional women. Spiers is in the Sydney office of Suters Architects and the only female principal there. She feels she has “become a role model to a lot of the younger women in the practice unbeknownst to myself.” Jacqui Urford, associate director at HBO+EMTB, has sat on Institute committees, written architecture books, had projects short-listed for awards, had repeat clients, travelled widely, been to some great restaurants, restored cars – and more in the last six years. She also admits that “her partner refers to himself as the weekend bloke, the HBO widower or widower of any current project that I am working on”.

This is the nub of it all – the long hours and commitment and endless demands of the job and client, where part-time work is seen as disruptive, or realistically, as an architect with small children who teaches at university and has childcare options, says, “not many jobs can be done successfully in two or three days shifts. Many jobs require phone calls and follow up measures particularly when dealing with builders and/contractors.”

And with the recent baby boom, Urford has noticed that while many women have initially returned to work part-time, they often leave to set up on their own or do government work.

Driven by design, wanting to improve on the last project, or work on larger projects (usually

when working in a large firm), or to be invited to projects rather than seek work are all common motivations. “Trying to get an architect not to work back is like telling a dog not to bark,” Sperling says. “I’ve learnt just to make it easier for them, provide them with meals, comfort.”

Around the time of the award I wrote in Australia’s *Architectural Review*: “Today’s 24/7, global, socioeconomic climate promotes hard work. An ageing population prompts the federal government to urge us to work on and on. Add to this architecture’s technical complexity and labour-of-love tendency towards long hours for poor remuneration. There has not been a better moment for the profession to make a choice, to be cutting edge and embrace equality and equity issues, or to stick with the status quo.”

Dodson believes the project architect role is pivotal and often seen as a crucial step to becoming a director but falling when architects are in their late 20s and 30s and when many women are having children or facing other caring and lifestyle responsibilities. How can these be reconciled? Can human resources policy be shaped to improve the retention of women architects? she has asked.

Are we stuck with the chicken and egg dilemma: do women set up on their own because they have always aspired to this or because they feel being in a firm as currently run and managed has limited their control and opportunities?

Perhaps it is intangibles that will eventually make things clearer. Debra McKendry-Hunt is director of McKendry Hunt Architects, some two hours drive north of Sydney. She mentions the importance of supporting other women, recognising efficiency rather than long hours and of having persuasion skills as potential methods of dealing with gender issues. “Architecture is all about communication,” she says.

Dodson agrees. Having an influence may well reflect your personal style and ethics, seniority and power base, she says. Though not her own expression, she subscribes to the view, “No one cares what you think and know, unless they think and know you care”.

“It’s about strength of purpose, not force of will,” she says. And that is something to take with us whatever the size of firm.

National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC)

International Women's Day Scholarship

The National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC) began an International Women's Day Scholarship in 2009 to support women in industry to do original research and publish it, as the association says, "to enable positive change in the industry". Sharing the inaugural prize of \$16,000 (funded by NAWIC and an auction from a corporate supporter) were a senior structural engineer at Arup, Ruth Kestermann, who looked at the sustainability of affordable housing in Australia with case studies of community and public housing from Brazil and Sydney and Melbourne. She found that research in early design stages with residents themselves participating and stating their housing aspirations was crucial to a project's eventual success.

Painter and lecturer at a further education and technical college at Wollongong, south of Sydney, Fiona Shewring, was that year's other winner and she reviewed and compared Australian and American approaches to women entering the building and construction trades, looking at ways to increase this from the current paltry 1 per cent average representation. Familiarisation with trades, more information from schools and more time with fathers and male mentors were all recommendations.

The 2010 winner, Melonie Bayl-Smith, director of Liquid Architecture and a University of Technology Sydney architectural lecturer, plans to continue her work developing a core construction curriculum and teaching framework for Australian schools of architecture, including structure, materials and fabrication.

"Some current thinking concerns the need for formal internships accompanied by mentoring and registration programs and support services, ...there are also calls for introducing a professional year for graduates."

At its best, the filtering of the results of this type of industry research is a potential way for women to increase their presence, control and influence on the industry.

The Scholarships continue to be awarded.