

Architecture? That's nice, dear. You'll be good at designing kitchens. I do think a woman's touch is so important in the home."

As a student in the late '70s you became inured to the clichéd response to your chosen profession. Tutors (male) responded jovially that it made no difference, since builders saw all architects as girls anyway. And the old phallo-regime was huffing its last, so who cared?

Now, 25 years on, you scan the horizon in vain for this bright new world of gender equality. Australian women have been studying architecture for 100 years, and in significant numbers for the past 20.

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They are good, often brilliant, students. And yet, in the profession, they vanish without a bubble. Why?

Figures from the three schools of architecture at universities in Sydney show a remarkably consistent decline through the system. From first-year intakes of about 50 per cent, numbers drop to an average of 36 per cent female graduates in architecture over the past decade (1992-2001). The female proportion of registered architects in NSW stands at a pathetic 14 per cent, which halves again by the time architects reach the 55-65 age group – when architects traditionally do their best work.

A straw poll across eight of the largest Sydney practices – most of them employing about 30 per cent of women architects – reveals, again, a sad 14 per cent of female principals. And of those, roughly half dwell in the softer pocket, such as planning, heritage, interior design and management. In smaller practices, female principals are more common but tend overwhelmingly to practise in husband-wife partnerships, where gender roles re-engage and female partners, almost without exception, are seen as seconds.

It's the same across the globe. Husband-wife teams have proliferated since early last century, when the avant-garde included Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahoney, Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry, Alison and Peter Smithson. More recent celebrity partnerships include Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Andres Duany, Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio. Behind the scenes the women are as smart or smarter. Out front, though, the men sport the mantle of design genius.

OK, so most men are handmaidens, too, in architectural practice. But where are the exceptions?

There are no names to conjure with. Not one of the architects whom developers typically use to buy themselves pre-DA design cred; no Cox/Murcutt/Seidler-equivalent; not a single household name; not even a young Turk or two boasts a double-X chromosome. Globally, there are Zaha Hadid (London), Kazuyo Sejima (Tokyo), Gae Aulenti (Milan), and that's about it.

Is there something about architecture, the professional system or women themselves that feeds this imbalance? Can it be the same old tale of babies, on the one hand, discrimination on the other?

The data is sketchy. A new book,

Women Architects in Australia 1900-1950, by Julie Willis and Bronwyn Hanna, sets out to restore women's visibility in our architectural history. A curious blend of biography, analysis, oral history and polemic, *Women Architects* documents a number of predictable discriminations, including condescension from tutors, harassment from colleagues, unequal pay and official refusal to fete achievements.

Then there are the repeated disappointments of careers abandoned. Take the story of Doris Lewis, who, having completed her articles in Sydney about 1920, attended London's Architectural Association (AA), was accepted into the Royal British Institute of Architects (RIBA), won a travelling scholarship, the RIBA gold medal and worldwide acclaim. Then she married the charismatic principal of the AA, Howard Robertson, and ceased practice, focusing on interior design.

Being consciously non-evaluative, *Women Architects* focuses on the architects, rather than their work, sidestepping the central, perilous question of whether women architects are any good. Perhaps it is wise to do so, for here the story becomes murky.

Yet we have to ask whether there is something about women, innate or behavioural, that stops even talented designers succeeding? If male and female brains are different, is it down to nature or nurture? Are they capable of change?

Brains, it now seems clear, are gendered. As anyone who has tried to raise children free from gender stereotypes knows, boys and girls think differently from the outset. There are exceptions; but in general women excel naturally in continuity stuff: communicating, managing, multi-tasking and nurturing. Men do one-off, out-there things: innovation,



Anything but the kitchen sink

For there to be more practising female architects, and successful ones, writes Elizabeth Farrelly, the concept of "success" in architecture has to change.

single-focus, problem-resolution stuff. This is delicate ground, with facts outgunned by the rest, and research shrouded in politico-emotional fog – especially for those of us with decades invested in reviling D.H. Lawrence's dictum that "men do, women be".

In architecture, this inclination to be, rather than to do, locates women in process areas such as planning, teaching and project management, leaving men cradling the essential product. The trouble is, architecture

is product-oriented. It is also an inherently aggressive activity – not just in the daily grind of on-site builders and tradesmen, but in the act of building. The urge to dominate a chunk of land and a group of people by translating a mental event into physical fact is aggressive. It's a fight, and it can last for years. Decades even.

Not that women are aggression-free. On the whole, though, it doesn't come naturally. As Caroline Pidcock, second-ever female president of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) in NSW, remarks, "The profession recognises and rewards characteristics that are more male – aggression, ego, self-promotion, big-noting."

Melbourne architect Kerstin Thompson, another of the handful of female principals, is even more succinct: "There is a sense that high design only comes about through being an asshole."

But these are women in the vanguard of disproof regarding such dictums. "There are other ways of being effectual," says Thompson. "I think women make great architects, because there's so much of the multi-tasking that we do so well." And that may be right, but to some extent it involves redefining the word great.

It's not Frank Lloyd Wright stuff. No longer does being successful mean designing huge buildings, running huge practices, wearing the bow tie, strutting the boardroom, hogging the limelight. Women architects generally run modest practices (five to 10 people) and design modest buildings, mainly, but not solely, residential.

Thompson points out that in Melbourne, where the residential boom has brought high-rise projects to many smallish practices, having your own tower to design has become a sign of arrival. For her, though, success is not about size of the office or the project, but about the luxury to select projects that allow the development of ideas.

Pidcock, too, marches to her own drummer, pursuing environmental sustainability in favour of more mainstream success indicators like money and profile. Even Kim Crestani who, having run her own practice for 18 years, is one of Sydney's best-known female architects, agrees: "I don't want to be out in the foreground either."

Women aren't stupid. If we de-prioritise what they do well, they'll stop doing it. Make motherhood a societal liability (regardless of the personal delight) and – surprise – birth rates plummet. It's cause and effect stuff. For long-term survival of the planet, as well as the species, society needs women to succeed without becoming pseudo-men.

So the question becomes one of whether the system can change, or be changed, to reward female skill sets. There are signs of progress. This year's National Association of Women in Construction awards ceremony drew a thousand guests, from both genders. And the rapidly warming environmental imperative – desperately dependent on female planet-nurturing skills – may yet spawn systemic change.

But this is not something that a spot of mentoring or affirmative action is going to fix. It goes way deeper than that; all societies that have seriously valued women as women, we regard as primitive. No, real change will need some far more drastic prod. Motherhood itself may have to be endangered before we understand, with Barrie's Peter Pan, that "one girl is more use than 20 boys".

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Melbourne architect Kerstin Thompson's Drum house. Photo: Patrick Bingham-Hall