

Reflections on women in architecture

With an architectural career spanning 25 years, former NSW Chapter President and 2011 Marion Mahony Griffin Prize winner *Caroline Pidcock*, director of Pidcock - Architecture and Sustainability, reflects on the progress of women in the profession and the challenges still to be overcome.

“Small practice is a euphemism for not being able to make large to medium practice work.”

“It is not possible to work part-time on large projects.”

Statements such as these, which came recently from females interested in promoting women in architecture, cut to the heart of the problem of why our profession finds it difficult to truly recognise and retain women.

Survey after survey continue to find that women from all walks of life are disinclined to put up with ‘toxic’ work cultures or jobs that can be characterised by being under paid and over worked and that encourage them to disengage. If the flexibility, personal time and good work environments they value cannot be found, they leave.

Unfortunately, it seems that these unfriendly, unsupportive work cultures, which can occur in practices of any shape or size, are the very same work cultures that underpin what we recognise as success in architecture. Hence the current situation where there is a serious loss of experienced women working in the profession.

Most women architects seem to be found in small practices, government agencies and universities, where such a culture may be less prevalent. While I have found such work environments to be great and rewarding places to work, others do not necessarily regard them as successful career outcomes. Thus, the damaging imbalance in the profession remains.

As the Australian Human Rights Commission’s Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick notes:

“Flexible work is seen as a work practice for women

with young children, and a poor relation to real work that is full-time work... Men working differently is what’s going to bring about attitudinal change.”¹

Women in the workplace

Recruiting and retaining women workers makes financial sense. The Australian Stock Exchange (ASX) has mandated quotas for women on boards. This is not a feel-good thing, it is driven by the many reports demonstrating that companies with females on their boards consistently make more money than those that do not. This is affirmed in research from the US regarding company performance, as noted by Shelly Penn, National President of the Australian Institute of Architects, on the Parlour website.²

The retention of women also makes the most of our talent pool. For many, many years there have been equal numbers of women studying architecture at our universities with consistently excellent outcomes. How can we think it is okay to ‘lose’ this well (and expensively) trained talent pool from our profession? Imagine what practice might look like if we had found ways to keep this talent.

Holding on to female employees has the potential to extend and improve what we do. The reason companies with women in board positions prosper is usually that they are open to change and different ways of doing things; they celebrate diversity and bring their flexible approaches to the boardroom table.

Creating the change

“The real question is are we really ready to change the way we think about gender diversity and take a big-picture, bold-action approach, or will our conservative masculine culture prevail?”

Claire Braund, Executive Director, Women on Boards³

Workplaces in new professions – such as internet companies Google, Apple and Facebook – have developed ways of working and places for working that aim to provide the best opportunities for all staff to realise their potential and deliver their best. They are outcome orientated, not process driven.

Those who work longest and on the biggest projects are not the only ones who are recognised as valuable members of the team.

While architecture firms have been instrumental in delivering physical environments for such businesses, we do not seem to have learnt much along the way about the workplaces that occupy them.

This is particularly worrying for a profession that sees design as the solution for any number of problems.

“Architects as professionals must set their own house in order, be more socially entrepreneurial, and work harder and more creatively towards a more equitable and balanced work life for everyone. Women architects have been pioneers in this, and it’s time their contribution was better recognised.”⁴
Dr Naomi Stead, University of Queensland

In 2004, as NSW Chapter President, I decided to give my 2004 annual award to the practice doing the most to encourage women to stay and progress in the profession. Among a number of excellent entries from practices of all sizes, the winner was Hassell, which continues to support and celebrate its female employees in a wonderful range of interesting ways. However, as the general situation in the profession has not changed much since then, I am not sure the idea behind this award had the effect I had hoped for.

Perhaps we need a design competition to explore alternative ideas about what a better architectural workplace might be for both women and men. It will need a brief that encourages participants to consider a diverse range of ideas for ways of: working and collaborating; managing different-sized groups; co-locating or working apart; as well as the many new tools that can assist. This might be a way to start creatively working towards seriously addressing the issues we continue to identify as holding back our profession as a whole. ■■■

Caroline Pidcock

Footnotes:

1 Elizabeth Broderick, Men must close the gender gap, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 February 2012

2 Shelley Penn, Diverse paths, *Parlour*, 4 July 2012 <http://www.archiparlour.org/diverse-paths/>

3 Claire Braund, Looking at the big picture on gender diversity, *Women on Boards*, October 2010 http://www.womenonboards.org.au/pubs/articles/norway_bigpicture.htm

4 Naomi Stead, Redesigning practice, *Parlour*, 15 March 2012, <http://www.archiparlour.org/setting-our-own-house-in-order/>