

Yasmin Shariff 'Women can make it to the top but the exceptions mask a kernel of inequality and discrimination'

Blaming babes in arms is a standard knee-jerk response to why there aren't more women architects in positions of seniority in the profession. Our culture of the 'wrong sort' is endemic – leaves, snow, rain, wind – so could it be that women architects are having the wrong sort of babies?

According to the General Medical Council (GMC) women account for 44 per cent (93,623) of a total of 213,886 registered and licensed doctors in the UK ('The State of Medical Education and Practice in the UK 2012'). The Law Society reports that women make up 47 per cent (56,720) of a total of 121,933 solicitors with practicing certificates in England and Wales ('Trends in the Solicitors' Profession Annual Statistical Report 2011'). In contrast, we are a tiny profession – only 33,456 people are registered with the Architects Registration Board (ARB) and, of these, only 21 per cent (6,911) are women. As a western nation with strong equal opportunities legislation, and the sixth richest economy in the world, 21 per cent in the 21st century is a disgrace.

It is not all bad news, however. Multi-award-winning Alison Brooks' contribution to housing design has been deemed particularly worthy of celebration at a time when housing delivery in the UK has dropped to its lowest levels since the 1920s. In 2004 Zaha Hadid was the first woman to win the coveted Pritzker Architecture Prize. Juror and architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable said: 'Zaha Hadid is one of the most gifted practitioners of the art of architecture today ... There has been a consistently original and strong personal vision that has changed the way we see and experience space.' Added to these achievements, since September 2009 the RIBA has had two consecutive women presidents, Ruth Reed and Angela Brady; women are gaining equal access to education; and there are no longer concerns about the numbers graduating from architecture schools. Talented women can make it to the top. But these exceptions mask a sinister and rotten kernel of inequality and discrimination.

Any mention of the 2011 ARB statistic of 21 per cent immediately sends most architects (male and female) into denial and puts them on the defensive. Perhaps women are not as talented as men – or is it those wretched designer babies again? I had one myself. I remember the good old days of 1am, 3am, then 5am feeds – not to mention all those nappies and 6pm childminder deadlines. Office politics and the Friday-night booze-ups were out of the question. Then there was the money or, more accurately, the lack of it. By the time I had paid the childminder and the rail fare, I was in deficit. Could it be that the relatively low pay scale for architects, when compared with that of doctors and lawyers, accounts for the lower numbers of women? Could it be that women simply cannot afford to work as architects?

This may well be the case. Research shows that women get paid 20–25 per cent less than their male counterparts. So how can they possibly afford the additional cost of childcare? After investing heavily in their education and graduating, a disproportionate number of women fail to register and, of those who do, a disproportionate number fail to remain on the register. Hence the miserable 21 per cent.

My own experience as a Part 3 examiner at Westminster for many years was that most of the exemplary case studies were authored by women. It is these same feisty, ambitious, talented women who are dropping off the register because they are not being given a fair chance. Young graduates are totally ill-equipped to deal with the inequalities of the workspace and, from the evidence of reported salary levels, seem unable to negotiate a fair pay deal.

The frustration expressed by those who confided in me as their tutor is reflected in the comments made in the RIBA 2003 report *Why Do Women Leave Architecture?* – namely that the reasons women leave tend to be a combination of factors and/or a 'final-straw' moment. Some of the key issues identified include: low or unequal pay; long, inflexible or family-unfriendly working hours; being sidelined; stressful working conditions; protective paternalism preventing

Opposite
Guangzhou Opera House, by Zaha Hadid Architects



development of experience; a macho culture; and sexism. The researchers found little evidence that women leave because they are incompetent designers or because they no longer want to be architects. A major concern was the extent to which some architectural practices were operating outside of current legislation in relation to employment practice.

The ARB is failing miserably in its duty to ensure that good standards within the profession are consistently maintained for the benefit of the public and architects alike. Unlike the Law Society and the GMC, the ARB has not undertaken any review or survey of women in the profession for more than eight years. At my insistence, in 2005 the ARB carried out a survey and produced a report entitled *Women in Architecture*. Its findings corroborated those of the RIBA's 2003 review.

Despite having two consecutive women presidents, the RIBA does not fare much better. Its latest detailed research on women in the profession dates back a decade. There is no monitoring of women in its 2011 annual report – however, figures released in December 2011 as part of its Future Trends Survey revealed a 7 per cent drop in the number of women architects over the previous two years. The current survey does not mention women.

Both the ARB and the RIBA state they are committed to

equal opportunities, yet neither organisation has equal representation on its board or committees. In its response to its 2003 report, the RIBA admitted that the way some architectural practices were operating was a major concern – yet these practices continue with their chartered practice registration without any sanction. The status quo is being safeguarded by vested interests and an entrenched culture of discrimination. It seems the only way women can make it as architects in Britain is either by marrying an architect or having a wealthy relative. The RIBA has largely ignored the recommendations of its 2003 report and the ARB has shelved its own. If *The Architects' Journal* hadn't pulled its finger out, the issue would have safely stayed festering under the carpet, out of sight and out of mind.

The problems, although complex and entrenched, are not insurmountable. It is encouraging to see how other 'macho' cultures are being transformed: women now represent 44 per cent of FTSE100 Board appointments.

The RIBA and the ARB need to take note of the initiatives of the Law Society. Recently at the launch of the report of the International Women in Law Summit 2012, Lucy Scott-Moncrieff, president of the Law Society of England and Wales, said: 'Gender inequity will not change simply because time passes and increased numbers of women are in the workforce.'

'It certainly hasn't so far. Only concerted resolute action will eliminate workplace inequity. As lawyers committed to equality before the law, and subject to anti-discrimination legislation, we have a particular responsibility to tackle this problem within our own profession.'

'Discrimination against women and minorities prevents our societies from functioning at full capacity and benefiting from the talent of all in our communities. We can't solve the problems of the world, but tackling discrimination within the profession is well within our grasp, and we should just do it.'

If lawyers can shift their macho culture, so can architects. There is no excuse. The Think, Act, Report framework promotes greater transparency and encourages gender equality in organisations. Signing up to it should be mandatory for all chartered practices, as well as the ARB and the RIBA. I sincerely believe that architects take pride in being agents of change and that they have a social conscience. The biggest stumbling block is that few acknowledge the seriousness of the issue within the profession and that both the ARB and the RIBA are in denial. It is time to honestly open our hearts, minds and pockets to the talent that is currently being trashed and to stop paying lip service to equity and fairness. ■

Read the Think, Act, Report framework at: <http://homeoffice.gov.uk/equalities/women/women-work/gender-equality-reporting>



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