

Gender flaws beneath the glass ceiling

Women architects don't see their sex as a barrier to success. They should, writes Elizabeth Farrelly.

Once, when I was a child, my mother got mad at my grandmother for writing in my autograph book the following aphorism: "Happiness lies not in getting what one wants, but in wanting what one gets."

It was years before I saw the reason for the maternal fury: what might seem these days like ancient Buddhist wisdom struck my mum as spineless and defeatist.

Even now, though, this tension, between changing the world and changing oneself to fit, is a constant subtext. In particular, given the sexes' opposite tendencies in this regard, it grounds the gender debate.

Architecture, despite a recent flurry of propaganda to the contrary, is an example out of the bleedingly-obvious box.

Somewhere in the 20 years or so between graduation and success, women architects vanish. This is nothing new, of course. What's new is we're finally worried about it - half of us, anyway. But the propaganda - headlined, in the words of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) press release, "No glass ceiling for female architects" - amounts to an assiduous reading of the wrong set of entrails.

And yet they are entrails we persist in perusing - money, promotion, maternity leave, job satisfaction. As though the standard emblems and epaulettes of success in corporate life signified in architecture. The entire push probably goes more to the fact that both Queensland and NSW have first-ever female chapter presidents with heartfelt agendas, than to any material change in world order.

But doesn't this prove their point? That the girls are making it into the big top? Well, no. Even if these two presidents were the rule, not the exception, measuring the feminisation of the profession by counting bits of gold braid could hardly be sillier.

Architecture ain't that kind of game. Nor is feminisation.

The propaganda spins off a recent study headed by Queensland academic Dr Paula Whitman, who also presides over the Queensland chapter. Why is it, she and her colleagues wondered, that females comprise 40 per cent of architecture students but only 1 per cent of architecture's company directors? It's the right question, or close to. Shame about the hermeneutics.

Her survey covered 500-odd female architects across Australia, half of them parents, most aged under 40 and working in a capital city. It found that "more than one in four female architects are deliberately knocking back promotions at work". Of these, "more than half" are doing so voluntarily, because they either have "different career aspirations" or don't expect greater job-satisfaction to result. Further, said Whitman, the survey showed "an overwhelmingly high number of female architects, almost 70 per cent, are willing to forgo career success to achieve balance in life... but still desiring improved remuneration".

Uh, did I miss something here? Even if all women architects were rhythmically refusing preferment - is this meant to make us feel better? Should we feel reassured, in pursuit of the equality-grail, knowing that women architects are so ambitionless, so resigned or so (sigh) content with their lot as to eschew positions of influence? Is disempowerment OK when it's voluntary? As US academics Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever state in their book, *Women Don't Ask*, "This turns out to be a big problem for women: being satisfied with less." Or, in Whitman's words, "women say they are getting what they want [but] is what they want not very much? Do women [architects] have safe targets and low goals when it comes to their careers?"

The reasons for the limpness are more worrying still. Australian women architects, says Whitman, do not see gender as a barrier and do not blame externalities like systemic bias. Instead, they see motherhood, lack of time and "negative personality characteristics (including low self-image, lack of confidence and discipline) as the biggest inhibitors".

Say what? Here we have a bunch of highly educated, highly motivated prime-time females

feeling it's OK their careers are crippled by having children, or by their failure to perform the ego dance. Women are internalising blame in the time-honoured way - and this proves we're achieving some kind of equality? Ever hear of a bloke's career being inhibited because he happens to have fathered a couple of kids, much less his being OK with that?

Beneath all this, though, there's a deeper misapprehension that escapes scrutiny. Architecture is not a

corporate deal. So architectural success is not measurable by the usual array of ticked boxes and salary targets. You can have all that and still count for nothing within the profession. Because while architecture calls itself a profession - has to, to get the work - it sees itself as an art. This explains architecture's standing-oscillation between the schmick edge of the arts and the daggy edge of the professions. Explains, too, why its stars are not those who make most money, or chair the most boards, or acquire the

most Porsches. Architecture's stars, rightly or wrongly, are the design gurus. And while their success is not measurable in the usual ways, there is a remarkable consensus, within architecture, as to who they are, and who they are not. Who they are, across the globe and almost without exception, is men. Who they are not - still so not - is women. This isn't changing. Not one skerrick.

So it doesn't actually matter, in the end, how many women are experiencing sustained job-satisfaction due to family-

friendly policies in the workplace... blah, blah. It counts for nothing that women might be happy working in a corner of the lounge doing alts and adds for the friends and rels during school hours. This is not success, not within the accepted definition of the term. Satisfaction, perhaps. Contentment, sure. Balance, convenience, whatever.

What it does not show is any form of attack on the glass ceiling. It's back to the future, with women settling again for changing not the world, but their expectations of it. That women may be their own worst enemies in this makes it worse, not better.

All of which leaves us with the why, what to do and does it matter anyway questions. Why is answerable in four short syllables: testosterone. Architectural stardom relies on focused and sustained (if often cloaked) aggression of the kind that comes naturally to few women, especially few women designers. Publication, for example. From Le Corbusier to Koolhaas, from Tschumi to Libeskind to Cox to

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Murcutt, you don't get a place in the firmament if you don't publish. And yet, as Whitman's survey remarks with some concern, "publication and/or public recognition was nominated as the least important goal of the women surveyed".

And - here is the unaskable question - if success-as-it-is-defined in architecture is not something women want, or not something of which they are (on the whole) capable, does that matter? After all, in Lily Tomlin's words, "the trouble with the rat race is that even if you win, you're still a rat".

Can architecture be changed, then, to fit women practitioners better? If so, should it be? Would architecture benefit, or just women? Would recognition benefit women in any case, if it isn't a priority? Is there another way which doesn't involve women either morphing into second-rate men or resigning themselves to second-rateness?

It's a story that'll run and run, although already we're on uncharted ground. For me, it comes down to this. How will I feel when my daughters propose studying architecture? Answer? *Mad Libs*

