

cover story | Jane Burton Taylor

# A woman's touch

There are more female architects than ever – and they are practising on their own terms.



**D**uring two decades of running her own practice, Virginia Kerridge has encountered the full scope of male attitudes. "I remember going on site one day in a pair of shorts, and I thought, 'I'll never do that again,'" she laughs. "Now it's not so bad. It depends on the people, their age and so on. Builders [could be a bit funny]. Sometimes there'd be comments, or they wouldn't take you seriously."

A building site is still a bloke's domain but women in Australian architecture are used to resistance.

The Institute of Architects of NSW, as it was known in 1902, was not open to modern ideas such as equality for women. Florence Taylor, Australia's first female architect, had a phrase for it: "girl-hostile". Though she qualified the year women were granted the vote, Taylor waited nearly two decades to be accepted into her professional association. By then, she had turned on her heels and become a publisher.

Today, women have the numbers – and Taylor would be a shoo-in. The Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) in this state has a female president, Caroline Pidcock, as does every

other RAIA chapter along the eastern seaboard. The ratio of women to men graduates at universities has been climbing during the past decade. Today they are neck and neck; at the University of Sydney, women have even overtaken men (in 2002, the last year figures were collated, the count was 72 to 67).

Yet in NSW, as of December last year, only 545 out of 3588 registered architects were women. They are graduating – and disappearing. Why? Pidcock says this is partly a statistical glitch. Registration is not yet compulsory for architects (though this may change with a new code of conduct this year), and so it is hard to monitor who is practising.

But it is not the full story. "The profession isn't nurturing women and there are a lot dropping out," Pidcock says. "The whole structure of how the profession works is much more suited to supporting men. The recognition, the promotion, the long hours, the working conditions – all of these things are not well suited to supporting women in the long term."

Kerridge, who graduated from university in 1984, has two RAIA awards for her deluxe domestic commissions. "I'm only interested in

Making their marks: clockwise from above left, Virginia Kerridge, Kerry Clare, Rachel Neeson and Bettina Bartos.

doing residential work," she says. "I like it because it's more personal. It's more about the people rather than being a big corporate identity. It's more human."

She still doesn't wear shorts and she handpicks her builders (an option not always open to architects). "There has to be rapport. It's like building a work of art and they are like the paintbrush. If you don't have rapport, how are you going to create a work of art?"

Kerry Clare, the chair of NSW RAIA awards in 2000, has worked in partnership with her husband, Lindsay, for more than 30 years. Together, they have collected 25 RAIA commendations and awards, including two Robin Boyds (Australia's top architectural prize). Along the way, the Clares had five children; Kerry stayed home.

"Having a husband as an architect has been one of the reasons I could keep my foot in the door," she says. "If you want to stop off and have kids, you can lose a lot of confidence. With my business, I didn't feel I had to stop. When I had a whole group of kids, I stayed home but every night we would discuss work. Then, when the youngest was 18 months,

Photos: Natalie Boog, Wade Laube, Patrick Cummins

I could get away two hours a day. She was happy, I was happy."

Certainly, more women are opting to practise on their own terms. Rachel Neeson, who took out a commendation in last year's RAI A awards, is nonplussed about gender issues. "I just don't feel it," she says. "The only time might be when we're working for bigger government departments – sometimes they are quite blokey. Also older style developers and some lawyers can be a bit condescending."

Byron Bay's Sharon Fraser, who won an RAI A NSW country division award last year and in 2002, paid her dues in corporate architecture but has opted for her own practice. She recalls her early days in a big Sydney office. "When the blokes were asked something, if they didn't know how to do it, they'd pretend. But women would point out the fact that they didn't know. The directors' eyes glazed over. The end result was exactly the same. The woman is always the first person to point out her shortcomings."

On domestic jobs, Fraser has found that builders appreciate openness. "When I walk on site, I say to the builder, 'I know I'm a good designer, but tell me if there are details that could be better.' They breathe a sign of relief. It's not a game of who knows more. If that's female, I don't know, but I suspect it is."

She says clients sometimes have the preconception that women are better communicators and are more in touch with the home. "But it's not true. If clients get the impression an architect is out of touch, they've hired the wrong person not the wrong gender."

Do women have a different approach to design? This is contentious. Pidcock believes "the feminine is about connecting things and working from the inside out. The masculine is more about outside shape, the look." Many others were loath to make a distinction based on gender. "Maybe women can bring a more social aspect, family orientation," Clare says, "but I don't like to categorise. I just consider myself as an architect."

However, one of the clear distinctions between the sexes is the imbalance in directorships in large architectural firms. Paula Whitman, a lecturer at Queensland University of Technology, says only about 1 per cent of women graduates are becoming co-directors.

"How much is choice or is it something dysfunctional about what architectural practice demands of people?" she asks.

Clare is a director at Architectus. Beverly Garlick, of the RAI A's women in architecture group, rattles off a list of other women who have climbed to directorship: Penelope Seidler of Seidler and Associates, Leone Lorrimer (Woods Bagot), Diane Jones (Peddle Thorp and Walker) and Sarita Chand (Bligh Voller Nield).

Bettina Bartos is another. An associate director at Cox Richardson, she was hired after graduating in 1989. Her big break came when her immediate boss left unexpectedly and she took over a 160-house project. "When I told the project manager, he said, 'This will be interesting.' It made me all the more determined," she recalls. Today, Bartos designs research facilities. She most recently completed a \$55 million CSIRO research centre.

When Bartos had children, she took a year's leave then decided to work part-time. She says her position in the company may not run as far as it would have if she hadn't had children, but she has no regrets. "It is my choice," she says. "It's the balance I want." Bartos says a few men in the company have also started working part-time.

Perhaps, ultimately, as more women reach management, they may reshuffle the conventionally male culture to incorporate a more humane balance between home and work and a greater focus on the people who live and work in the buildings architects design.

It is in recognition of this that Pidcock has chosen to give her RAI A President's Award this year to "a practice that is going to work on the issue of workplace policy to support women".

As Beverly Garlick says, "It would be better for the boys, too. I don't think long hours and tough deadlines produce the best work. You need time out to see your place in the world."

**For more designing women, see pages 8, 9, 11 and 13.**



## PAST PERFORMERS

Women have long been unsung architects of our cities. In the 1800s, Elizabeth Macquarie and Eliza Darling, wives of NSW governors, turned their hand to building design.

In 1821, together with her husband, Lachlan, Elizabeth Macquarie designed a Gothic fort on Bennelong Point described by historians "as a picturesque focal point". Also on Bennelong Point, Eliza and her husband Ralph Darling designed a castellated bathing house in the late 1820s. Eliza also designed the Female School of Industry, which stood on the corner of Macquarie Street and Adelaide Crescent.

Elice Nosworthy, one of the first graduates of the University of Sydney's architecture degree, set up a practice designing homes on the North Shore and Palm Beach. Rosette Edmunds graduated in 1924 and specialised in churches and schools; Winsome Hall Andrew (class of '28) co-designed Manly Surf Pavilion, and Eleanor Cullis-Hill ('38) designed a Wahroonga kindergarten shortlisted for the 1956 Sulman Prize.

If there were one household name in this field of women it would be Marion Mahony, the Chicago-born wife of Walter Burley Griffin. Mahony graduated from MIT in Boston in 1894 and was the chief designer for Frank Lloyd Wright. In Australia, she worked with her husband designing Canberra and Castlecrag. "Marion was larger than life and quite modest," writes Anna Rubbo in *Beyond Architecture* (Powerhouse Press). "When it came to taking credit for her achievements, she seemed almost uninterested."

In her later years, Mahony erased her husband's name from several drawings. No one knows why. Was she straightening the record?

**JBT**

*Women Architects in Australia 1900-1950*  
by Julie Willis and Bronwyn Hanna (RAIA).