Women in Architecture?

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the findings of an international survey, devised by the authors to see what has changed in the past forty years since the publication of AD’s special issue on ‘Women in Architecture’ in 1975. This was the largest survey undertaken of its kind, publicized through 89 websites and translated into several languages including Italian, Spanish, French and Polish. The figures reveal a sharp difference in the responses from different countries which is not related to population or wealth. Russia, China and Africa were significantly under represented.

Almost all the women who responded to the 2015/16 survey were under 50 years of age (98.7%) and did not have children (65.5%). After the age of 40 there is a sharp and steady decline of women in full time employment. Many women below 40 who are in full time work and do not have children believe that there is inequality because women do not take the profession as seriously as men, not because they are discriminated against.

The findings of the survey highlight serious structural institutional misogyny and opportunities for the UIA to play a significant role.

Keywords: Women; Equality; Gender mainstreaming; Cities

1. Introduction

Despite their remarkable contribution, most women remain out of the mainstream of design history, education and research. Evidence that women are underrepresented and underpaid both in practice and academia is indisputable.

The main objective of this paper is to reveal the findings of an international survey, devised by the authors to see what has changed in the past forty years since the publication of AD’s special issue on ‘Women in Architecture’. **Contact Author: Yasmin Shariff, Director,**

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Architecture’ in 1975. The 1975 survey targeted only British women architects, most of whom trained at the Architectural Association. There were only eighteen responses.

The 2015 survey launched at the Architectural Association on 7 Nov 2015, at a conference organized in collaboration with AD as part of the AAXX100 project, was open for responses until February 24th 2016. It was international in its reach, publicized through 89 web sites ad translated into several languages with many country coordinators. 1368 responses were received.

2. Women in Architecture in 1975

In the year that the UN designated 1975 as International Women’s Year the editor of Architectural Design, Monica Pidgeon, ‘egged on by young women libbers at the AA and Barbara Goldstein’ devoted the August issue to the subject of women in architecture. The issue was edited, written and illustrated by an enthusiastic team of women.

In her editorial Pidgeon summarizes:

'We wrote to 100 British women architects, asking them whether they thought there was any contribution to architecture which women can make and men can’t (and vice versa); and seeking their ideas on ways in which they thought that being a woman could be an advantage or disadvantage to working in the profession. One and all, they agreed with us that architects were good or bad regardless of sex—or race, colour, sexual preference, build or what you will.’ (AD, 8/1975, p. 458)

All women who responded to the survey, in general, were convinced that the talent and training acquired is independent of the sex of the person; some, however, understood that women could have greater ease for empathy or cooperation. In general, all agreed that maternity was a disadvantage in the professional world, because as Innette Austin-Smith reported ‘it is not easy to give a position of authority to anyone who is only part time’ in front of who is in a full-time position and, therefore, able to assume responsibility and reliability. (AD, 8/1975, 459)

The AD issue published extracts from the 18 letters they received and divided them roughly into three groups:

1) women compared to men
2) coping with family
3) work opportunities and conditions’ (AD. 8/1975, p. 458)

The main issues that are highlighted in fifteen fragments of the first group Women compared to men is that women have to be more competent than men to overcome prejudice against them and it was considered that women will experience more difficulties due to family responsibilities eg:.

[1] Innette Austin-Smith writes ‘for a woman to make a mark in her career, she must be more than competent to overcome the prejudices that do exist. Whilst an “also ran” can get by, it is my view that a woman must be better to get anywhere’ (Ibid.)

[8] Jennifer Jones explains ‘I think we women have an advantage as one tends to have more responsible attitude to all matters. Society expects its female population to have an incredible versatility –one has the responsibility of all the ‘living’ requirements of the nuclear family. This tends to spread into other areas (or should do so) and so, perhaps, our responsible attitudes cover a greater sphere than a male one, which has been educated into only taking and accepting defined areas of responsibility. […]’ (Ibid.)
Surprisingly the second section on *Coping with family* had two fragments of answers probably because the additional burden of caring for a family was thought to be obvious and not necessary to articulate.

In the third grouping *Work opportunities and conditions*, there are twelve fragments of answers that are, fundamentally, opinions on the difficulty to be able to progress in a great office eg.

[6] Jane Drew, describes ‘at present, one is still treated as something odd or special, and subject to certain disadvantages. There is a natural fear in men’s minds that a young woman may get married or have a baby and leave the office, therefore there is a tendency not to give her the same responsibility as a man’ (AD. 8/1975, p. 459)

and

[13] Pam Parkinson comments ‘in a day to day, superficial level, women architects have quite a good life. Offices tend to make a fuss of them for rarity value –but only if they are proved they aren’t dumb blondes but competent (or as competent as men!) in their field. Builders, clients, etc. probably have an inbuilt skepticism when confronted with women architects, but when competence is proved, tend to be perhaps doubled impressed. From my building site experience I have learnt that builders have no particular bias against women architects since they regard all architects as women anyway!’ (Ibid)

Whilst the survey was only answered by eighteen architects it provides a direct insight into the issues facing women in architecture from ‘the shop floor’. Most of the women who responded including Innette Austin-Smith, Jane Drew, Kate Macintosh, Santa Raymond and Dianna Rowntree became highly significant leading figures in the profession.

3. Women in Architecture in 2015

The 2015 survey incorporated questions asked by Monica Pidgeon in 1975 but it was far more ambitious in its scope and its reach. An international team under the leadership of Yasmin Shariff, Eva Alvarez and Carlos Gomez was put together on a voluntary basis. Country coordinators included: Argentina, Ines Moisset; Brazil, Ana Gabriela Godinho Lima; Switzerland, Olivia de Oliveira; Italy, Mariagiulia Bennicelli Pasqualis; Poland, Dorota Wantuch/ Agata Dzianach/ Maria Rauch; Uruguay, Daniela Arias; Finland, Maija Ojala; France, Catherine Guyot; Slovakia, Zuzana Krísová; Canada, Tracy Wong; Australia, Justine Clark; Germany and Austria, Brigitte Wothe/ Heidrun Wankievićz

The survey was publicized through 89 websites, the most popular visited was the multi-language web site set up for the survey *Women in Architecture 1975*. Other web sites included Parlour; Archdaily; Donna Architetto; femmes et sia; Architectxx; Architectural Review; Facebook; Twitter… The survey was translated into 9 languages and had 1368 responses- 1261 from women (92.3%) and 105 from men (7.5%). Respondents were identified in the results but are presented anonymously by the authors.

The main aim of this questionnaire was exploratory. It was a voluntary effort and there were no resources available for a through statistical survey, though we can obviously read its output statically. The same questions were asked as those asked by Pidgeon in 1975 and in the same open ended way. Asking short open questions lets different thinking appear. They are more difficult to assess but it may provide a different and unexpected point of view. In contrast, surveys with multi-option questions tend to produce a neutral answer by the respondent, based on the question asked.

Responses were received from 64 countries including United States of America (14.7%); Australia (12.3%); Italy (8.6%); Switzerland (7.3%); Brazil (7%); United Kingdom (6.2%); Canada (5.8%); Spain (5.1%); France
A large proportion of women who responded to the survey (80%) are in full time employment and most of these are between the ages of 31-40 (32.1%). Twice as many people under 40 years of age responded to this survey than those over 40. Nearly 60% of the respondents did not have children. Less than 14% worked with their life partners. After the age of 40 there is a sharp and steady decline of women in full time employment: 41-50 (22.8%) and 51-60 (11.9%).

Overall most respondents (78.3%) believe there should be equal number of women in profession citing that as women make up half of the world population and it is only fair and just that there should be equal numbers represented in the profession. However a significant proportion of women under 30 (29.8%) did not think there should be parity and that women should only be promoted according to their skills and qualification, not by gender.

A general reading of the responses reveals that many women believe that ‘men are goal oriented’ or ‘women do not want to put profession in the first place’ or qualify their response with the argument that ‘Only if an equal number of women wish to work in the profession’ should there be equality.

Whilst most respondents consider taking time out of the profession as a barrier one New Zealander in her 50s thought that when a woman is the primary carer this time out gives time for reflection and building bonds with other women:

‘Where a woman is the primary carer in a family, it might be considered that she has an opportunity to reflect on variation in a career path that men don’t get if they feel bound by traditional roles. This view might be considered to putting a gloss on time out from a professional paid work environment. I think that women in architecture in NZ have built/are building quite a strong collegial environment - especially for young women. Young men are left to theirown devices to work that out’

Some men recognize that they get higher salaries, have greater seniority and enjoy male camaraderie in a way that women do not. A young male respondent from the USA stated that, ‘The profession has mostly been men; this creates images in potential clients of what the ideal architect should look like.’

Finally, when respondents were asked to name the most influential and inspirational woman working in the built environment including planners, critics, academics as well as architects, Zaha Hadid was by far the favorite. Other women named include Kazuyo Sejima (12.1%); Lina Bo Bardi (8.7 %); Anne Lacaton (5.9%); Jeanne Gang (5.8%); Eileen Gray (3.9%); Maya Lin (3.9%); Rachel Neeson (3.9%); Carme Pinos (2.5%); Denise Scott Brown (1.7%); Elizabeth Diller (1.5%); Benedetta Tagliabue (1.3%); Magarette Schütte Lihotzky (1.2%); Odile Decq (1%).

In summary the survey responses findings were as follows:

1. The average survey respondent is a woman, bellow 40, without children, working full time, lives in an English speaking country and she is used to use digital resources. The majority of them believe that there should be equal number of women working in the profession.

2. Nearly all the women bellow 30 are against the idea of quotas or positive discrimination. They see it as a real discrimination against women.

3. There appears to be an ideological line that separates women bellow and over 40. Younger working women with no children justify unequal conditions on issues around maternity and child care. Some also mention long working hours.
4. The survey was publicized on general web sites and open to men and women to respond. Women’s professional engagement seems to be a women’s question according to the disproportionate difference between male and female response rates.

4. Conclusions

The 1975 questionnaire showed women trying to fit into pre-established male roles but also trying to combine a personal and professional life balance. The 2015 survey shows a split between younger and older women: young women seem to adopt and adapt to a traditional male role avoiding traditional female roles while older women seem to ask for a role change.

Though the scale of both surveys is not comparable, and precisely by that reason, it is striking the natural acceptance and continuity of the neutrality discourse -that is to say ‘the value of the work should be recognized by its own value regardless gender’. Then and now, women respondents wanted and want to be acknowledged only by their own talent and skills. In 1975 women assumed they could cope with daily domestic life and family but in 2015, most of the women respondents who did not have children, blamed maternity and family life for the inequality which exists. On the other hand, the Patriarchal discourse recognizing differences between sexes according to biological or psychological conditions -women are emotional and empathetic and men are rational and aggressive-, seems to be better established now than in 1975, and responses in this sense have appeared both as a support and as a negation of questions asked.

As in 1975, in 2015 nearly all the young respondents were against positive discrimination. Respondents seem to accept negative discrimination as neutral and assume women have not got the same natural characteristics as men to succeed. According to Freeman, in the 70s women were educated to ‘avoid success’ (Freeman, 1971) because they feared ‘social rejection or role conflict’. This ‘role conflict’ avoidance seems to survive, according to 2015 opinions – ‘if women wished to work, they would’.

That particular situation might show, in the authors’ opinion and according to Freeman (Freeman, 1970), the existence of institutional discrimination, ‘built into normal working relationships of institutions’ and whose ‘perpetuation requires only that people continue “business as usual”…

‘Consequently, one must not ask what the motives of the individuals involved are but what the results of their actions are. Institutional discrimination is easily seen statistically: If a particular group is disproportionately absent in comparison to the pool of those possessing the relevant skills, discrimination is occurring even if it is impossible to document specific individual instances. (Such discrimination may also be affecting the pool of available talent, but that requires action on a different level).’(Freeman, 1970)

In her opinion, among many others, recruitment processes should be clearly assessed since they are not totally objective. And subjective practices are not tackled because they are assumed as normal. In fact, this subjective perform founds the working relationships among colleagues and establishes social networks which may exclude ‘others’: other races, other genders, other ages… She explains the needed and desired transparency in appointments and promotions is not affordable in prestige based systems (Freeman, 1979); and she describes how prestige works within academia as a ‘favors exchange’ system. And it is easy to check this practice has been dropped directly within professional institutions and offices.

The 2015 survey, also shows that in countries where women (or feminist architects regardless sex) were previously organized through different networks, the amount of participation and responses is higher than
where they were not. There was very little evidence in the 2015 survey that respondents were aware of changing demographics in countries such as the UK where there are significantly more women than men (1 million more) in an ageing population or of initiatives in cities such as Vienna that are adopting gender mainstreaming to make their services more effective and efficient.

Both surveys show the importance publishers and editors have in creating awareness and bringing recognition. In 2015 survey, respondents could name a women architect due to her relevance in media: Zaha Hadid, Kazujo Sejima and Lina Bo Bardi were at the top of the list and followed by other women architects also well known. Respondents hardly could mention a name of a women landscape architect or of a women designer.

The world of journalism and architectural criticism is dominated by men and women are often overlooked or deliberately made invisible. As recently as 2014 the BBC airbrushed Patty Hopkins out of the opening shot of three part series The Brits Who Built the Modern World and pioneering architects like Mary Crawley who really did make the Modern World were not even mentioned. So, publishers in order not to follow business ‘as usual’ should increase their issues dedicated to women authors and academics and institutions should watch for them being used and cited.

The nature of the responses shows that gender discrimination is not a personal issue but an institutional issue. The biased and misogynistic view of architecture persists. The results of the survey provide significant evidence that structural change is needed if women are to play a more equitable role. All male panels should be banned and women should be given a voice and a presence.

Professional institutions, especially the UIA is in a position to play a vital part in helping women achieve their potential. Other professions such as lawyers, medics and accountant in the UK have managed to achieve 50-50% participation of both genders and there is no reason why we as architects cannot learn from these and other international examples. We should be alarmed at the poor rate of change and lack of engagement revealed by the 2015 survey. In forty years, there has been little done to redress the structural situation of consented discrimination. There is an opportunity for the UIA to take action with some urgency.

References