The Career Progression of Women in the Architectural Profession

Findings of a national study examining the careers of women in the architectural profession in Australia

by Dr. Paula Whitman
Background to research study

In 2002, 43% of the total population of architecture students in Australia were female (Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 2003, p.71). Yet in the same year, according to the Queensland Board of Architects, less than 1% of the total number of registered architects who were directors of architectural companies in Queensland were female. This discrepancy might be viewed as a “time lag” problem, given that women are relatively new to the profession, and with time, their representation in senior positions will increase. Yet studies in other countries show that “time lag” cannot wholly account for the persistence of women’s under-representation within the upper ranks of the profession (Shannon, 1996; Adams & Tanecloud, 2003). Despite an increasing proportion of female students studying architecture over recent decades, there continues to be a lack of women in senior roles within architectural practice. This study aims to identify the reasons behind this lack of representation of women in significant leadership positions within practice. It identifies the barriers and enabling factors that impact on and affect women’s attainment of senior positions. Some of these factors are common to other professions, while others are unique to architectural practice. This report sets out recommendations aimed at allowing women to fully participate and contribute to the development of the architectural profession.

An earlier report regarding women in the profession within Australia, published in November 1996 by the RAIA and funded in part by the Human Rights Commission, provides a longitudinal context within which to set this study (Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 1996). The report discussed the findings of a national survey undertaken in 1984 that was aimed at gauging the attitude of architects regarding a wide range of professional and related issues. The report noted that while there was little direct evidence to indicate that discrimination based on gender was systemic or condoned, there were sufficient statements of disadvantage, degrees of sexual harassment and other problems related to gender that concern was still warranted. These concerns related to women’s income, employment conditions and education and suggested deep, pervasive patterns of difference between the experience of male and female architects which were no less important for their subtlety. In addition to this earlier research, this study builds on related research in associated professional disciplines, such as engineering and surveying (Roberts & Ayre, 2002), as well as other disciplines outside the building industry, including accounting (Morley, Bellamy, Jackson and O’Neil, 2000; Holdnott & Jarrett, 1998), law (Victorian Law Foundation, 1996), management (Sinclair, 1995; Wood & Lindoff, 2003) and the public sector (Brown, 1997, 2002a, 2002b). Research studies on gender issues within the architectural profession undertaken in other countries, such as New Zealand (Auckland Uniservices Limited, 2001), Canada (Adams & Tanecloud, 2000; Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, 2002) and Britain (de Graft-Johnson, Manday and Gred, 2003) provide a useful international perspective on the issues. This study extends these other studies by providing a specific account of the situation of women within the architectural profession in Australia today.

No other such account of women and their careers within contemporary architectural practice in Australia currently exists.

In contemplating the gender issues associated with contemporary practice, it is instructive to consider the historical record of female architects within Australia. Willis and Hannah (2001) provide an excellent account of the role of women in the architectural profession in Australia from 1910-1950. Their research shows that, contrary to popular belief, there were a number of women active in the profession during this period, but their contribution to the profession was simply not recorded or celebrated.

“Women’s absence from architectural history can be seen to be most fundamentally a problem of recognition. While women have been graduating and working as architects in substantial careers in ever increasing numbers throughout the twentieth century, architectural history has largely failed to notice their existence or acknowledge their achievements” (Willis and Hannah, 2001, back cover)

This failure to acknowledge the role of women can be attributed to a range of factors, many of which continue to influence the profession today. This study on contemporary career progression offers new insights that challenge the popular understanding of how women fit within the profession, just as Willis and Hannah challenge the historical interpretation and “invisibility” of women architects.

Methodology

The study was based on a written questionnaire distributed nationally and supplemented with a small number of interviews and focus groups. 1120 surveys were distributed. 1070 of these went to RAIA graduate members and members of “higher” categories within the institute. The 41 that were distributed to non-members were largely sent in response to direct requests to be included in the survey. Analysis of the responses did not separate members and non-members. Of the 1120 surveys distributed, 550 surveys were returned, achieving a 49% response rate.

Female student members of the RAIA were not included in the survey, as the focus was on career progression and experiences in the workplace, and most students have only a limited, if any, experience within practice. The perspective of female students was gathered through focus group discussions and a number of individual interviews (See Appendix 1, “The student view: Focus group with female students of architecture”).

1 It is difficult to provide a rational figure for the number of women directors within architectural companies, as the registration boards in most States do not collect this information. It is suggested that the Queensland figures provided would not vary greatly to a national average.

2 Refer to Appendix 2 for data related to gender distribution of registered architects in Australia.