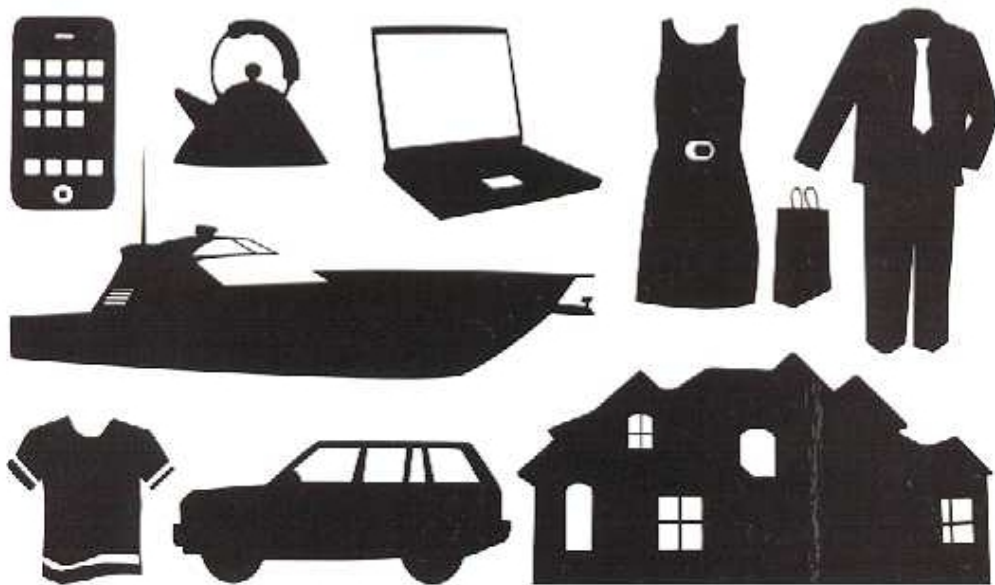


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BLUBBERLAND
THE DANGERS OF HAPPINESS

• | **Wimmin architects**

Once, when I was eight, my mother got mad at my grandmother for installing 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 (for application later) struck my mum as supine defeatism. A sniper-attack from doiley-land. Even now, this tension between changing the world and changing oneself to fit it better, or perceive it differently, is a constant subtext. In particular, given the sexes' opposite tendencies in this regard, it grounds the gender debate.

In this, architecture, despite occasional propagandic flurries to the contrary, is in the bleeding obvious box. Somewhere in the decades between graduation and maturity, women architects vanish. Always have, perhaps always will. But the propaganda – headlined, in the words of a recent Royal Australian Institute of Architects press release, 'No Glass Ceiling For Female Architects' – amounts to an assiduous misreading of the entrails.

And yet they are entrails we persist in perusing in our messy search for signs of growing equality – money, promotion, maternity leave, job satisfaction. As though the standard emblems and epaulettes of corporate success life were actually it, in a profession as peculiar as architecture. Probably the entire push reveals more about what we'd like to be true than about any material change in world order. A couple of female presidents in the RAI, and suddenly we're hearing victory talk.

But, you counter, doesn't this in itself prove their point? That the girls are finally making it into the big top? Well, no, in a word. Even if female presidents were the rule, not the exception, measuring the feminisation of the profession in bits of gold braid could hardly be sillier. Architecture just ain't that kinda game. Nor, for that matter, is feminisation.

The RAI press release referred to a 2004 study of Australian women architects headed by the late Queensland academic Dr Paula Whitman, also then president of the Queensland chapter of the Institute. 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?

Whitman's survey covered 500-odd female architects across Australia, half of them parents, most of them 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 Dr Whitman, the survey showed that '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'.

Even if it's true, though, 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, darling) content with their lot as to repeatedly eschew positions of influence? Is disempowerment okay when it's voluntary? Is *that* what we're saying?

It's a real danger. As US academics Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever pointed out in *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 okay that their careers are crippled by having children, or by their failure to perform the ego dance. Once again, that is, 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 a couple of kids, much less his being okay with that?

Beneath all this there's another, deeper misapprehension that escapes scrutiny altogether. Architecture is not a corporate deal. So architectural success is not measurable by the usual array of ticked boxes, salary targets and Key Performance Indicators. You can have all that, of course. But that's the point. You can have the lot, and still count for nothing within the profession. Why? 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 slick side of the arts and the daggy edge of the professions. Explains, too, why its stars are not those who make the most money, or chair the most boards, or acquire the most Porsches.

So who is at the top? Well, the stars, of course. The design gurus; the Prometheus figures, the stealers of fire from heaven. 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, is men. Who they are not – still *so* not (Gae Aulenti, Zaha Hadid, and one or two others notwithstanding) – is women. Even today, most female architectural principals, from

Denise Scott-Brown to Benedetta Tagliabue, either focus exclusively on domestic-scale work or practise with, and stand in the shadow of, their husbands. This is not changing. Not a jot. If anything, it's going backwards.

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. That women might be happy working in a corner of the lounge doing alts and adds for the friends and relatives during school hours counts for zilch. This is not success, not within the accepted definition of the term, anyway. Satisfaction, perhaps. Contentment, sure. Balance, convenience, life-wisdom, whatever. But not professional success.

What it does not show is any form of attack on the glass ceiling. Indeed, it's back to the future, with women settling yet again for changing their expectations, not the world. Situation normal. And 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 about it and does it matter anyway questions. Why comes down to four short syllables: testosterone. Architectural stardom relies on focused and sustained (if often corduroy-cloaked) aggression of the kind that seldom comes naturally to women, especially women designers. Take, for example, publication. From Le Corbusier to Koolhaas, from Tschumi to Libeskind to Cox to Murcutt, they all know it: you don't get a place in the firmament if you don't publish. Publication is something at which Hadid, for example, excelled, decades before she had anything built. 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'.

So here's 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? Are women just ahead of the game, natural downshifters, too wise, too enlightened, to be bothered? After all, in Lily Tomlin's immortal words, 'the trouble with the rat race is that even if you win, you're still a rat'. Thing is, though, one reason they are immortal words – as opposed to dead and vanished – is that Tomlin's is a field in which women can shine *as women*.

So can architecture change to fit women better? If so, should it? Would architecture benefit? Would women, if recognition is genuinely not a priority for them? Is there some other way perhaps, which doesn't involve women either becoming pseudo-men or resigning themselves to second fiddle? It's a continuing story, for which history offers no guide. For me, it comes down to this. How will I feel when my daughters propose studying architecture? Answer? Mad, like my mum.