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## Why Are Women Leaving Architecture? A Look at the AIA's Equity in Architecture Movement

A few weeks ago I received an invitation through my local American Institute of Architects chapter to take the 2016 Equity in Architecture survey.

Conceived of as a research tool to be administered once a year for the next five to 10 years, the Equity in Architecture survey strives to “identify conditions impeding the advancement of the profession’s best talent, highlight best practices and measure progress toward equity over time.” The findings and discussions related to the survey hope to “help men and women realize the goal of equitable practice” while advancing and sustaining the profession in the years to come.

Forty minutes later, I had made my way through an anonymous survey of approximately 80 questions ranging from demographics, schooling, licensure, salary and job advancement opportunities to more personal inquiries related to work/life balance, caregiver and household status, job flexibility and firm culture. These may seem like delicate omissions to share with a friend or family member let alone an online community but, I have to admit, the collective findings of the ensuing report are important to me, not to mention the broader architectural community of 7,000-plus potential survey participants nationwide.

Upon completion of the survey, I felt intrigued to learn more about the origins of such a thought-provoking document.

A quick Google search led me to a TEDxPhiladelphia Talk by Rosa Sheng, AIA, LEED AP BD+C. A senior associate at Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, Sheng is also the founder and chairwoman for Equity by Design, an AIA San Francisco committee (formerly known as “The Missing 32% Project”). In Sheng’s presentation, “Equity in Architecture,” she shared somewhat startling information that is reiterated on the Equity x Design website:

*“In the United States, women represent less than 50 percent of the students graduating from accredited architecture programs in the U.S. The number of women who are AIA members, licensed architects and senior leadership varies between 15 percent and 18 percent of the total. While the exact percentage is in constant flux, the challenge of losing the large pool of architectural talent remains the constant.”*

Sheng continues her talk by sharing a personal story of how she was discouraged by her family to pursue architecture because “she was going to have a family anyway.” She also describes the challenges and “pinch-points” men and women face in architecture, including

**1) Graduation (0 years professional experience).** Being hired after graduation can be challenging for many architects, as many people must pursue alternative careers or take detours if their graduation timing aligns with a recession.

**2) Early career (less than three years).** A time for low salaries and the pursuit of required internship experience, or what the survey illustrates as “paying dues,” insinuating, from personal experience, long hours and hard work.

**3) Mid-career (less than seven years).** A time to pursue a lengthy licensure process of five-plus exams (formerly seven exams prior to 2015.)

**4) Late career (less than 12 years).** Often a time in life when one must balance caregiving with career demands. This can be one of several tipping points for individuals in the profession who are also expected to be the primary caregiver.

**5) Late-career retirement (more than 12 years).** A time in one’s career when it is possible to hit a glass ceiling in terms of advancement and leadership opportunities. This also may be a time when caregiving continues, not only for children, but also for elder relatives.

As I scanned the list, I couldn’t help but relate pinch-point to personal experience. I graduated during a recession, but held on to my aspirations through persistence, a yearlong detour, and several career-related moves that landed me in the East, Midwest, and Western regions of the United States. Internship and licensure were both challenging and arguably rewarding. For better or worse, both experiences felt like professional rites of passage.

Through all of my experiences thus far, I would relate that I experienced these milestones as a student-turned-professional. In other words, I rarely felt like I was experiencing these career phases as a “female architect” as opposed to a “male architect.”

And yet, somewhere in the mid-career mark, similar to many other hard-working women professionals, I am grappling with the idea of what it means to be a practicing architect and a soon-to-be primary caregiver.

With the excitement of our family’s first child arriving in the fall, this is the first time I’ve had to think about how I might balance a challenging, rewarding career in a historically demanding profession with a schedule that might afford a reasonable degree of what I could only hope might be flexibility and empathy.

But what is “reasonable” these days? In the United States, where there is a family leave policy that is notably outdated in comparison with most developed countries worldwide, it seems the only navigable roadmap is the one that is forged between an employee and her employer.

In a broader context, women architects such as Amy Kalar, AIA, a working mom and author of “Archimom.com,” cites the challenges a primary caregiver might face in taking an “off-ramp” rather than returning to work shortly after maternity leave. An article from the Harvard Business Review entitled “Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women On The Road To Success” explains:

*“Our data shows that women lose an average of 18 percent of their earning power when they take an off-ramp. In business sectors, penalties are particularly draconian: In these fields, women’s earning power dips an average of 28 percent when they take time out. The longer you spend out, the more severe the penalty becomes. Across sectors, women lose a staggering 37 percent of their earning power when they spend three or more years out of the workforce.”*

While the issues that are important to various individuals in the profession will differ depending on personal priorities and experiences, issues such as how to lessen the pay gap while creating more flexible work environments for primary caregivers without sacrificing leadership opportunities are a few reasons why I am eager to learn the outcomes of the 2016 Equity in Architecture survey.

What are the professional “best practices” across the architectural community that might be adopted on a more universal scale? What’s working? What isn’t?

In a recent article in Metropolis magazine by Despina Stratigakos, a historian, writer, professor and champion of the “Architect” Barbie (as a way to interest young girls in building), she explains, “Other demanding professions, such as medicine and law, are notably closer [than architecture] to reaching gender parity. Today, half of new doctors and lawyers are women. There are some encouraging signs that architecture may be moving in a similar direction. According to the National Council of Architectural

Registration Boards’ 2015 annual report, the proportion of women completing internships and registration exams (steps toward licensure) has risen from roughly a quarter to over a third of the candidate pool in the past decade. Yet numbers alone won’t ensure retention if architecture’s gender-biased professional culture remains unchanged. Ten or 20 years from now, we may still be asking ourselves, “Where are the women architects?”

Perhaps what is most important in Stratigakos’ article, “The Attrition Problem,” is that she cites the seeds of progress with the momentum of groups such as Equity x Design and others; “real-world venues for discussing gender equality are proliferating, suggesting the need for a different kind of community – one that is physically present – to voice concerns and search for solutions ... [and] unlike that earlier era [citing the 1970s feminist movement], which pitted women against an almost uniformly hostile male establishment, a younger generation of male architects is today joining in the struggle for gender equity as its issue, too.”

Needless to say, I encourage architecture professionals to join the conversation and to work collectively toward the elimination of pinch-points wherever possible for everyone in the architectural profession. My hope is we might enable the next generation of architects to live by Eleanor Roosevelt’s words, “What would you do, if you knew you could not fail?” \\\

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