

"You have no idea ... ": Women in Architecture in the Eighties

Gill Matthewson, School of Creative Technologies, Wetec, Wellington

ABSTRACT: A number of moves in the seventies had meant that more women than ever before were in architecture schools and by the eighties they were flooding into the profession. Over the decade their numbers quadrupled (as measured by registration) as women moved from the exception to the norm. But their impact was variable. This paper will try to tease out that impact from women-only practices to support groups to what they published to moves away from the profession.

I have written elsewhere about the huge increase of women into architecture schools in New Zealand¹ and other countries during the 1970s; the result of a combination of economic, educational, aspirational and societal changes. As a consequence, women architecture graduates began to flood into the profession in the eighties. During the decade of the seventies just 15 women became registered architects; during the eighties, the number was 60 – a fourfold increase (during the nineties, it was 130). The first woman to be registered in the decade was Claire Chambers in 1980. The first for the nineties was Felicity Wallace. Between the two women is a gap far greater than ten years might imply; one strongly experienced discrimination (and was pivotal in strategies to counter it), the other once declared she had never been discriminated against.² The eighties were where it all changed, and changed fast, even

from year to year. When speaking with women who graduated only a few years ahead of me, their common comment was: "you have no idea."

In my previous writings I have speculated on the reasons why the profession has been resistant to women, Bronwyn Hanna points out a war analogy was always invoked when women started moving into architecture: "comments ... describe early women architects as invaders or usurpers ... The metaphor of invasion evokes an image of rightful citizens of an established territory being overrun by outsiders who will corrupt the established culture."³ In this paper I want to look at the way women dealt with that war – by fighting or collaborating or counter-resistance.

It was to second wave feminism that many women turned. Feminism explained in multiple ways what we were experiencing and why. It also offered a number of strategies, perhaps the most important one was safety in numbers. In May 1979 recent graduates Mandy Reynolds and Fiona Christeller and current student, Janet Thomson, sent out a letter calling for interested Auckland-based women to meet on the 18th June. The plan was to meet and share:

thoughts and experiences as women involved in the architectural world. We feel that for us there are certainly differences between the sexes which need to be discussed and understood generally, rather than overcome individually; and that with the rapidly increasing numbers of women graduating in architecture, the need for some such interaction is now immediate.⁴

From the beginning there was a mix of aims

¹ Matthewson "Take it to the limit" pp 319-325.

² Chambers, Pers Comm, 5 October 2009.

³ Hanna, "Questioning the Absence" p 249. See also Ahrentzen & Anthony, "Sex, Stars, and Studios" p 17 for a discussion of the warrior mentality in architectural education.

⁴ Reynolds, Christeller & Thomson, letter.

and ambitions: some wanted technical help with architectural problems, some wanted support, and some wanted to change the world. Regardless, within a month the Women's Institute of Architecture was formed and busying itself becoming incorporated with its aims and objectives, for legal purposes, of:

- * To actively encourage and support women in professional practice, particularly in the field of architecture
- * To give direct support to women working, learning, educating and researching in the field of architecture
- * To promote architecture as a career for women using all available channels of communication eg film, TV, magazines, lectures, etc
- * To promote changes in the profession of architecture and society as a whole which would support the existence of women practising architecture eg setting up 24 hour child care centres
- * To comment publically on matters of concern to the society⁵

To call the group an "Institute" was both tongue in cheek and a very deliberate, straight out political challenge to the NZIA which Christeller, Reynolds and Thomson believed

"simply did not exist for women."⁶ "At the time, a separate institute seemed like the only option."⁷ Positioning the group as a parallel institute meant serious lobbying became possible. The September 1979 WIA newsletter details the lobbying already begun with an application to the government Committee on Women for funding (\$250 was granted in 1980), and the writing of submissions to the NZIA to suggest revisions to the Code of Staff Employment on maternity and parental leave, flexible working conditions and job sharing ("cordially received" notes the March 1981 newsletter). While the NZIA, like other institutions at the time, might have thought itself gender neutral, their documents and processes revealed otherwise. It was laborious work pointing out that: yes, actually, words make a difference and suggesting alternatives. But it was also work that at times brought ridicule and personal attacks upon the women.

In June of 1980, the WIA organised a Management seminar at the Auckland Architecture School and it was attended by 32 women. There were workshops, including

one on how to be assertive, which, while now might seem clichéd, in the early eighties was a new idea and seemed necessary for those of us born in the fifties. As the Head of an architectural school in Tasmania put it:

In my experience it is often difficult for a woman to become a capable professional in architecture. Even with intelligent and gifted females it appears to me that the pressures in our society discourage girls from developing initiative, independence and decision-making capacity ... I think it unfortunate that the stereotype emotional classic female sex role is expected to be so submissive.⁸

Later in 1980 the WIA exercised some assertiveness by writing to Professor Allan Wild at the Auckland Architecture School expressing concern at the lack of women lecturers at the school, "not so cordially received!" notes the March 1981 newsletter.⁹ In 1981 Sarah Treadwell became the first woman on the permanent teaching staff and remained the only one for much of the eighties. Notwithstanding the lack of female teaching staff, the WIA also set up a subgroup to produce brochures for secondary schools to encourage girls to study architecture. This included visits to schools

⁵ WIA newsletter (9 August 1979).

⁶ Christeller, Pers Comm.

⁷ Thomson, Pers Comm.

⁸ quoted, WIA newsletter (13 October 1979).

⁹ WIA newsletter (1 March 1981).

by the women and general publicising of women working in architecture as a norm rather than an exception.¹⁰ A strong conception of the importance of role models underwrites this kind of lobbying, very much a concern of the feminism of the time. It attached itself primarily to an historical project, but live role models were equally important.

The challenge to the NZIA eventually became a collaboration, as the WIA became a useful source for the NZIA. For instance, in mid 1981 the group was asked to comment on the Recommended Conditions of Employment pamphlet being produced by the NZIA Employed Architects Committee. The group was instrumental in adding clauses on parenthood – applicable to both men and women.¹¹ That a lot of this is so much part and parcel of the contemporary work environment is a testament to the success of the WIA. The lobbying and liaising between the two institutes continued with an NZIA sponsored survey of women in the architectural profession. Claire Chambers from WIA joined the NZIA's Employed

Architects Committee and argued for it to undertake this project following similar studies in the UK and USA during the seventies, and a recent one completed for women in law in New Zealand. The study was completed in 1984 by Massey University MBA student Beverley Gill.

The study notes some women unimpressed by the WIA and refusing to join "a sexist group."¹² Separatism was an important tactic of feminism resulting from an idea that women needed to separate from men in order to understand the dynamics of sexual politics and to become strong enough to not be overwhelmed. But it was a tactic that produced strong reactions from men and women alike. Some women thought that they were just as good as men and there was no difference between them; to insist that there was, was dangerous and counterproductive.

Other women considered that women who had been socialised in one way and trained in another were uniquely able to bridge and repair the gaps in architecture. A study in Australia noted women not registering because they believe it would limit their

practice, of registration being conservative, oppressive and conformist.¹³ Gill's study likewise records women not joining the NZIA because "its policies were outdated and status quo oriented and that it was failing to meet the challenges of economic and social demands on the architecture profession."¹⁴ The notion that the NZIA was outmoded was reasonably prevalent at the time amongst younger architects – we wanted something different. When, in Professional Practice, architects came in to tell us to join Rotary, the golf club and other such associations in order to pick up work, we resisted. Architecture was for us not "poncing about in Pierre Cardin shirts" but more about being community-based, and helping people (perhaps a part product of the hippie movement). And so the late seventies early eighties produced a number of architectural collectives as an alternative way of working in architecture.¹⁵

However, it is difficult at times to tease out

¹³ Shannon "Architecture and Equity" p 58.

¹⁴ Gill "Women in Architecture in New Zealand" p 74.

¹⁵ Archangels (Nick Stanish, Russell Withers, Chris Fox and Stuart Scott) and Artifice (Pete Bossley, Pip Cheshire, Mal Bartleet and Mandy Reynolds) being just two of the better known (and named) ones. I was part of one of the not so well-known ones called Open House Design Collective with Roger Thackery and Ros Derby.

¹⁰ See Malcolm "Career Check" p 70, and "Cause to Celebrate" §4:4.

¹¹ WIA notice (July 1981).

¹² Gill "Women in Architecture in New Zealand" p 55.

how and why things happened the way they did. The same period was also a time of economic depression with few architectural opportunities and even fewer employment opportunities for graduates. These collectives were not always a matter of choice, but the only option; and not all saw themselves as being about community. The economy also places a question mark around the reason why Fiona Christeller, who was the recipient of the Fletcher Scholarship in her final year at architecture school (1977) which required her to work for Fletchers for a year, never had to complete that bond. Was it because she was a woman that they did not find a job for her, or was it because of the economic situation at the time of her graduation?

The WIA was "constantly questioning its direction"¹⁶ and by early 1981 was observing the fact that despite a large mailing list the monthly meeting saw only a handful attend. Meetings seemed to have become bogged down with discussions about the rules and regulations needed to become an incorporated institution.¹⁷ By the end of the year WIA stood for "Women in Architecture."¹⁸ The

¹⁶ WIA newsletter (1 March 1981).

¹⁷ Thomson, Pers Comm.

¹⁸ The August 1981 newsletter is under the banner

"Institute" was gone and it is tempting to conclude that with it a notion of the conservative approach of "working within the system." That is not accurate but there was a shift. In March 1982 the group discussed whether they should continue or fold. The decision was made to become a more informal group, less of the lobbying and more architecture,¹⁹ and to invite notable guest speakers to boost numbers. The April 1982 meeting featured Claudia Pond Eyley and was attended by about 25 women.²⁰

The following year saw a burst of activity and public visibility. For the NZIA conference in June 1983, WIA was asked to give a presentation which was of *Home Truths*, a series of slides created by the Matrix Feminist Architectural Collective in London.²¹ The presentation was meant to be an optional workshop but a last minute programme change²² meant the presentation was to the

"Women's Institute of Architecture"; September and October are simply titled "WIA" and November records Women in Architecture (Auckland).

¹⁹ WIA minutes for meeting (18 March 1982).

²⁰ Noted in the margin, WIA Newsletter (April 1982).

This was the first meeting I attended.

²¹ We became aware of these from Mandy Reynolds who was by now based in London.

²² Janet Thomson believes that this was a result of poor

full conference. This provoked a great deal of discussion at the conference and an invitation from Gerald Melling to supply a regular column to *NZ Architect* of which he had just become editor. For the three years of his editorship the tone and look of the journal was quite different. In early 1984 Melling contacted the WIA pleased with what had been sent so far, but asking for more controversial pieces.²³

WIA was never a homogenous group of women all sharing the same thinking, and this is clear from the range of articles. The first column in October 1983 was about the conference and the *Home Truths* slides;²⁴ the second was about domesticity and housewives written by Janet Thomson drawing on her undergraduate sub-thesis; the third was by me. It came from a series of panels I had done for the *Gone to Kiwi*, the Oceanic Architecture Students Congress held in Auckland in July. WIA had been asked to produce a display for this and the plan was to produce panels showing architectural works

organisation.

²³ WIA Newsletter (April 1984).

²⁴ Although I am named as a signee I was not at the conference.

by women.²⁵ I "broke away" from the WIA group; there was to me an uncomfortable feeling that we were jumping up and down saying "look, look we can do it too." And so my panel became a record of how I felt about being in architecture; for me the practice of architecture was very different from what I wanted it to be. The generosity of WIA meant my mutiny was not considered as such and I was asked to adapt the piece for the column. But it was also noted that I had been brave to do the panels and brave again to write the article. The same comment was used to describe Heather Ives and her piece²⁶ in issue 2 1985.

A consequence of the article was I was invited to run a women's only studio project at the architecture school in 1984 to see if the eternal question at that time "do women design differently from men" could be answered. I ran the project for three years, found no complete answer but realised I knew too little about the process of both teaching and design and the need to know more propelled me into

²⁵ The display show work by Renate Block, Fiona Christeller, Mandy Reynolds, Christina MacKay, Diane Brand and Claire Chambers – WIA Newsletter (August/September 1983).

²⁶ Matthewson to Wigley (27 February 1985).

post-graduate work in the nineties.

In 1986 Sarah Treadwell introduced a course at Auckland Architecture School on women architects to counter that other eternal question: where are all the women in architecture?

Lecture today by Sarah Treadwell on Marion Mahoney and all through of how she was and has been misinterpreted by colleagues and historians all looking through eyes and ambitions distinctly male. "History is a record of men and their monuments." It's enough to make you spit bricks and then hurl them.²⁷

The early to mid-eighties saw women going into sole practice or collectives. It is hard to say whether they did this more or less than men at the time but their reasons were often clearly a response to discrimination. They were either feeling as if they were never going to get any higher in the practice they were in (hitting the proverbial glass ceiling as with Claire Chambers in 1985) or realising that the obligatory 60 hour week was not going to be possible with children and that they needed a more flexible work environment (like Deb Cranko²⁸). In Wellington, Fiona Christeller set up Fiona Christeller Architects and shared

²⁷ Matthewson, Diary entry, 1986.

²⁸ Cranko, Pers Comm.

space and resources with Barbara Webster. They were later joined by Anna Kemble Welch when she was refused maternity leave.

The last piece published under the Women in Architecture banner in *NZ Architect* was a joint piece by Heather and myself which had a controversial start.

Heather and I went to WIA. I can't believe it. [They] want to write an article "What is Discrimination?"... What an article... as if discrimination can be addressed in a tiny article and as if giving examples like "being made to make the tea all the time" gives any indication of the insidiousness of it all. Everything will end up sounding trivial but I guess you could say (and *you* probably would) that it's in the trivia where you will find the important things.²⁹

The final article was felt by some in the group not to "have gone far enough."³⁰ Somewhere between posting and printing, the article was altered which at the time annoyed us immensely – part was cut, the order was changed affecting its integrity. We never found out what happened and I am not sure whether it was our complaint to Melling that spelt that the end of the articles or whether WIA had run out of steam. For me, it did.

²⁹ Matthewson to Wigley (14 Dec 1984).

³⁰ Matthewson to Wigley (18 April 1985).

But perhaps the finale was 1993 when for the centenary of suffrage in New Zealand there was a national wide exhibition, *Constructive Agenda*, once again using the formula of panels showing architectural work by women. This time though, the sheer number of panels once and for all laid to rest the argument that women could not be architects. The tactics of the eighties were no longer required.

But the nineties saw the beginning in Auckland of the Thursday Lunch Group by members of WIA to be a support/discussion group for sole women practitioners. While initially ridiculed, the group became the template for Small Practice Groups a critical component of Continuing Professional Development for architects under the 2005 Registered Architects Act.

REFERENCES

- Ahrentzen, Sherry & Kathryn Anthony "Sex, Stars, and Studios: A Look at Gendered Educational Practices in Architecture," *Journal of Architectural Education* 47(1):11-29.
- "Cause to Celebrate" *New Zealand Herald* (27 October 1983) s4:4.
- Chambers, Claire. Personal communication (conversation) 5 October 2009.
- Chambers, Claire. Personal communication (conversation) 23 November 2009.
- Christeller, Fiona. Personal communication (conversation) 24 November 2009.
- Cranko, Deborah. Personal communication (conversation) 18 November 2009.
- Gill, Beverley "Women in Architecture in New Zealand: a research report presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business" Palmerston North, N.Z.: Massey University Research Report, 1984.
- Hanna, Bronwyn "Questioning the Absence of Women Architects in Australian Architectural History" *Formulation and Fabrication, proceedings of the 17th Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians of Australia and New Zealand* ed. Andrew Leach & Emina Petrovic, Wellington, November 2000:239-250.
- Malcolm, Jill "Career Check: Architecture" in *City Girl* (June/July nd [circa 1982]):70.
- Matthewson, Gill to Mark Wigley, letter, 14 December 1984
- Matthewson, Gill to Mark Wigley, letter, 27 February 1985
- Matthewson, Gill to Mark Wigley, letter, 18 April 1985
- Matthewson, Gill, Diary entry, 1986.
- Matthewson, Gill "Take it to the limit: women as Architectural Breach" *Limits: proceedings from the 21st Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians Australia & New Zealand: Melbourne* 2004 ed Harriet Edquist & Hélène Frichot, Melbourne, Australia: Society of Architectural Historians, Australia & New Zealand, 2004 2:319-325.
- Reynolds, Christeller, & Thomson to Claire Chambers [distributed widely to women architects], letter, 28 May 1979.
- Shannon, Susan "Architecture and Equity: Education and Practice" *Architectural Theory Review* (April 1996) 1(1):48-62.
- Thomson, Janet. Personal communication, conversation, 23 November 2009.
- WIA Newsletters and minutes, WIA material courtesy of Claire Chambers Architect Archive