

ART & DESIGN

I Am Not the Decorator: Female Architects Speak Out

By ROBIN POGREBIN APRIL 12, 2016

“For a woman to go out alone in architecture is still very, very hard,” the architect Zaha Hadid said. “It’s still a man’s world.” Ms. Hadid often stated that she did not want to serve as a symbol of progress for women in her profession. But, inevitably, she did. A study on diversity in the profession released this year by the American Institute of Architects found that “women strongly believe that there is not gender equity in the industry”; that women and minorities say they are less likely to be promoted to more senior positions; and that gender and race are obstacles to equal pay for comparable positions. Since Ms. Hadid won the Pritzker Prize in 2004, the percentage of female architects in the United States has barely grown, increasing to 25.7 percent from 24 percent, according the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

After Ms. Hadid died on March 31 at 65, The New York Times, in an informal online questionnaire, asked female architects among its readers to talk candidly about their experiences in the profession: the progress they’ve made and the obstacles they still face on construction sites and in client meetings. Below are edited excerpts from a few of some 200 responses we

received.

‘Pushing Through Assumptions’

“We absolutely face obstacles. Every single day. It’s still largely a white, male-dominated field, and seeing a woman at the job site or in a big meeting with developers is not that common. Every single day I have to remind someone that I am, in fact, an architect. And sometimes not just an architect, but *the* architect. I’m not white, wearing black, funky glasses, tall or male. I’m none of the preconceptions of what an architect might be, and that means that every time I introduce myself as an architect, I have to push through the initial assumptions. Every new job site means a contractor who will assume I am the assistant, decorator or intern. It usually isn’t until the third meeting that the project team looks to me for the answers to the architectural problems.”

—Yen Ha, New York

“African-American women make up less than 0.3 percent of the architecture industry. There are approximately 300 licensed African-American women architects in the whole of the United States. I am a rarity in the field. It’s overwhelming being in an industry that doesn’t see your demographic enough to correlate it with the occupation you love.”

—Farida Abu-Bakare, Atlanta

The Boys’ Club

“Subcontractors, who have [fewer] opportunities to work with women architects and designers, seem to think that we do not even know how to change a light bulb and that our only role is just to decorate interiors. Many subcontractors seem very surprised whenever I give them solutions.”

—HJ Kim

“There is always that moment, while stepping onto a new construction site, that a few might consider a woman an intruder in a boys’ club. This quickly dissipates as soon as I treat them with respect. After all, they are the craftsmen that work with the materials daily. I am eager to learn from them, and they can elevate my design. Being a woman has also had some advantages, as certain clients feel more comfortable working with a woman during the design process.”

—Amanda McNally, North Palm Beach, Fla.

“I’ve seen younger women with architecture degrees pushed into more drafting, more into interiors and landscapes, while the men seem to think they are “better” at designing the building structure and are given more face time with the clients. A woman in large firms may be kept in the background.

—Maddy Samaddar-Johnson, New York

“The design profession won’t be integrated until the construction industry is, too. (Good luck with that!)”

—Bronwyn Barry, San Francisco

The Commission Gap

“It is easier to get commissions from educational, health care and governmental institutions than from fields which are very male-dominated. The only female in a board room discussing a project is the one in the skinny dress, delivering messages and setting lunches!”

—Juann Khoory, Wellesley, Mass.

“I have heard discussions where Zaha Hadid’s name came up as a suggestion to do a high-rise tower, and the men around the table declared her too risky. This is emblematic of the obstacles inherent in the field of high-

profile projects. There needs to be more awareness among women in a position to be clients to consider hiring architectural firms that have women in design leadership roles.”

—Claire Weisz, New York

“My eagerness to learn is perceived as ignorance. My strong voice and firm stance are perceived as ‘bitchiness.’ It’s unlikely and uncommon for women to get commissions, gain corporate clients and to be given high-level responsibility.”

—Patricia Galván, San Jose, Calif.

The Road to Success

“I did what most successful female architects did before Zaha: I partnered with my husband. Saying that sounds horrible, but I never thought it could be different. I simply chose not to swim against the tide. Yes, he knows I use him sometimes to open the road for me, and he is fine with that.”

—Flavia Quintanilha, Brazil

“There was a time when women were not allowed to be members of the Century Club. About that same time, as a young architect trying to survive, I was doing exhibition design and had been hired by an N.Y.C. art collector to do an installation of Piranesi prints for the Century Club. When the club learned that I was a woman architect, I was not allowed to install the exhibit. I, like many other women architects, found it much easier and less humiliating to just strike out on my own. I have been in my own practice now for 20 years.”

—Christine Matheu, Bloomington, Ind.

The Pritzker Path

“To get a few more Pritzker-winning women, let’s:

- Never call anyone over age 18 a girl, especially not in a client meeting. This is not cute; it is patronizing.

- Make sure you introduce yourself to women on the project. (I have experienced this countless times in a meeting, where someone introduces themselves to the rest of the team but somehow skips me.)

- Do not comment on their bodies/clothing more than you might a man’s. (Don’t make jokes about them dieting)

- Don’t apologize for swearing in front of them. This is 2016; I am pretty sure women can handle it.

- Don’t interrupt them or talk over them.

- Don’t devalue their social ability. Getting everyone together for an office event can show leadership and planning. Being able to communicate is a key skill in a field with so many consultants.

- Do promote women into positions of power and influence. My previous firm rarely promoted women. I eventually quit. Next thing you know, they promoted all the women in the office. I like to think something got through.”

—Amity Kurt, New York

The Work/Life Balance

“No overtime pay and no paid parental leave can make it hard to justify staying in a profession. As a new mom, I feel like I must choose between advancing to a principal, or being there for my child. I will forgo the opportunity of making principal if it means I can be an involved parent.”

—Rosemary Park, Cambridge, Mass.

“After my daughter was born, it was clearly not possible to support her and do great work. I work as an urban designer for a planning department in a major city — the culture of planners is remarkably different and healthy. I never had trouble until I accepted a top award, seven months pregnant, in front of a large pool of existing and potential clients. After building a strong reputation for great work, the phone stopped ringing.”

—Maia Small, San Francisco

The profession is losing women faster than imaginable. This is due to the low wages and long hours at the start of one’s career, as well as those seeking to be parents. My firm is predominantly women, and I offer lots of work/life balance to my team so they can lead fulfilling lives, given the many hats they wear each day.

—Carol Kurth, Bedford, N.Y.

The Glass Ceiling

Women struggle far more for institutional and corporate work and for high-level responsibilities. The ratio of men to women was 50-50 in my graduating class at Columbia University in 1992, but today, most of my female classmates have dropped out of the profession.

—Deborah Ascher Barnstone, Sydney, Australia

“I have practiced now for 40 years, and the percentage of women in leadership roles in the profession has improved only a small percentage in that time. After my first five to seven years, being treated as kind of a cute or sweet team member, I left for a position in urban design in the public sector, retaining my own self-identity as an architect/urban designer. Without that clarity, I’d have left the field completely. The women partners I know are still the people who left other firms to begin their own.”

—Rebecca G. Barnes, Seattle, Washington

“I ended up creating my own ‘mommy-track,’ working as a sole practitioner, doing mostly single-family residential work for almost 20 years. I had always aspired to work in the public sphere, and by designing high-end houses in Marin County, Calif., I had clearly failed on that front. At some level, I will always wonder whether I failed at my profession, or if my profession failed me. That said, I am an optimist and am actively involved in the **Missing 32% Project** [formed to illuminate gender challenges] at the American Institute for Architects San Francisco, so I can help figure this out for younger architects and for the profession itself, which is sadly hemorrhaging talent because it has been unresponsive to the needs of its members.”

—Sharon Portnoy, Mill Valley, Calif.

Mentoring

“I worked for Zaha when I was first out of college. I did not have an architecture degree, but she hired me anyway and then encouraged me to apply to graduate school when I feared I would not get in. (I did.) I credit her influence directly for my decision to pursue architecture.”

—Marion Cage McCollam, New Orleans

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