WOMEN IN ARCHITECTURE: FIVE YEARS ON

Sandra Manley and Ann de Graft-Johnson 1

University of the West of England, Department of Planning and Architecture, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol, BS16 1QY, UK.

In October 2003 the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) appointed a University of the West of England (UWE) research team to investigate reasons why a disproportionate number of women were leaving architectural practice. The statistical information available on representation of women within the architectural profession and those going through architectural education and training indicated that there was an issue which needed to be addressed. Whilst the percentage of women entering architectural studies had increased from 27% in 1990 to 38% in 2002/3, the percentage of women within the architectural profession as a whole, at 13%, had remained fairly static for a number of years. The UWE team presented ‘Why do Women Leave Architecture’ in June 2003. Five years on from this research a review of progress has been undertaken. Concentrating mainly on what the organisations whose work can influence architectural education and practice have done in response to the original research, the review examines the responses and actions taken, assesses their effectiveness and provides an update on the situation. The findings are both positive and negative. On the positive side current figures indicate that the overall percentage of women in architecture has increased to 17% and most of the organisations have taken concerns about women leaving architecture seriously, although there is still much more work to do, including a need to find out more about the nature of good practice. The overall conclusion is that a more proactive approach is needed to ensure that women can thrive in the architectural profession, as this is seen as a benefit for both males and females and can contribute to the development of a more diverse profession that reflects the community it serves.

Key words: architecture, diversity, equality, inequality, women.

INTRODUCTION

In 2002 the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), prompted by Architects for Change (AfC), an organisation within the RIBA that promotes equality of opportunity, became increasingly concerned about the female brain drain from the architectural profession and ‘the need to understand more fully the human experience behind the statistics’ (RIBA 2003). Statistics published in 2001 revealed that although 37% of students embarking on architectural courses in the UK were female, the overall percentage of women in the profession stood at only 13% (Mirza and Nacey 2001). Further statistical analysis revealed that, following qualification, a significant number of women must have been leaving the profession, as without this attrition, the percentage of qualified women would be increasing more noticeably year by year. The RIBA resolved to find out why women were leaving, not least because of the implications for the public image of architects and the perception that clients were becoming dissatisfied with the narrow profile of the profession (RIBA 2003). The RIBA commissioned research into the problem of female retention from the

1 Ann.Degraft-Johnson@uwe.ac.uk

University of the West of England (UWE). The published report was entitled ‘Why do women leave architecture?’ (WWLA) (de Graft-Johnson, Manley and Greed 2003).

The research methodology concentrated on exploring with women who were about to leave or who had already left the practice of architecture the reasons for their departure. Through a combination of a web based questionnaire, individual interviews and the examination of the findings by an expert group, the research team concluded that it was not possible to identify one particular problem that was causing women to depart. The conclusion was that in most cases where a woman had taken the decision to leave the profession, she had done so with considerable regret after an incremental series of events and circumstances had eventually led to her decision. Many women who took part in the research had commented that issues cited as reasons for leaving, such as low pay, sidelining and poor promotion prospects, long working hours, the macho culture and the lack of scope for flexible working, were also disadvantaging men. A number of participants voiced concern that these and other factors would ultimately be detrimental to the profession as a whole.

Concerns about the female brain drain were also seen to be indicators that all was not well in the architectural profession regarding the extent to which it had embraced the need for greater equality and diversity. In other words, if women were finding it difficult to cope in the current cultural climate, what hope was there for other groups, such as people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, disabled architects or other minorities?

Rhys Jones (2006) has suggested that it was the aftermath of the Latham Report (1994) that led to greater realisation in the construction industry that addressing issues surrounding equality and diversity could no longer be left to languish in the “too difficult” tray. However progress seemed to be slow. Interviews and discussions undertaken as part of the study had picked up from many women architects a distinct cynicism regarding the launch of yet another initiative. The danger of what is described as “initiative overload” by Gale and Davidson (2006) is that yet another failed report on women in architecture could have been seen as damaging rather than productive. The idea that the 112 recommendations for action would be ignored or worse still that the architectural establishment in the form of the RIBA and ARB (Architects Registration Board) and major architectural practices would continue to take the view that there was no need to take action, seemed likely to be an outcome. This cynicism was fuelled by the fact that women architects in practice reported that their colleagues believed erroneously that these matters had been addressed at the time of the Equal Pay Act in 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act in 1975 or that the real reason why women left the profession was associated with the fact that women have the wrong type of brains to be architects (Philips 2003; Glaser 2003). If either of these arguments were taken as read, then there would be no need to take any action and the WWLA report could be left to quietly gather dust.

Notwithstanding these reservations, in considering the recommendations for action the challenges faced in trying to remove these matters from the “too difficult” to handle tray did not prevent the recommendations of the report from addressing the whole spectrum of the profession from the individual practitioner through to the action that should be taken by the RIBA/ARB. Five years after the publication of the report is an appropriate time to review progress.
FIVE YEARS ON: MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF CHANGE

Changing attitudes in the construction industry generally, with its reputation of being dirty, sexist and racist (Rhys Jones 2006) is challenging and as Dainty et al have pointed out, imposing cultural change from on high is fraught with difficulty and likely to meet with resistance (Dainty et al 2006). Architectural practice shares many of the characteristics of the wider construction profession. Women interviewed as part of WWLA research raised concerns regarding the expectations of a predominantly macho culture and many encountered blatant sexism. In the macho environment identified, both men and women were expected to suffer for architecture. Many of the women who had not been able to juggle family and other caring responsibilities within the long hours culture of the profession had left the practice of architecture for other employment opportunities where they would be able to cope; hence the brain drain of talent from the profession.

In a profession that prides itself on its individualism and independence from authority it is likely to mean that top down initiatives will be poorly received. The shadow of equal opportunities initiatives and misguided political correctness may also linger and increase resistance (Davidson and Fielden 2003, Burke 2005 Gale and Davidson 2006). There are undoubtedly many impediments that prevent change (de Graft-Johnson et al 2006) and action by the organisations that influence opinion and practice can not alone bring about culture change. However, change must start somewhere. Looking for evidence of leadership from RIBA, ARB and other organisations that can influence practice and exploring the way in which architectural schools are responding to the need for change is a good place to start.

ORGANISATIONAL RESPONSES

Responses by ARB

The Architects Registration Board (ARB) was established by statute in 1997 as the independent regulator for the architects' profession in the United Kingdom. ARB aims to protect the public by ensuring that high standards of professional education, practice and conduct are developed and maintained. The standards are set out in the Code of Professional Conduct. The ARB did not publicly respond directly to the WWLA report but appear to have undertaken its own exercise in part as a result of some of the WWLA findings and recommendations.

The ARB ‘Composition of the Register Survey’ (2005) was a study relating to how architects experienced the ARB. There is no express statement that the study was triggered by the WWLA research conclusions although by inference, from their list of references, the focus is on equalities issues primarily relating to gender. The ARB study was both quantitative and qualitative. The sample of 3,000 is significantly greater than that in the WWLA research and involved surveying both genders, two thirds of whom were female. The ARB achieved a 40% response rate of 1208 and a balance which correlated with the original 1/3 to 2/3 male/female sample. In addition to the survey 51 interviews were undertaken. Because of the lack of some dates and sources, it is not entirely possible to gain a clear idea of where the study findings sit in terms of general progress and current situation. This is disappointing. The statistics contained within the report do however indicate increasing representation of women in the architectural profession over time. This leads to a younger age profile for female architects compared with males. The majority of women were employees whereas the majority of men were principals. Over twice as many women (30%)
worked part time contrasted with 14% of men. A number of issues identified are very
general, such as the need for ‘better understanding of the regulation of the profession’.
They do refer to Professional Indemnity Insurance (PII) which was one of the issues
raised in the WWLA report. Other considerations relate to support, the
acknowledgement of older, non practising architects and the feasibility of ethnic
monitoring. One of the specific recommendations made by the WWLA report, that
gender neutral language should be introduced in all documents, is not addressed in the
ARB paper and some of the ARB material contains gendered language; for instance in
the "PII Guidelines" and "Regulation of Title", which still use male only references. It
is not clear if any specific positive actions were undertaken by the ARB as a result of
their survey or the recommendations of the WWLA report.

**Responses by RIBA**

The RIBA made an impressively speedy response to the research report and published
initial reactions when the document was still in draft form (RIBA 2003). It is
illuminating to examine in detail the intended action and the reality almost five years
later by reference to a series of topics highlighted by the RIBA report as matters that
could make a difference to the position of women.

**Policy**

The intention was to work closely with external bodies such as the ARB, the
Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), the Construction
Industry Council, the Standing Conference of Heads of Schools of Architecture
(SCHOSA), and the Centre for Built Environment Education (CEBE) in a bid to
mainstream equality and diversity throughout all RIBA activities. The reality is that
the RIBA has been the main instigator of change. They have spearheaded a number of
initiatives and revised and updated key policy documents to reflect the equality and
diversity agenda. Perhaps most significantly the update to the Code of Professional
Conduct published by RIBA in July 2005 now includes Principle 3.1 which states,

"Members should respect the beliefs and opinions of other people, recognise social
diversity and treat everyone fairly. They should also have a proper concern for the
effect that their work may have on its users and the local community."

This contrasts with the earlier Code of Practice (RIBA 1997) which stated,

"A member shall in every circumstance conduct himself in a manner which respects
the legitimate rights and interests of others."

This change is significant in that the revised statement refers to the social
responsibility of an architect toward the user of the buildings and the community as
well as acknowledging that society is diverse rather than homogenous. Disappointed
women architects interviewed as part of the WWLA research often cited concern
about the profession's failure to consider social goals as a major cause of their
disenchantment with the profession. For example, several women mentioned that their
colleagues devalued the significance of their own concerns about designing
inclusively or placing user needs at the heart of the design process as a method of
eliminating discriminatory built environments (Matrix 1984, Weisman 1992 Imrie and
Hall 2001). Principle 3.1 of the Code is now also rendered gender neutral and the use
of language abandons the rather legalistic style of the previous document in favour of
a clearer style of writing (RIBA 2005).

A series of accompanying Practice Notes on employing students clarify the role of the
employer in relation to equal opportunities and employment (RIBA 2008).
Furthermore, when the national society for architectural students, ARCHAOS launched a Good Practices Campaign in 2006 it was welcomed and supported by the RIBA. The campaign encouraged architectural practices to sign up to a fairer system of employing Stage One and Stage Two students through the use of model contracts of employment (Gegg 2004). 509 practices had signed up to the Good Practices Campaign by April 2008 (ARCHAOS 2008). Jack Pringle, president of RIBA, recognised the benefits this might have in promoting diversity in the profession in a statement on 10th March 2006 by saying,

"As President of the RIBA, I am delighted to endorse ARCHAOS' Good Practice Campaign, and to support good employment practice for architecture students through the model contracts detailed on www.pedr.co.uk. I believe that promoting good working conditions for all of our members is an investment that will secure a strong and diverse future profession" (Pringle 2006).

Supporting RIBA members as employers
The RIBA Employment Policy was updated in 2004 to include more information for architects in the role of employers. A positive aspect is that it demonstrates an acceptance of the responsibilities of both employers and employees. This is significant as inevitably the employer alone can not create an environment in which everyone can thrive. The employee must also bear responsibility for his or her own personal development and behaviour and make changes to facilitate a better working atmosphere for women and other minorities.

The policy includes three key strands. The first strand provides information about legal rights and responsibilities. Employees are expected to comply with the RIBA Code of Professional Conduct (RIBA 2005) and hence treat people fairly. Possibly the responsibility of employees to avoid discriminatory behaviour in all its direct and indirect forms should have been given a stronger emphasis. The second strand covers good practice in employment and encourages the promotion of a healthy work life balance and avoidance of a long hour’s culture. There is no advice about how this might be achieved or any suggestion that employers should monitor the extent to which the long hours culture has pervaded the individual office. Strand 3, which explores more specifically the promotion of diversity by recognising the business, social and environmental benefits of good employment and diversity in practice, seems rather vague in its intent. Employers and employees are likely to be unclear about what this really means. The final strand of the policy document provides some suggestions for recruiting, retaining and promoting RIBA members throughout life and career changes. Again there is scope for more explanation, but its general content at least recognises that people’s careers may not all follow a continuous and unbroken timeline.

Member Data and Promotion of Diversity
The intention to allow clients to search specifically for women and minority led practices does not appear to have been put into effect, as the RIBA Practice register does not facilitate such a search. However, the RIBA does offer a nomination service which offers the possibility for clients to request names of women or black and minority ethnic (BME) led practices.

Establish Diverse role models within the Institute and Profession
Under this heading RIBA proposed a number of initiatives that would promote women in the profession. There have been some positive developments. Representing the diverse range of architects for press and publicity resulted in the establishment of a
Diversity Taskforce in 2007 to continue the work of AfC and spearhead specific initiatives to drive forward the agenda. SOBA (The Society of Black Architects) has introduced a scheme whereby SOBA members in practice operate as mentors to black students and a number of other mentoring schemes are being developed, most notably by the south east branch of RIBA.

Other successes include the DiverseCity exhibition, developed in 2003, which showcases the work of women and BME architects. Between 2003 and 2008 the exhibition has visited 22 cities nationally and toured worldwide, including Boston, Beijing, Istanbul, Delhi and Palestine. The exhibition has been added to as it proceeded and is described as a global snowball (DiverseCity 2008). Of course the existence of the exhibition in a particular venue does not necessarily mean that a large number of people will comprehend the contribution that women and others have to make to the profession. It is likely that people already committed to the promotion of diversity in architecture are the most numerous visitors.

On a more negative note the President's medals, which is an annual award for ‘excellence in the study of architecture’ had an all male panel in 2007 for the design element and there was only one female member of a panel of four assessing the dissertation entries (President's Medals 2008).

**Improved Careers Information**

Whilst not addressing specific under-represented groups, the RIBA has in its endeavour to create a more diverse profession, revisited its careers information and endorsed the notion of a more representative body of architects and architecture students. The RIBA Education Department statement endorses this view.

"Architecture reflects the society that builds it, but it also affects the way that society develops. This means we need architects who can respond to the different needs and values of all sections of the community. In the past most architects were drawn from a fairly narrow sector of society but now it is essential we ensure that the profession represents every social and cultural background" (RIBA 2008).

In addition to the mission statement, the format and structure of the online career’s advice provides more straightforward information about architecture as a career and the routes to qualification.

**Career Breaks and Returning to Practice**

The RIBA has recognised that male and female architects may take chosen or recession-enforced breaks from the profession and has sponsored a week long course to be held in 2008 at the Department of Spatial Design at London Metropolitan University to support returners of both sexes. This course is welcomed, although there are questions about whether people will be able to afford the £720 per week fee plus the cost of accommodation and subsistence. This amounts to a substantial financial outlay. However, in time it may be possible to develop bursary schemes and establish regional centres in addition to the London based course. (London Metropolitan University 2008)

**Education**

The extent to which RIBA can influence the way in which architectural education responds to the concerns expressed in WWLA is limited as the architectural schools have considerable freedom to operate as they think fit once the initial validation of a course has taken place. Periodic visiting board reviews of performance do enable the boards to consider the extent to which schools are taking a serious approach to
equality and diversity if they so desire, as consideration of equal opportunities is now
a standard item on the agenda for Visiting Boards (RIBA.) The reports for some
schools such as Sheffield University, (RIBA, 2004) provided detailed breakdowns of
students by gender, ethnicity and academic background and the board “applauded the
work undertaken within the School to develop novel assessment techniques” and "the
outreach work with local schools that aimed to widen recruitment". Other reports have
been rather bland and mainly confined to pointing out that the host university has
addressed equality and diversity at an institutional level.

Table 1 RIBA (2007) Visiting Board Reports - summary of references to equal opportunities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>% of female students</th>
<th>Recent initiatives and commentaries on equality and diversity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newcastle-on Tyne</td>
<td>Part 1:42</td>
<td>Detailed breakdown of sex, age and ethnicity of students and staff provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford Brookes</td>
<td>Part 2:39</td>
<td>Gender balance described as &quot;satisfactory&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huddersfield</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Majority of academic staff are male&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Diverse range of students as regards ethnic background&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leeds Metropolitan</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Impressively detailed data on the sex, age, ethnicity and disability status&quot; of student population but a lack of analysis of figures. Need for improved gender balance of staff recognised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De Montfort</td>
<td>Part 1:30</td>
<td>Staff profile &quot;improved&quot; but no details available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part 2: variable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| UCL Bartlett School of
  Architecture                |                      | Gender balance described as "good" but diversity figures "incomplete" |
| East London                  |                      | Initiatives include summer school for students from schools in Camden and bursary scheme |
|                               |                      | "very diverse student body"                                |
| London Metropolitan          |                      | "Exemplary policies and commitment to social justice"       |
|                               |                      | Appointments strategy reflects diversity of the student body |
|                               |                      | Foundation course supports admission of mature students and people from diverse backgrounds |
| Brighton                      |                      | "More female students than national average and commendable ethnic diversity" Dean and Head of School are female. |

More recent visiting board reports do seem to be taking equality and diversity matters
more seriously than hitherto (see table 1). However, information on the extent to
which detailed consideration and more significantly analysis of statistics and whether
consequent action plans have been prepared is inconsistent. It is not clear whether this
inconsistency is because the Visiting Boards do not request this information or
because schools do not provide it. RIBA could require more information and obtain
figures for student performance and progression and staff representation in a
consistent way. This would be a useful way of analysing and monitoring performance
and ensuring that action plans are developed where needed. It would also be possible
to investigate more closely teaching and learning techniques, the extent to which
equality and diversity matters are embedded into the curriculum and whether concerns
expressed about the over reliance on architectural "crits" as the main assessment
 technique, have been addressed, given that the confrontational style of some "crits" is
seen by many students as a demoralising rather than motivating experience (Sara and
Parnell 2004).

Responses by CEBE

The Centre for Education in the Built Environment (CEBE) is part of the Subject
Network of the Higher Education Academy which aims to provide discipline based
support to enhance the quality of learning and teaching in the UK Higher Education
Built Environment community. CEBE supports, through funding and organisational assistance the setting up of Special Interest Groups (SIGs) to investigate specific topics of relevance to the built environment community. In response to the WWLA research and the parallel study undertaken by CABE which looked particularly at the experience of BME students, a SIG was set up in 2005 “to explore issues of student retention and achievement on professionally recognised architecture programmes”. The general conclusions of the SIG (CEBE 2005) raised concerns over the culture and profile of schools as well as educational aspects.

The overall conclusion was that “a lack of diversity in teaching and learning methods; in learning resources; and in role models, contributes to problems of retention and erosion amongst women and BME architecture students in UK universities.” A number of recommendations to Schools of Architecture were made to provide a framework for positive action.

Response by SCHOSA

The recent work of SCHOSA, the forum in which Heads of Schools of Architecture can exchange good practice and debate issues of common concern does not appear to have included any specific equality and diversity initiatives. SCHOSA is an influential group that should have the power to bring about change if the motivation to make changes is there. The group, which currently consists of 38 men and 5 women from the accredited courses, has a council which is made up of 6 males and one female. The aim currently being pursued by SCHOSA is to change the current three part process of entering the profession to a simpler “single gateway” approach. If this happens it is likely to be beneficial and make architecture a more diverse profession by enabling a wider range of students to ultimately become qualified architects.

Response by Schools of Architecture

The analysis of the RIBA visiting board reports provides some insight into the way in which the schools of architecture have responded to increasing concerns about equality and diversity issues, but this can only be a partial view. To explore this response in depth would require more research, but it is instructive to note how the Heads of Schools responded to a recent request for examples of good practice in relation to equality and diversity. It is evident from an analysis of responses that there are islands of good practice; for example, in London Metropolitan, East London, Sheffield, Newcastle upon Tyne and Oxford Brookes Universities. The responses from some schools implied that the head considered their school to be exemplary in applying equal opportunities policies. Without qualification this might mean that the school believed that there were no problems to address. This raises cause for concern in the light of previous research (CABE 2005 de Graft-Johnson Manley Greed 2003, CEBE 2005).

CONCLUSIONS

It is evident that the concerns raised by WWLA have been taken seriously a number of the organisations whose work can influence the culture and profile the architectural profession. The RIBA have been particularly active in making changes both on the professional and educational fronts. This is a positive step. Schools of Architecture have responded with variable levels of enthusiasm. There remains considerable scope to develop more effective collection and analysis of statistical data and to develop action plans to address any imbalances within architectural schools. SCHOSA could take a lead in this. There is opportunity to develop innovative teaching, learning and
assessment methods to encourage and support a more diverse student community. The curriculum should be revisited to ensure that matters that women and members of other minority groups feel are of value are embedded. Challenging the belief that designing for diversity and user needs represents an undesirable straightjacket that restricts the freedom and creativity of the designer is part of this agenda for change.

RIBA could encourage change more vigorously through its monitoring of equality and diversity issues and the investigations of visiting boards, particularly in relation to schools that have not taken the issue very seriously or believe that no such problem exists in their institution.

There is a need to examine the extent to which and how the practice community has responded, as the organisations alone can only advise and encourage progress. Further research is necessary to identify systematically examples of good practice and celebrate and disseminate these so that it becomes the normal expectation. The concentration of research such as the WWLA report has been mainly on the negative experiences; focussing on the positive would be a valuable for the architectural profession's external profile and help to spread the expectation that women in architecture and other minority groups should work within an environment that enables them to thrive and contribute effectively to the practice of architecture.

Finally the fact that the percentage of women in architecture is now recorded as 17% as opposed to the 13% in 2002 (ARB 2007) seems to indicate that small but significant improvements in the male/female balance in the profession are being made.

REFERENCES


Manley and de Graft-Johnson


