ARCHITECTURE: A GOOD CAREER FOR GIRLS?

Val Caven

Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University, Burton Street, Nottingham, NG1 4BU, UK

The construction industry and its related professions have a negative image in terms of attracting and retaining women. This paper is work in progress which reports the findings of a 12-year longitudinal study into the careers of women architects who have been interviewed three times over a period of 12 years. Firstly, to investigate what attracted them to the architecture profession and latterly to examine why they remain there. Findings show that the choice of profession is very much intuitive rather than a reasoned, logical decision and that while the women are aware of the negative aspects of the industry, the intrinsic rewards from architecture outweigh them.

Keywords: architecture, career, women.

INTRODUCTION

The careers of women in the construction industry have been subjected to much academic scrutiny particularly as to why it has historically not appealed to women. The industry is perceived as being sexist, physically demanding, combative and male-dominated (Watts, 2007; Greed, 2000; Agapiou, 2002; Fielden et al., 2000; Ellison, 2001). The architecture profession too has come attracted academic attention with the research focussing on occupational stress (Sang et al., 2007), reasons for women leaving (De Graft-Johnson, et al 2003; Adams and Tancred, 2000) and other professional difficulties (Fowler and Wilson, 2004). Much less attention has been paid to those women who have remained committed to their careers in the profession and their motivations for doing so. This paper seeks to redress this imbalance by reporting on a longitudinal study of women architects examining their careers over a 12-year period of time investigating initially why they chose to enter the profession and how their careers have developed, and if the construction industry is as difficult an environment for women as reported, then to seek to explain why the women remain in the profession.

In a profession such as architecture, there is a notion that the commitment of the individual to his/her work is greater than someone who has not invested in his or her training and qualifications to such an extent. This is also implicit with work orientations. It takes a seven-year period of both study and practical experience in order to qualify as an architect in the UK – a length of time that would be likely to deter anyone who was not fully committed to entering the profession. In addition, women are much underrepresented in the profession with only 14% of corporate RIBA members are women (RIBA 2007). The combined factors of professional membership and of being a minority in that profession suggest that both commitment to career and orientation to work should be strong for women and these are the areas of theory drawn on as a basis for the empirical research.

1 valerie.caven@ntu.ac.uk
LITERATURE REVIEW

The notion of using orientations to work as an indicator of commitment and motivation was first developed in the work of Goldthorpe et al (1969) where it was suggested that there was either an ‘instrumental’ (motivated solely by money) or ‘expressive’ (work as self-actualisation) orientation to work. The concept applies differently to women because of their childbearing role, the structure of the labour market and the different employment arrangements, such as part-time working, which are more likely to be adopted by women than men. The extensive literature on women’s orientations to work draws principally on Hakim (1996, 1998, 2000, 2003) but with additional contributions and responses by a variety of others (McRae 2003a, 2003b; Fagan 2001; Crompton and Le Feuvre, 1996; Crompton and Harris, 1998; Ginn et al., 1996; Bruegel, 1996; Walsh, 1999; Procter and Padi2field, 1999).

Hakim’s thesis is that women have qualitatively different orientations to work based on their preference for involvement in the labour market; Firstly, there are those she categorises as being fully committed to working full-time having invested in their own human capital and choosing career over motherhood; secondly, those who attempt to combine both career and children, classed as ‘adaptives’; and thirdly, she identifies those who give precedence to the homemaker career and who do not invest in training and qualifications except for the purposes of intellectual dowry, giving priority to the family and supporting the main breadwinner.

While there is value in identifying these forms of work orientation, the main weakness of Hakim’s work is both the lack of dialogue and research carried out with the women themselves (Fagan 2001). Procter and Padfield (1999) in contesting Hakim’s argument state that careers are planned and replanned according to the various opportunities available and when these opportunities present themselves. They conclude that women do not have a single orientation to work and that priorities change in line with different circumstances. Fagan’s (2001) more realistic framework for interpreting work orientations takes into account issues such as the position in the lifecycle of the individual, as well as the interplay of household and workplace factors. This arrangement acknowledges that there are both internal and external influences on work orientations and moreover, that these effects can and do change over time. These will now be considered in turn:

The financial imperative: Hakim focuses solely on preference as determining labour market involvement and does not take the financial imperative to work into account. While there is an instrumental aspect to orientation to all kinds of work (Goldthorpe et al., 1969), financial reasons are one of the key defining factors determining an individual’s involvement in the labour market, from avoiding poverty to the desire to maintain a certain standard of lifestyle. Bradley’s (1999) work shows that two thirds of the women in her North East of England study described their earnings as essential and a further 28% describing them as important. Changes in the structure of the labour market have led to more women being in employment and the decline of the male breadwinner model of the family leads to women’s earnings being important particularly in lower income families (Bradley et al 2000).

Intrinsic reasons: aside from the financial imperative, people work for intrinsic reasons. Studies using the ‘lottery question’ have shown that the majority of people would continue working, although not necessarily in their current job or context, if they became financial secure (Meaning of Work Survey, 1987; British Social Attitudes Survey carried out annually). The reasons for this are related to the status
and type of job (Baruch, 2004), the moral imperative to work (Noon and Blyton, 2002) and, where work is considered to be a central life activity (Mannheim and Cohen, 1978; Mannheim and Dubin, 1986).

Time: It is unclear whether there is a link between work orientations and the amount of time spent working although Hakim assumes that women who are committed to their careers, and who therefore display a strong orientation to work, will work full-time. Rose (1994) refutes this by stating that it is possible to have a strong commitment to employment without prioritising the demands of work over non-work activities. Ginn et al (1996) suggest that it is the interaction of demands on women’s time combined with costs of childcare that determine whether they work full-time or part-time. Other studies have also shown that there are many women who do not have dependent children (or other caring responsibilities) who only want part-time work for a variety of other reasons but who show a strong identification with their work (Bruegel, 1996; Walsh, 1999).

Career lifecycle: The position in the career lifecycle is related to an individual’s involvement with work with the early stages of career being associated with developing and establishing a career (Super, 1957; Super et al., 1996; Levinson, 1978) and this, indicating a greater identification with work. However, career stage models are associated with chronological age (Super, 1957, 1980; Schein, 1978; Levinson, 1978) which assumes that decisions relating to participation in the labour market are made at an early age and are static not reacting to changes which take place either in the lives of the individuals or in the labour market. The difficulties with this are firstly, that the development stages of the career coincide with women’s childbearing years and secondly, that career changers and late starters are not accommodated.

Dex (1987) characterises the pattern of women’s employment as M-shaped, falling as a result of and rising in between the births of children with periods of part-time employment incorporated throughout. The position and size of the peaks and troughs of the M-shape will vary among women. Bradley (1999) has shown that women are less ambitious than men only between the ages of thirty to thirty nine, which is likely to coincide with producing children. Fagan contests this arguing that “having a child is associated with a decline in employment commitment for men as well as for women” (Fagan, 2001:249) while Doorewaard et al (2004) argue there is no significant difference in the orientations of women with young children compared to those without.

Just as traditional theories relating to motivation attempt to explain security needs, achievement needs and esteem needs but are presented as fixed and predetermined, the same can be said of the orientations debate. The literature reviewed above brings together a wide range of issues relating to motivation and work orientation but the propensity for change over time is ignored. There will be different influences on orientation to work and commitment to career depending on many different, and often, conflicting demands throughout the course of life which will undeniably have an impact. However, to date little or no research has aimed to examine work orientations in a longitudinal sense, although studies have been replicated (for example, Crompton et al 2005); they have focussed on asking the same questions to different respondents. The discussion will now turn to the longitudinal study which provides the focus for discussion in the paper.
METHOD

Female architects in the East Midlands region of England have been interviewed twice – the first time in 1996 and follow up interviews were carried out during late 2001 and early 2002. The third round of interviews is currently taking place in Spring/Summer 2008. In 1996 there were 49 women corporate members in the East Midlands region of the architects’ professional body the Royal Institute of British Architects and all were contacted by letter, of these 37 were interviewed. In 2001, attempts were made to contact the original 37 subjects and 26 interviews were achieved. Of the 11 who were not contacted, two were retired at the time of the first interview and it was decided not to contact them again, one had retired since, and it was established that two had died. In 2008, of the 26 interviewed in 2001-02; 21 have been contacted and asked to take part in this follow up study. Interviews are currently being carried out at the time of writing and findings are thus currently limited.

The five/six-year interval between the interviews was considered to be a sufficient period of time to allow for change in both personal and professional lives of the women in that, for example, if young children had been a major influence in determining both work organisation and orientation then they would be older and perhaps no longer such a significant feature. In-depth biographical interviews were carried out on all occasions and the intention was to explore career histories and to draw out the changes which had taken place in the intervening periods. The interviews lasted from one hour to four hours and took a life history methodological approach (Jones, 1983) that is particularly appropriate for the study of career especially in a subjective sense (Evetts, 1996).

The initial interviews explored why the women had chosen architecture as a career; where they studied and length of time taken to qualify; how their career had developed since qualification; the highlights and low points of their career; the pressures and satisfactions; the rewards both intrinsic and extrinsic; and, the factors which may have helped or hindered the career. The second and third interviews were of a much more reflective nature examining the changes which had taken place in both work and non-work arenas. The rapport which had been generated between the interviewees and interviewer during the first interviews was a significant factor in aiding the depth and richness of the second and third interviews with several invitations to lunch and comments of “I’ve often wondered how your research was going” and “You know where to find me next time!”

All the interviews were taped and then transcribed. NUD.IST qualitative research software was used to help with the sorting and coding of the data for analysis. Initial coding was based on the interview schedule but emergent themes were explored and coded accordingly. This helps in the sense-making process of eliciting the meaning to the individual and how they consider their career and their lives in retrospect (Nicholson and West 1989). The discussion will now turn to the findings of the study.

THE MOTIVATION TO BECOME AN ARCHITECT

The commitment required prior to qualification in terms of time spent studying would suggest that the choice of architecture as a career would be made following a thorough examination of individual self-concept and the environment in which that individual lives (Super 1984) or by the ‘matching’ of the individual and occupation (Hall 1976). It would suggest that a certain amount of research would be carried out and careers
advice sought. However, the reality indicated that career choice was resolved along more subjective lines (Evetts 1996).

‘Basic Instinct’

The most frequent response to the question “why did you become an architect?” was that it was something they had wanted to do right from being a child.

It's a very basic instinct ... because I wanted to know how the buildings around me worked in the same way as it helps to know how a car works if you're going to drive it. It's a natural curiosity and this feeling that it's fun (Jennifer)

It's something I felt drawn to, really. I didn’t know anybody who was an architect, I always liked trying to draw things (Amanda)

Other influences included meeting other architects and finding out about the profession from them. This tended to happen during the teenage years when there was pressure to choose a career. Likewise, being good at certain subjects at school such as art and mathematics meant that architecture became an obvious career:

The only things that I was good at school were art and maths and there's not a lot you can do with art and maths (Rachel)

In other cases the qualification became a job requirement arising from an existing position. More objective criteria for career choice, such as salary or considering various options before settling upon architecture, did not feature strongly, whilst possibilities of promotion and career structure were not mentioned at all. Careers guidance while at school was universally described as poor. Several of the interviewees mentioned that their careers advisors felt architecture was not suitable as a profession for a woman and they were actively discouraged from applying.

STAYING COMMITTED TO THE PROFESSION

Financial motivations

Financial rewards in a profession are reputed to be higher than in other occupations with shorter periods of training. This is effectively a form of deferred compensation to offset the time spent studying prior to qualification as well as to reflect the prestige of the professional and the value of their qualification (Barber 1965).

It doesn't compare financially with other professions ... it's slightly the puritan work ethic or something but you'd be very, very lucky to do something you really wanted to do and be paid handsomely for it. ...I feel extremely lucky to have a job that I do enjoy doing... (Jennifer)

... the money we get is rubbish compared to everyone else. (Pam)

The pay is low relative to the responsibility and everything that you're expected to take on. (Catherine)

Each of the comments above makes a comparison with another profession. Architects are deemed to be on a par with doctors, lawyers and accountants in terms of professional structure but there are significant differences in terms of salary between the professions. Architects earn on average £40,000 per annum (RIBA 2007) but the range fully qualified staff is from £30,000 to £80,000.
Non-Monetary Rewards

The association of professional work with a stronger sense of personal identity and its central role in the life of the practitioner carries with it an inherent connection with implicit rewards (Kaufman 1982; Gerstl and Hutton 1966). To the extent that architecture as a profession is not well rewarded in a financial sense, the non-monetary rewards of following such a profession need to be explored in an attempt to provide an explanation for why the profession recruits and retains its practitioners.

Professionals are said to have a strong sense of vocation and monetary rewards are of reduced importance when compared to the non-monetary compensations. The job satisfaction element and the satisfying of creative and esteem needs came across as a very important aspect and represent the source of pleasure mentioned by Gerstl and Hutton (1966). It is also linked to meeting social needs and the fact that something pleasant has been created for the client or the building users which then creates a feeling of being involved with something of value for the creator, which then provides public service over private gain (Barber 1965). The following quotations illustrate the very personal satisfaction gained by the interviewees in seeing their designs ‘translated’ in to buildings:

Architects must have the most enormous egos and quite rightly. When you build something decent ... you think it could last 200 years and to see a building go up which you've designed ... that's a high (Denise)

I think from a purely selfish point of view I absolutely love seeing something that I've drawn come to life (Sarah)

I'm not motivated by money ... it's just trying to fulfil myself and my goals ...(Alison)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

A key feature which emerged was the apparent lack of planning which followed the initial choice of profession showing a greater awareness of career choice relating to Super et al’s (1996) ‘growth phase’ or Baruch’s (2004) ‘foundation, career entry and early advancement’ stages rather than of the later stages of ‘establishment and maintenance’ (Super et al., 1996) or the ‘later advancement and re-evaluation’ periods (Baruch, 2004). The structural and cultural barriers to women’s employment are also largely ignored. None of the interviewees spoke of being aware that they were entering a masculine environment or whether they had considered other careers in a similar setting such as quantity surveying. Where resistance was encountered it was from schools on the basis that architecture was not a suitable occupation for a woman. However, this appeared to add to the appeal and acted as a positive influence on the career choice.

Professions and professional bodies have long been regarded as perpetuating the exclusion of women through structural and cultural barriers, using patriarchy and gender as the justification for their actions. The RIBA too has played its part, Melvin (1997) reports that its formation did nothing to help the position of women architects because it reinforced and entrenched existing inequalities.

Women architects are more visible than their male counterparts because there are simply not the numbers in the profession for it to be generally accepted as a profession in which women work unlike law, medicine or accountancy (Carter and Kirkup 1990). In these professions the sheer numbers of women have resulted in there being an
attitude shift but the ‘critical mass’ of women is still lacking within architecture to such an extent that gender is still more obvious than the professional person (Carter and Kirkup 1990). The women interviewed were aware of their gender in such a way (and made to be aware) that would not be apparent in a profession where there were larger numbers of women. At the same time, they played down the effects of gender. It was as if they expected their gender to cause a reaction among the men they worked with and were either prepared for it or made some attempt to circumvent it. A woman’s visibility is heightened by two strands – physical appearance and attitude – and exists in a way that they do not for men. All the interviewees acknowledged that they are more visible than their male colleagues.

This research has attempted to examine why women still choose to join the construction industry, in particular architecture, in spite of the poor image that the industry projects in terms of sexism, patriarchy and generally, ‘not a good place to be’. Findings indicate that the desire to pursue a career in architecture is primarily driven by an inherent need arising in childhood rather than as a result of careful research into the career. However, a strength of this research is that only those women who had remained in the profession are included and so represents ‘survivors’, in contrast to the work of Adams and Tancred’s (2000) and de Graaf-Johnson et al (2003) who examined women’s reasons for leaving the profession and present a more negative picture citing long hours and masculine culture as reasons for leaving. What the women in this research have shown is that although there are difficulties in starting out and during their careers, they do not consider them to be insurmountable.

The findings contradict the popular notion of building sites being unpleasant environments for women to work with the women generally giving positive accounts of time spent on site with only the toilet provision being cited as cause for concern! It is perhaps surprising that reports of discrimination and sexist behaviour were linked to fellow professionals and colleagues from the same organisation but explanations for this could be linked to the fact that the architect, whether male or female, occupies a stronger position of power and authority on site than in their office environment.

The level of acceptance of gender-related barriers and difficulties by the women interviewed is a surprising outcome of the research. The women seem reluctant to challenge the overwhelming masculinity in terms of both structure and culture of the profession. They are also keen not to be seen as projecting too strong a feminist image while strongly believing in their equal rights to opportunities. The pervasive masculinity surrounding the profession and the building industry does little to alleviate the situation. The additional pressure and stress created by taking an overt feminist stance is perhaps too great in addition to the demands of the career itself. Furthermore, the existence of the strong formal and informal networks within the industry mean that career prospects and project opportunities can be damaged by negative reports on personal reputations.

REFERENCES


Barber B. (1965) ‘Some problems in the sociology of professions.’ Daedalus, 92(4)


*British Journal of Sociology.* **49**(1), 137-143.


