

In Conversation

Eight architects reflect on the past, present and future of the profession

Photo
Ivan Jones

Architecture Today marks its thirtieth anniversary this year, and such milestones offer an opportunity to take stock, not only of the changes that the profession has seen, but also of developments in media that have been driven by many of the same forces.

In addition to the monthly magazine and other publications in print, AT now has a busy programme of conferences and other live events, and an extensive online and digital publishing programme, not least at the website, architecturetoday.co.uk.

That scope will continue to broaden as we enter our thirty-first year, starting with a new series of podcasts. Synopses of the first four appear on the following pages.

Each podcast takes the form of a conversation between two architects — one of whom began in practice at around the time the magazine launched, while the other is at an earlier stage in their career — and reflects on how a specific aspect of architectural life, work and culture has changed over the last three decades, and might continue to develop in the coming years.

Sarah Wigglesworth and Zoë Berman consider women's experience in the profession, and the importance of diverse perspectives in design; Simon Allford and Eleanor Hill share experiences of setting up a practice; Bill Dunster and Clare Murray examine attitudes to sustainable building, concern for which has moved from the margins of the profession to shape both the regulatory environment and personal ethics; and Sheila O'Donnell and Luke Caspar Pearson discuss drawing.

Opposite

Zoë Berman and Sarah Wigglesworth at the Stock Orchard Street studio of Sarah Wigglesworth Architects (ph: Ivan Jones).

Dialogue



Women in Architecture

Sarah Wigglesworth and Zoë Berman

Sarah Wigglesworth



Founded Sarah Wigglesworth Architects in 1994, whose major projects include her own home and studio — the Straw Bale House — the Siobhan Davies Dance Studios and Sandal Magna Primary School. In 2003 she was awarded an MBE for services to architecture, and was made a Royal Designer for Industry in 2012. For 19 years she was a professor of architecture at the University of Sheffield.

Zoë Berman



Co-partner in the design office Studio Berman, which she established in 2015. She leads a third-year studio at the Welsh School of Architecture and is a design tutor at Reading School of Architecture. In 2018 she founded the campaign group Part W, which pushes for gender equality in the built environment sectors.

ZB The catalyst for my inviting you and others to meet up, this time last year, to start what became Part W, was that I was listening to conversations around housing, public space and infrastructure and wondering, “How does this impact women, in particular?”

I had joined the Women’s Equality Party, and through that was finding data about how women are particularly impacted by, say, losing a home, issues of domestic violence. I then took that knowledge across into my industry, asking, “Where am I, as an architect, in this, and what are the concerns within my profession?” I thought I’d like to talk to some other people. And every single woman I emailed said, “Yes, I’m there. You don’t need to explain it. I get it”.

SW I’m the elder of our group, so I came at it from a really different perspective. When I went to college, I was not taught by a single female. There was a sense that there was this knowledge, which belonged to men, that we were being asked to try to find — almost like it was a secret. Then I met a lot of feminists, and that was important in understanding some of the problems that I was encountering, trying to find a way of externalising them and not turning it on yourself, and giving you clues as to how to operate against that.

I still think that the way architectural knowledge is structured is very masculine. That’s one of the reasons that women’s experience tends to get undermined and undervalued. The old clichés about women wanting to work on projects that are good for women — schools or hospitals — do ring true because they are to do with the kind of experiences that women have had, where you’re not dealing with the world as an abstraction.

After I left university, I worked for some practices doing very ordinary work. It was the beginning of my interest in ‘backdrop’ architecture, which is the world that women often occupy — going to the shops, taking the kids to school, cooking, cleaning — and tends to get denigrated and neglected in favour of the high-art type of architecture which gets all the gongs.

Then Beatriz Colomina and Jennifer Bloomer did seminal work such as ‘Sexuality and Space’ (1992), trying to understand an architecture around women, which was really important for me. There was this moment when there was a lot of discourse around feminism and what that could teach architecture, but it disappeared again. That’s what’s exciting about seeing your generation come along and say, “This is not good enough. We’re going to do something about it”.

ZB The point that you make about a flare-up makes me think of a line that I heard Extinction Rebellion use, about “when hope dies, action begins”, and the feeling that, at moments in history when there are significant societal challenges, then actions and campaigns happen. We have a President of the USA who gets away with saying the things he does. Progress, perhaps, doesn’t happen when we’re comfortable. I wonder if those peaks and troughs are inevitable?

SW I think that they oscillate, a little bit, around theorisation and then action. If you think about early-phase feminism in the 1970s, that led to the Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative starting, and their experiments in how to form a new kind of practice and ways of working that were challenging to the status quo.



Then I think about the late 1980s, early 1990s, and the revived interest in the body as a site of experience, which inherently means that there’s a difference in the way that you experience the world as a woman and a man, that led to the theorisation in the work of people like Bloomer and Colomina.

Some people who were interested in that went into academia — like Ruth Morrow, who came to Sheffield and started to reinvent the first year as a feminist school — but the issue of how to make the difference within practice has been a hard nut to crack. To be an overtly feminist practice is difficult; it’s hard to bite the hand that feeds you, at a very basic level.

That impacts on all sorts of things, such as the expectation of what a leader is and how you lead a team. How you dress. How you shake someone’s hand. How to challenge people in a nice way. Or whether can you be really tough and get away with it as a woman.

Today’s challenges

ZB The boundaries of what defines progress shift. There have been female architects of an older generation who have said to our group, “But things are so much better. When I was your age, there were only two of us studying architecture, in a group of 60 men”. There is a sense of “What’s the problem?” We can celebrate progress that has been made, but also demand next steps.

SW When we held the exhibition and symposium ‘Desiring Practices’ in 1995, one of the things that somebody said to us was that “We fought these battles before, in the 1960s”. There is a case for understanding that it’s all relative, of course. We no longer wear crinolines, and we’re able to go out on our own in public. Some things are better than they were. But that doesn’t mean to say they’re right, by any means. Every generation stands on the shoulders of the previous ones, and we have to acknowledge that debt. But every one has to fight its own battles as well. That’s why I’m excited by the current conversation going on.

ZB Another comment made to our group was, “You’re just another women’s group, talking to other women”. There need to be spaces for women to talk about things honestly and openly and in a supportive way, while also having men working with us, hand in hand.

SW We’re aligned on the idea that it needs to be very inclusive — intersectionality being the big word, where feminism intersects with other issues, like race or class or money.

The idea that Part W should begin by drawing attention to the lack of women among winners of the Royal Gold Medal emerged quite early on, didn’t it? Perhaps that comes to an end today, with the announcement of Grafton Architects as this year’s winner, and there have been discussions about where we go next.

ZB It’s simultaneously quite challenging, and also quite nice, that we don’t have a brief, and we haven’t said “We want to get to X point”. We also haven’t set a timeframe for Part W. If, in a couple of years’ time, all things in the built environment are gender equitable, then we’re fine. We can just get on with our jobs, and Part W can snooze.

Do you have a set of points that you think are particularly pressing?

“My biggest goal in architecture is to change the value system behind what we think is good and bad”

SW My biggest goal in architecture is really to change the conversation and the value system behind what we think is good and bad. That’s a really big one, I’m afraid. In other words, valorising a different set of experiences, or thinking about the world in other ways than we’ve traditionally been taught to do, where, perhaps, competition is seen as much less important in architecture, and quality is seen for what it is. These are really deep-rooted issues and difficult to deal with, but they’re absolutely critical if we’re going to see a big change.

It is related to the issue of numbers of women in the profession, but if you simply produce a bunch of women who replicate existing systems, the numbers won’t make any kind of difference. If you have a profession which is highly inclusive, where difference is recognised, and that actually shifts the value system, then, of course, that will change the culture.

ZB We need to be going upstream — not just talking about what's happening when we're designing something, but how the decisions have been made further up. Last year I was invited to talk to an audience who are not in the industry about issues in building and gender. The way I decided to talk about it was to use the RIBA stages of work. I printed it out really big, and made marks across it — trying to look at the whole stream, before the RIBA stages kick in and after — to say, "Look, these are the moments where decision-making may be dominated by what is generally a male-led group". Land sales and finance and decisions around large-scale masterplanning and infrastructure are all dominated by men, outside of architecture, but indirectly, absolutely essential to what we do. If something starts in an imbalanced way, it's almost inevitable that the effects continue through brief writing, through the design process, then to construction on site.

SW Or projects proceed in a very myopic way that fails to understand what the consequences of that might be, spatially or for particular groups of people.

ZB Quite often I find myself looped in on social media grumbles about the design of women's toilets. Consistently, what I say is "Yes, it is a problem that in pretty much any public building, there are women queuing out of the door while men are coming and going easily. We can look just at design, but that is not going to solve the problem, which is about who holds the purse strings on this project, who wrote the brief, who is making the decisions around value. That is where the real decisions are being made, and what we really need to tackle".

In our first meeting about Part W, I mentioned the Building Regs, Part M, on accessibility, and asked "What might a truly accessible Building Regs mean?" I think it was Dr Harriet Harriss — now dean of the Pratt Institute — who said, "That's what we're trying to flip". That was where the name came from — flipping Part M to Part W.

SW The city of Vienna has now decided that every design decision they make is going to get reviewed through the lens of women's lives, which is fantastic. They've been overhauling their systems for understanding how women use cities in a very different way than men. It's good to see that it is possible for an authority to take that on board and really drive the agenda. In Caroline Criado Perez's book 'Invisible Women' she talks about a Swedish city that decided that they were going to audit what they did through the lens of gender. There was a joke going around that "There's nothing gendered about snow ploughing."

But actually, when they looked into it, they found there were a lot of gender issues around snow ploughing, because men's and women's journeys are very different. They were snow ploughing the main roads, because that's what men's journeys tend to be, in the car, to and from work. Whereas women's journeys are local, multiple, and they involve lots and lots of stops.

So they found that if they did the lanes and sidewalks first — the routes to school and the routes to the shops — they saved money, because women weren't falling over, and so they weren't having the hospital bills.

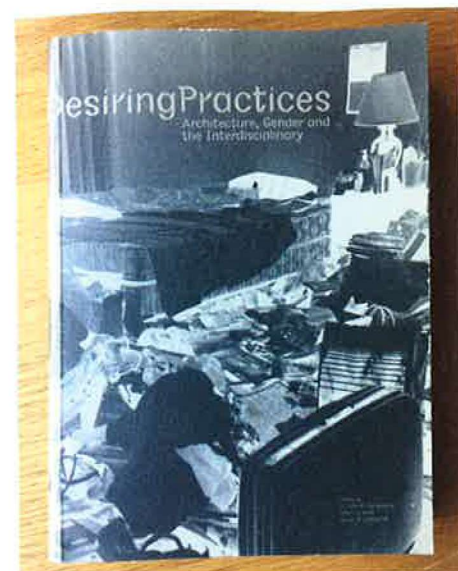
Once you start to unpack all of this, you realise the world is not necessarily the way that you assumed it was.

ZB There does seem to need to be a total taking apart of some of the basic principles that we work to, to create a system where the value systems are completely different. If we were to look at things in terms of greatest health and happiness and ease of going about one's day-do-day business, we would come up with a completely different system for the way in which we arrange our transportation and design cities.

A place in practice

SW I qualified in 1985, so I've been in architecture for quite a long time. The proportion of women in the profession has gone up only very slowly. We know when people start dropping out: it's when they can't see a future in architecture, and one of the reasons they can't see a future for themselves in mainstream practice is because it's not making room for them. So you might as well go it alone and make your own space, and live with the consequences. But it would be a real shame if women can't contribute to what I'd call mainstream and conventional architecture — they've got loads to offer.

The reason that I set up in practice was because I couldn't see my destiny resting with the culture of any practice I had been in. That has been difficult, but the freedom that has given me to self-express and do something slightly differently has been empowering. Changing the culture of very large practices is difficult. One of the issues that tends not to get talked about very much is that architecture follows money, which tends to be in the hands of men, and tends to be the thing that quantifies everything, which squeezes out other kinds of values — social value, cultural value, inclusion and so forth.



Above
Table of Participants at the 1995 Desiring Practices symposium, of which Sarah Wigglesworth was an initiator, and cover of the the book 'Desiring Practices: Architecture, Gender and the Interdisciplinary', edited by Sarah Wigglesworth, Katerina Ruedi and Duncan McCorquodale (Black Dog Press, 1996).

Below

First anniversary meeting of Part W, an action group of women campaigning for gender parity across the built environment, which was founded by Zoë Berman in 2018 and is co-chaired by Alice Brownlow. Its first campaign, conducted through events and social media, drew attention to the very small number of women recognised by the Royal Gold Medal since its inception in 1848. It sought both to encourage nominations of women currently in practice and to raise awareness of the women whose earlier contributions to architecture have been overlooked (phs: Sarah Alkibogun).



ZB On the one hand, I'm really optimistic about alternative forms of practice, and there does seem to be a growing support and appreciation of practices that are working in different ways. There is much more coverage of their projects, and there are more of them, which is also great, because, of course, safety through numbers. You start to feel more supported and that you're not quite so weird, or not at the periphery of things, and that, actually, doing things alternatively doesn't have to be 'alternative'; it can just become another way.

At the same time, in teaching, I have seen a cohort of students who were asked to write an end-of-term essay on "What sort of architect do you want to be? What kind of practice do you want to work in?" Out of a cohort of about 60, only one of them wanted to work in what we would consider a traditional practice. For me, that presents a real challenge: how do you talk about these alternative structures while also having the traditional kinds of practices that we also do need? It's something that I'm quite conscious of as an educator and as someone who now has a handful of junior staff working with me. How do I balance them being aware and conscious of the challenges that they face going into architecture, while not being so terrified that they decide to drop out? That seems a tricky balance.

SW A vast change is happening, and has to happen across the board, so it's inevitable that it's not going to happen tomorrow. But at the same time, I'm disappointed that some leaders in our profession are not taking more of a lead in trying to address, for example, the gender pay gap, and acknowledge the difficulties in women's lives [because of expectations that they will assume primary responsibility for childcare].

On that subject, one of the issues for women in architecture is, generally speaking, our poor pay. Not earning very much money gives you so little choice. As a profession, we really need to think hard about how we pay our staff and the fees that we are bidding on jobs for. There are people working for free, just to work for the stars, and it's really corrosive. It affects everyone, but it affects women more.

As a leader in my own practice, we try to do these things, but we've got very little room for manoeuvre, because we don't make a lot of money, so we have to juggle what we have. But we have to understand people's lives and make room for them, and make career paths for them, despite all of that.

Larger practices have more ability to do that. Yet, I don't see great leadership coming out of those practices. They really need to take a long, hard look and make more space for women, and listen to what people are saying to them and make the adjustments.

ZB We're starting to see that there is, perhaps, some change coming about among some institutes or foundations or places of higher education, where diversity and equality is almost like an advertising gimmick, a little bit like eco-bling. Genuine change, at a deep level, will only come when the kinds of things that we've been talking about — equality of opportunity and real representation — are what everybody wants to do, rather than because there are organisations or individuals who feel that they're obliged to, or being shamed into action.

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So looking to the future, the next layer will be when we've got to the point that we talked about earlier on in the conversation, of this idea of post-feminism. When we've moved beyond having to demand these changes, and got to a stage when equality just becomes the norm. Then we're able to focus and put our energy into other things, rather than having to fight this particular fight. *✱*