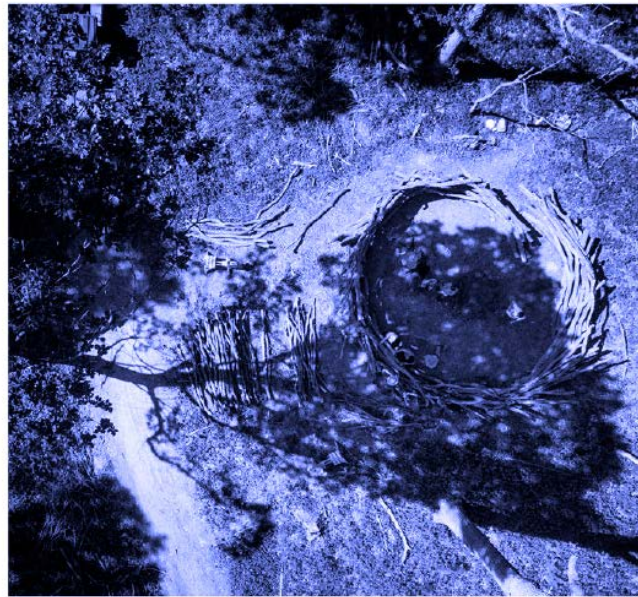




Learning from Studio in the Woods

Forum



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The Studio in the Woods inspired Zoë Berman to develop her practice as a loose-fit network of freelance collaborators and gave her the skills to launch Part W, an action group that campaigns for gender equality in the built environment

I've never been big on camping. Despite having grown up with one foot in the rural, one in the city, sleeping under canvas has never appealed. But I have joyfully made an exception, first as a student and now as a tutor, to participate in the Studio in the Woods workshop. The annual gathering of minds has been a formative influence on my ideas around collaboration and the value of convening people with diverse experiences.

Established by Invisible Studio founder Piers Taylor, Studio in the Woods is a design-and-make workshop that has run since 2004. Architects Kate Darby, Meredith Bowles, Gianni Botsford and timber expert Charley Brentnall have been instrumental in establishing the event which sees small groups working in woodlands with professionals guiding participants over the course of a long weekend to develop 1:1 scale prototypes and installations in timber.

In recent years, we've used wood grown and sawn in the very woodlands in which we work. Projects are rarely pre-designed. While some tutors arrive with thematic ideas, built works emerge from collective exploration. Conceptual ideas are negotiated and take physical shape over two and a half long working days. On the Sunday morning, guests join us and we slowly wend our way through the wood, visiting,

discussing and musing on each of the finished structures.

Although participants are mostly strangers, I am struck by the depth of thought and consideration that immediately bubbles up in conversation about what, where and how we build. The backgrounds of participants have become increasingly diverse. Carpenters, digital analysts, trainee landscape designers, photographers and ex-Royal Air Force engineers have all joined in. The range of lived experiences has been significant and positive. In his book *Messy*, the economist Tim Harford notes the deep value of "how different fields can cross-fertilise one another". The benefit of differing ways of thinking plays out during the workshop as we plan, cut, weave and build together, discussing and co-developing solutions as they arise: how to joint this? how to balance this? how to get this to stand up? Not knowing one another and not having preconceptions about the structure forming beneath our hands brings an extraordinary kind of democracy to the act of making.

Embracing multidisciplinary knowledge and valuing the richness of varied skill-sets, has been crucial in the formation of my practice. Never quite comfortable with the structures of traditional architecture offices,

as a young practitioner I sought to establish a loose-fit collective. Studio Berman operates as a network of architects and designers who I bring together on a project-by-project basis. This allows us to be nimble but also brings a brightness to each new project as collaborators weave back and forth between working together and separately, alongside maintaining teaching, research and design roles. Operating as a network of freelancers also enables far greater work-life flexibility. This notably lends itself to women, those with caring duties and those who work part-time for health reasons. My role is that of convener and organiser, and I continually admire the supple formats of other non-traditional practices, such as Invisible Studio. Piers Taylor has over the years become a close friend and mentor, and I continue to be influenced by his advocating for the social benefits if the process of, and relationships between, designing and making are restructured.

While bringing together talented architects has enabled the strategic development and realisation of educational and community-focused projects, operating as a convener of people was invaluable in the early formation of Part W. The idea for an action group that campaigns for gender

equality in the built environment began in my mind when attending local branch meetings of the Women's Equality Party. I became far more aware of the impact of austerity on services for women, and the associated under-investment in equitable infrastructures.

It felt right to gather a group of women – multigenerational experts from across the built environment – to talk about the challenges around placemaking and gender, and collectively develop ideas for bringing about change. Determinedly nebulous, we've quietly held Part W meetings across London, now online, while our campaign work seeks to become more UK-wide and global in outlook. It's been a privilege to form strong working relationships with extraordinary women, not least guiding figures Sarah Wigglesworth and Harriet Harriss and contemporaries Alice Brownfield and Yemí Àlàdérún among others. Through group discussion we evolve thinking around actions to instigate positive change. Discussions and ideas for campaigns are open-ended and enriching. And thankfully, I have been able to participate without having to go camping.

Zoë Berman is a university lecturer and the founding director of Studio Berman



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIM STEPHENSON

Opposite: Small groups work with professionals to develop 1:1 scale prototypes and installations using wood grown and sawn in the very woodlands in which they work. Right: Coexisting and collaborating with strangers from very different backgrounds leads to thoughtful, considered conversations. Not knowing one another, and not having any preconceptions about the structure that is taking shape, brings an extraordinary kind of democracy to the act of making.

