



# Zippering around



Parlour, April 2020

Parlour is a research-based advocacy organisation working to improve gender equity in architecture and the built environment professions. Their series of interviews Home/ Work with female architects explores ways of working during the pandemic. The interview series asked designers how, during this unusual time, they were continuing to work, asking 'What are the struggles and benefits? Where do they find moments of invention and generosity?' The following interview was carried out with practice director Zoë Berman

For the past 18 months, my partner and I have split our time between the cities of London and Bristol, in the UK. As the lockdown started to come into effect, we hunkered down in Bristol. We had moved out of London in 2018, in part to be able to afford having more physical space. The timing of that move has been extremely fortuitous and that bid for extra space has, inadvertently, been timely. Ordinarily a desk-based working day would see me and my small team in a studio space that I co-share with architect Nicola Chan – who I collaborate with – and designer Katy Goutefangea, who runs the female-led crafted stationery studio Ola. The office is a 10-minute walk away. At home, I have the luck of already having a room of my own that I had – rather grandly – called my 'reading room'. That is an extravagant description, but it is accurate, as that is what I was using it for. The room is on the ground floor, at the front of the house with a bay window that looks out onto the street; a room that many families with children might use as a playroom or TV room. It is just me and my partner here, so I had taken this room for myself and my partner makes use of the equivalent room on the first floor.

Previously, the room was sparsely furnished. Along one wall is a row of bookshelves. The shelves are full, so I have been stacking up books in piles on the floor. Next to the window I have a mid-century Scandinavian bentwood armchair, which was given to me by my uncle, and next to that a battered old vintage floor-standing lamp. That was pretty much all there was in here, before I added the extras I need for it to become my temporary home office. To set myself up to work here, my partner helped me to carry in a doorblank that I had some time ago found on the street, and had set aside for some future purpose. I am quite a scavenger, constantly picking up bits and bobs to recycle, bringing home old chairs

and bits of wood. The doorblank was ideal to set up on trestles and form a long desk for me.

My design studio is small and quite nimble, so it wasn't too complex to box each of us up with our iMacs and send them home with each person to their respective space. I've brought the office plants back with me, and a stack of samples and lighting catalogues to refer to for projects we're working on. My desk faces a white-painted wall, which sounds a little depressing, but I have prints and pictures that I have arranged to cheer things up. If I am here much longer I might drag in some kind of impromptu pinboard to attach all the notes and scribbles that I would tag up on the office wall.

The sounds here are different to my usual working day. From within the house, I can hear the domestic hum of the washing machine and dishwasher, variously churning away through the day. Behind me, I can hear the comings and goings of a residential street experiencing shutdown. Neighbours call out to one another, bikes whir gently up the hill and the kids across the road sometimes come out on their skateboards. It makes for quite a different soundscape.

### What work do you do here?

Two of our main design projects at Studio Berman have been paused. We were readying a tender package for a project that was set to start on site in June, and it has taken some time to wrap up all the threads for that, so it can be tidily picked up again with relative ease when it does restart. I spent about a week on the phone with project architect Nicola getting that information packaged up, and there was coordination to do with the rest of the design team on the phone, via email and talking through drawings on those projects. I video-call my small team every morning, to chat about the work we're doing each day. We're using this time to consolidate and write things up for digital-based dissemination. I run an annual educational workshop, Rural Works, which I lead in Cumbria in the north of England, UK. I have been discussing ideas around rural design quite a lot recently, and we're working to chronicle five year's worth of design, make and community engagement work that has been carried out with architecture students in a rural community. So, I am writing and working with others on the graphic design and layouts for those booklets.

Some other rural design research is bubbling. I teach on the annual Studio In The Woods summer workshop, and co-tutored last year with architect Hannah Durham and Dr Carolina Vasilikou. We discussed an idea to share with the wider public, the installation titled 'Pause' that we made last year with participants on the workshop. That was planned to be part of the London Festival of Architecture Fringe events, but we'll now rethink how we might write up and draw up that display in a desk-based way. Studio In The Woods is a design-and-make event that was established by architect Piers Taylor (Invisible Studio) with other leading UK architects. That summer teaching is likely to be postponed, sadly, but I am in a moment of both looking back and looking forward together with other teaching colleagues and friends – thinking about what we will do. My desk is now, more than ever, a place to exchange ideas, send emails, post photographs online and so on.

I am also continuing to teach. The Reading University School of Architecture teaching has all been moved online, so one day a week I spend a whole day working from my working-from-home desk, teaching via video call. Meanwhile, there is planning, arranging, discussions to be had amongst the Part W team. Part W is an action group that campaigns for gender equality in the built environment. The core group of ten of us all work in full-time roles and many of the steering group members have children who are now being home schooled – so we are grabbing corners of time when we can to communicate via email, WhatsApp and video-call. It's a lot to juggle and there is a lot to take in right now and try to coordinate. That coordinating is another strand to what I am doing from my desk.

### Did you work from home pre-COVID-19? How has the experience of remote working changed for you in the last few weeks?

At some level, anyone who designs is always working! But I have been trying in recent years to have a clearer balance, and not bring client work home. Part W campaign work spills into all corners of life. After all, gender inequality doesn't stick to specific time zones or a working week – and I have been coordinating Part W things on-the-go, remotely and digitally, since I founded the group in 2018. That activist side of my life isn't tied to a desk, but rather wherever I am with a smartphone or laptop.

### Have there been benefits to working from home?

I have been able to zip around, remotely and digitally, both teaching and giving Part W talks – far more than I ordinarily would be able to do in a week due to geographical constraints. In a fortnight I have been able to teach at Reading School of Architecture, as I do each week, and join a review at Grenfell-Baines Institute of Architecture, which is based in Lancashire in the north of England. I am looking forward to taking part in two days of reviews at the Umeå School of Architecture in Sweden, and will be giving a talk about Part W's campaign work at the Canterbury School of Architecture in the south east of England, and Portsmouth School of Architecture, which is south/ south westerly. I spend a lot of time travelling for work in 'normal' times, but it's really only been possible to do quite so much cross-European hopping as I am doing right now via video calls.

I also find it tremendously beneficial to be so close to my bookshelves. I tend to keep my design-specific books in my studio. On my shelves here at home are my books on economics, sociology and planning, philosophy, poetry. It's a huge boon – especially when teaching – to be able to reach for those. I would never be able to take that many books with me, and thumb through them and look for sections as easily as I can right now. Having printed copies of texts, with all the marks and post-it notes in them, readily to hand, is wonderful.

### What have been the biggest challenges so far?

Missing the chatter and communality of a design studio. Having the physical connection in-person with co-workers, and the incidental conversations that unfold through a day. Being in the same space as others is personal, social and human. Also, this current state of having one's office in the same building as you eat and sleep, can feel as though you are 'on call' all the time. Switching off from work can be harder. But it is immensely necessary to do so.

### What has been surprising?

The ability to get a lot done digitally and the discovery that really you can get quite a lot done with the rest of the design team via video call and remote working, as long as you keep talking regularly. It's also been really positive to be much closer to the local community, and that brings other kinds of human and social connections. It has been striking how fast (even for us as relative new arrivals to the area here) our street has set up collective but at-a-distance socials, plant exchanges, street music and so on. There are bulk orders of food being arranged – next week, there will be 180 locally made pies delivered. People are sharing and exchanging things. Someone has set up a sophisticated spreadsheet listing everyone on the street; inviting them to indicate what their needs are, what they are able to offer. It is extraordinary how much a small group of people can get done in a fast amount of time and how resilient and generous people can be in small communities where there are a few lead community organisers. A lot of people won't have access to this kind of community spirit. I am incredibly lucky to have landed in this spot, at this time.

### Have you discovered any tools (technological or otherwise) that have been particularly useful for remote working?

Lots of people will be becoming familiar with video call platforms and screen sharing methods. Those are useful. I'm interested in the industry-centred resources and knowledge exchanges that are happening. Journalist and critic Laura Mark set up The Virtual Unit – a free, weekly session for architecture students to ask questions and get advice from different architects and academics, and has invited guest speakers to join in. The Architecture Foundation 100 Day Studio offers “a daily diet of online lectures, interviews, building tours, panel discussions and quizzes” and the architectural photographer Jim Stephenson has set up Get Dressed Chats that run every lunch time (UK time), and also made available his Building Studies films for free. These things help me feel connected with what is going on out there, and supports my feeling in touch with professional colleagues. I have been learning a lot – new ideas, new building case studies, I've been introduced to new people working in the architecture sector. All good things that counteract some of the more depressing aspects of what is happening to society right now.

### Do you have any tips for creating successful working relationships remotely? With colleagues, clients and others?

Keep gently checking on people, making sure people are OK. We need to be mindful of others wellbeing, anxieties and other personal commitments at this time. I've noticed people being gentler and more personable at this time in professional exchanges. Long may we hold on to that.

### How are you managing the work/life juggle, and all the competing demands?

By trying to go to bed a bit earlier, get up a bit earlier – and taking a proper lunch break. No desk eating. I'm also trying to acknowledge that reading articles, writing articles, checking in on colleagues and collaborators and checking my team is OK. That is work. That is the work I need to be doing right now – even if it doesn't feel especially tangible, and there isn't always a drawing or a spreadsheet or a set of design-team notes at the end of the day.

### How are you staying connected with work, friends and family?

With the Part W family, there is a core steering group of 10 of us and we are exchanging emails and notes here and there. It is tricky to find time to all speak together, as we often would around a table over a glass of wine, all in one place – as a lot of the core team are directors and leaders in their field and a number of them have young children. I think there is a bit of an unspoken understanding right now that we are not going to be chatting every week, at the moment. The team has a huge amount to deal with during this phase – and Part W has always been run voluntarily, alongside our full-time roles. A number of us are a slightly younger generation – we studied around the same time – and the five of us have a WhatsApp group that we chatter back and forth on. That is incredibly supportive and helpful and we all try to energise one another, encourage each other. We all need to have our own squad right now. I am reminded of something Alisha Fisher, of Black Females in Architecture said – “find your coven”.

### What strategies are you using to switch off from work?

Gardening, planting things – and walking. This stay-at-home period is offering up a renaissance of interest in, and showing the value of, being green fingered. Green things do us so much good. At a micro level, planting a few herbs in yoghurt pots on a windowsill is a cheerful thing to do. At a macro-level, we're really seeing right now the immense importance of green walkways and highlines, allotments and canal-side paths. Open spaces, spacious piazzas, generous cycle paths – we need this stuff to be holistically part of city infrastructure. These spaces are not just important in ecological terms but also as places that people can get out to and be out of the house. Access to green space is especially important right now for people who are struggling with mental health and wellbeing issues, people who live in cramped living conditions, people who have no outdoor space of their own. Green spaces can do much to contribute towards alleviating some of these pressures.

### What strategies are you using to lift your spirits and maintain mental wellbeing?

Dancing.





