

Unpacking the Library



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The following article was written by Zoë Berman and published in Architecture Today.

“The authors and subjects that dominate our bookshelves reinforce inequalities in architecture.”

It's a great joy to be able again to while away time in bookshops. On a recent visit, I cast an eye over the shelves dedicated to architecture in a commercial bookshop, and on the spur of the moment decided to carry out an informal count. Setting aside those written by multiple authors – reference books such 'The Oxford Dictionary of Architecture' – there were some 67 volumes that clearly showed the names of individual or joint authors. Of those, 12 were credited to women – a male to female author ratio of almost 6:1.

The lower shelves were bulging with weighty monographs dedicated to the usual canon of archi-stars of the past – Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn, Carlo Scarpa, Alvar Aalto, Charles Rennie Mackintosh et al. All of these tomes studied the work of individual, white, male architects; none was dedicated to architects from minority ethnic backgrounds, or women. Only one of the monographs was by a female author.

This was far from a detailed counting exercise, but it indicates a wider difficulty around authorship and representation. Published books act as a record in the annals of history. Books written about practitioners appear on the shelves of both mainstream and specialist bookshops. They feature (albeit sadly in limited numbers) in the stacks of public libraries, and in the design departments of colleges and universities. If female designers and minority groups are not featured, that will shape the perceptions of future generations, and diminish the sense that they are welcome in the profession.

The lack of recognition is equally problematic for those working in the sector right now. That the work of female designers is so overlooked on printed pages implies that women's work is not as highly regarded, or considered equally worthy of publication, as that of male peers. Such

signals are likely to be a component in a much larger jigsaw of reasons for the high rate of attrition among women who choose to study architecture but do not go on to qualify or practice.

“The message emanating from the bookshop or library shelves is echoed by gender imbalances in prizes, medals, judging panels and media”

The message emanating from the bookshop or library shelves is echoed by gender imbalances in prizes, medals, judging panels and media. Indeed, up until 2019 the Royal Gold Medal had been awarded to only one woman in her own right – Zaha Hadid, in 2016. This is something that Part W – the gender equity action group that I founded in 2018 – vocally campaigned on last year, and we were pleased to see that the most recent award was given to the female-led Grafton Architects.

A justification that I hear time and again from male editors, publishers and leading industry figures is that decisions about inclusion on panels, in programming events and invitations to contribute to publications is based solely on merit. This is a flimsy argument. Across all sectors of work, research shows that women’s career progression is hampered by multiple barriers: the widely recorded gender pay gap, a pattern of women being overlooked for promotions and having to contend with poor parental leave, insufficient maternity pay, and undertaking the majority share of unpaid caring work. In the architectural professional women often have to deal with inappropriate treatment by some men on construction sites, and have historically been faced with an entrenched lack of support for flexible working, which makes the balancing of work and caring responsibilities all the harder. To ask women to contend with these challenges while demanding that their work should be measured equivalently and directly against that of their male peers, is in itself a form of iniquity. That many women have to deal with all of the above and too are leaders in their field indicates a level of skill, commitment and perseverance that makes many women worthy of at least equal – and some argue greater – recognition. Too few custodians of power recognise this paradox.



There are some positive steps being taken to try and adjust the equity balance in architectural writings. In 2017, Dr Harriet Harris published online the freely available ‘Women Write Architecture’ list, to support educators compiling 50:50 reading lists. The New Architecture Writers, a free programme for emerging design writers, is now in its fourth year, and seeks to develop “the journalistic skill, editorial connections and critical voice of its participants (and) focuses on black and minority ethnic emerging writers who are under-represented across design journalism and curation”. Later this year, we at Part W aim to launch an intersectional book club. Such initiatives are necessary, because the imbalance in the way the architectural industry grants recognition means there is a glass ceiling hovering over the heads of minority groups in this profession. It’s hard to hold on to a sense of possibility, when the paths laid out ahead have been narrowed by multiple forms of inequality.

Books are crucial as a means of recognising the important design work that has and is being done. Publications are key in recording ideas and as methods of passing on knowledge. In a recent talk about the future trends of work in a post-Covid environment Jason Fried, CEO of software company Basecamp, touched on the importance of writing as a means of disseminating information. Interestingly he suggested that long-form writing will become more, not less, important in working patterns where people might choose to digest and review information in their own time, to suit their own schedule. If that is the case, we need to move fast to overcome the imbalance that exists in whose work is – and is not – being circulated through the written word.

In a time of global upheaval, we are going to need skilled thinkers to contribute design solutions to address the seismic problems we face. We will need architectural propositions that constructively contribute to responding to the challenges of the modern world. Society won't find the most useful solutions to best support all people if the design thinking of women and minority groups continues to be left off the page, and off the shelf.

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