More Women Design Their Way to the Top

Female Architects Make Inroads in Leadership Roles And High-Profile Projects

By ALEX FRANOS

Women are finally making their mark in the manmade world of architecture.

It's been over 20 years since women reached near parity in university architecture programs. But only now are female architects populating the professional ranks in greater numbers and taking on leadership roles at firms, according to new statistics.

The percentage of licensed architects who are women grew to 19.9% in 2002 from 13.7% in 1999, according to a study released this week from the American Institute of Architects. Those who are partners or principals of firms rose to 20.7% last year from 11.2% in 1999. These new statistics coincide with anecdotal evidence of women getting to the top of the design-world food chain.

Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, one of the largest architecture firms in the U.S., selected its first woman head, Marilyn Jordon Taylor, in 2001. Architecture watchers consider Zaha Hadid, an Iraqi-born British architect fresh off rave reviews for a new museum in Cincinnati, the first female member of the living pantheon of celebrity "starchitects"—along with men like Frank O. Gehry, Richard Meier and Sir Norman Foster. And local builders and homeowners are much more likely to run into women architects as thousands of small, woman-owned firms have opened in the past decade.

Greater Sensitivity

So is the latest generation of architects bringing a woman's touch to the landscape?

"Buildings don't have gender," says Ms. Taylor at Skidmore, based in New York. "Buildings have qualities that may make women, or children or older people, any group of people, ethnic people, more comfortable than others."

But many women say they bring a sensitivity to the design world that better reflects the needs of clients and occupants.

"It wouldn't be that our buildings would be pink," says Sharon R. Sutton, a professor of architecture at the University of Washington. "It's that there would be a more inclusive way of dealing with problems."

On the surface, that means things such as designing sufficient women's bathrooms in public places or building kitchens

Instead of the typical mid-1980s boxy granite office tower, the facade is white ceramic, the building is white ceramic, with blue accents, and a hinge-like Victorian-inspired curve projects onto the street corner. "I used to take offense at [the comment]," Ms. Williams says, "but now it's going on 20 years later, it's interesting."

Her latest project, the cultural center in Pittsburgh, is a work that expresses strong emotions. The triangular structure is led by a four-story entrance inspired by the sail of an African trading ship with a hull of wind behind it. "It's taut, as if it's filled with wind or someone's proud chest pushed forward," she says. "It feels like it's got movement, power and pride."

Still Struggling

Despite success like Ms. Williams's, some women still feel shut out from the top floors of the profession.

For example, of the six architects assigned buildings on the World Trade Center site in New York, none are female.

"It's bizarre that there aren't any women," says Ms. Hadid, who is currently working on numerous international commissions including a ferry terminal in Salerno, Italy.

Many architecture graduates—men and women—never make it past the grueling three-year, post-graduate internship years, which offer low pay, long hours, and cutthroat competition to get the attention of firms principals who carry important sway. The result: Graduates end up outside mainstream architecture, in city-planning offices, academia, or in consulting positions where license isn't required.

Another factor is that the overwhelming dominance of men in the client role. But that, too, is changing. "As there are more women on the other side of the table," says Ms. Eastman, "it's a lot easier to be a woman architect."