

Sex Change Anyone?

This Guardian supplement focuses on the work of women architects here in Trinidad and Tobago. It may come as a surprise to some members of the public that women architects exist – whereas women professionals in health, law and finance have become the norm (in fact in many countries more women now qualify annually as doctors and lawyers than men do), women in the world of building are only now achieving prominence in significant numbers. The construction industry is evolving and women are becoming more involved at every level – from strategic planning to conceptual design, project management and resource management. The token woman is no longer the wife of one of the senior members of the board who is paid to advise on colours, textures and the location of the perennial ficus plant– design is big business and good design enhances every aspect of our lives.

Historically women designers and architects have usually worked closely with male colleagues and then set up on their own. Women such as Charlotte Perriand worked closely with Le Corbusier in the 1920's, was responsible for his most successful furniture and was a driving force putting like-minded modern thinking architects together. Eileen Grey was another influential pioneer of the modern movement, whose progressive work was only recognised in the late 70's. Both women were strong designers displaying an awareness of human scale, texture and sensitivity to the site. They were unconventional and although driven to produce perfection in their work, did not channel their energies into the promotion of themselves.

Today there are a growing number of female architects who are players at a global level such as Zaha Hadid, Farshid Moussavi, Odile Decq, and Amanda Levete who are all very aware of how to manipulate the media to be in the right place to get the recognition they deserve. They are not 'women architects' – they are brilliant architects who happen to be women. In some cases they have male partners, but rather than being 'behind the scenes', they are acknowledged as powerful, creative and fundamental to the work.

Architecture is not only about imaginative and responsive conceptual solutions to the brief and the site allied with technical expertise, management of information and control of costs – it is also about large investments. The most successful commercial architects are those who can persuade their clients that they have the experience and expertise to minimise their risk and to see the 'big picture'. Unfortunately, the conventional view of a woman who presents herself in this manner is someone who is loud and brassy rather than confident and knowledgeable! Every architect knows that small residential projects are more complicated, time consuming and frustrating with the lowest return in terms of fees for time spent – yet this is what women architects spend a disproportionate amount of their time doing.

There are probably more female architects now here in Trinidad than at any other time. Thoughtfully designed and well built projects of significant scale and importance, produced by women will do more for promoting 'women in architecture' than any amount of rhetoric. Let's have more open forms of procurement for building projects so that women have a better chance to show what they can offer.

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