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In Praise of Zaha: Women, Partnership, and the Star System in Architecture

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In Praise of Zaha

Women, Partnership, and the Star System in Architecture

Where Are the Stars?

I'm a fan of Zaha Hadid. Her buildings are certainly elegant. But what interests me most is that she did it, very obviously, alone. Name another woman star architect who is not in practice with her husband or male lover, generally in a firm that bears both their names? (As a hint, I do list some below, but it takes time to think of them.)

Women are moving slowly into architectural practice but the road to stardom has been more difficult. There are number of potential reasons for this pattern and social networks of various kinds are at the base of most of these explanations. While the numbers are far too small to really generalize, if I had to give advice on how to be a star, I'd tell a woman that the route is very difficult for those not married to their architectural partners.

Who Is a Star?

Of course this kind of analysis of women stars depends somewhat on who is a star and there are several potential measures. I chose the following:

- *Pritzker Prize recipients*: Of Pritzker Prize winners since 1979, all are men except for Ms. Hadid (<http://www.pritzkerprize.com/main.htm>).
- *AIA Gold Medalists*: There have been over sixty AIA Gold medalists since 1907, all men (see http://www.aia.org/gold_medal_awards).
- *RIBA Gold Medal Winners*: RIBA awards have been given almost every year since 1848 and go to architects and theorists throughout the world. There have been over 150 awards. Two women have won, both with their husbands: In 1979, the office of Charles and Ray Eames, and in 1994, Michael and Patricia Hopkins of Michael Hopkins and Partners (<http://www.architecture.com/fileLibrary/pdf/RC.pdf>).
- *Authors of the new urbanist Ahwahnee principles*, a measure locating star new urbanists: Of authors of these principles—Peter Calthorpe, Michael Corbett, Andres Duany, Elizabeth Moule, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Stefanos Polyzoides—the two women

are part of firms linking their names to their husbands, Duany Plater-Zyberk and Moule and Poly-zoides. Corbett is also in practice with his wife, but they are developers.

- *Macarthur Fellows*: Three architects have received Macarthurs. The only woman to receive one in architecture is Elizabeth Diller, in partnership with her husband, and corecipient, Ricardo Scofidio of diller + scofidio (<http://www.macfound.org/>).
- *Design practitioners tenured at the full professor level at elite institutions* (which are not necessarily the best schools, but which tend to hire and produce stars): Harvard, Columbia, Princeton, Yale, Cornell, MIT, Berkeley, and Penn.¹ This group of "academic design stars" is analyzed separately below.

Overall, over 240 awards have been given to those I call "practice stars."² Six women have been in this group, and five of these have been married to other awardees or signatories, practicing in firms bearing their names or the name of their husbands. The exception is Zaha Hadid.

These numbers are, of course, biased by the measures I took. The RIBA Gold Medals go back to a time when there were basically no women architects, and most awards also tend to reward older people. However, the numbers for women would look much worse if I hadn't included the new urbanists, a group that is often not included among the practice stars. The bottom line is that most women practice stars have been obviously in partnerships with their spouses and most men have not.³

At the elite schools, things are better for those I call academic design stars. In the eight architecture departments I surveyed, in 2005 there were seven women full professors with what appeared to be current practices in architectural design. There appeared to be twenty-seven male full professors with such practices, although it was at times hard to tell how much practice some were doing. I did not count adjuncts and visitors or people in related areas such as structures or history, or architects in

related departments. The numbers did count professors of practice. Of the seven total women, only two were openly in practice with their husbands (Elizabeth Diller and Farshid Moussavi of the less obviously named Foreign Office Architects). In 2005, the other women were in small practices not obviously with their husbands: Toshiko Mori and Monica Ponce de Leon at Harvard, Adele Santos at MIT, Nasrine Seraji on leave from Cornell, and Homa Farjadi at Penn. All seemed to have relatively small practices, and a number had significant academic administrative duties, but of course such situations can produce high-quality design work. The only woman from a big firm, Patricia Conway at Penn, had a successful practice at Kohn Pederson Fox Conway but did not appear to have a current practice and now teaches real estate. Only one man on the academic list, Mario Gandelsonas at Princeton, was obviously in current practice with a spouse in Agrest and Gandelsonas.

It is also interesting that for many schools, this is a numerical high point of women full professors of design. At Harvard, at least, this list of current faculty includes every tenured woman full professor of design in the history of the school. A number of schools have no tenured women full professors with design practices.

Reasons for the Lack of Not-Obviously-Married Women

There are a number of reasons for this pattern of only women who are obviously married making it in practice.

There are of course few women who stay in the field. Of every hundred registered architects in the United States, thirteen or so are women.⁴ If five of these women marry male architects and create a practice that bears both their names, then 39 percent of women but only 6 percent of men will be in this situation of two architects in the same firm. Perhaps, most women architects marry male architects and so the star system merely reflects demographics.

However, this pattern seems to be about more than simple numbers. Without the academics, the proportion of women stars goes down and most of the deficit has to do with an absence of women not in partnerships with their husbands. In contrast, men have reached prominence with rather more varied household arrangements and diverse or ambiguous sexual identities.

This is not the fault of the prominent women. They have become stars in a field that idealizes a particular form of masculinity. Many have held down academic jobs as well as practices. And there are still very few of them. However, it says something about the closed networks, social expectations, award jury biases, and sexual norms of architecture that the way women achieve a level playing field is in obvious association with a man. I suspect that there are other women who might well have the talent to excel ahead of a number of prominent men, but they have not happened on the right formula of partnership.

How Marriage Might Help

So if it is true that on average women have done better when married, how has this happened? It is important to note here that I am not trying to explain why women are underrepresented in architecture, troubling as this is, but to explain why women not in partnership with their husbands are virtually absent from the practice stars. I am rejecting the idea that all the most talented women marry and stay married to their architectural partner and that the unmarried and unpartnered, or even those married but to people other than star architects, are just not star material.

- Is it that only women who have a very sympathetic male to keep them in the loop have made it close to the elite networks with the biggest commissions?
- Does being married give some kind of access to the master-pupil arrangements that seem to be essential in creating star architects?⁵

- Is it that being a very obvious heterosexual, with husband in tow, neutralizes the problem of being a woman in architecture—making her seem less threatening or dangerous to peers and clients? The issue of sexuality seems to be at play here. Star male architects can be unmarried, straight or gay, with one partner or more than one—it really does not seem to matter. But options for women stars are more limited—in practice, in particular, they have needed to be not only heterosexual, but very obviously so.
- Is it something about having a husband that has kept talented women in architecture, rather than going to related fields? Perhaps they have provided support.
- Have husbands been active in deflecting criticism from women, heading off the gossip that is so rife about uppity women?

I do not know the answers but these questions are suggestive about the field and practice of architecture, its social structure, and openness to difference. It is also important to note that being talented and married to another famous architect does not guarantee stardom—it is likely just a leveling point. For example, Madelon Vriesendorp, the wife of Rem Koolhaas and cofounder of the Office of Metropolitan Architecture, painted those whimsical illustrations of New York sky scrapers in bed that are the main thing people remember from *Delirious New York*. Perhaps because she is an artist she has a far lower profile.⁶

Implications

Social networks are the way of the world in architecture. To become a star, one must persuade a group of people to let you spend large amounts of money on an artistic statement and convince tastemakers that one's work is cutting edge. However, women also need to, on average, marry another (male) architect and form a firm with him.

This raises questions about the implications for the future. There is something suggestive about the different and growing numbers of design stars in academic life. Overall, the situation may be changing and perhaps there's a generation of women just waiting to be recognized.

In addition, one could obviously criticize the star system that creates a hierarchy of fame, with high-style, high-art design on top, and all other forms and styles of design much lower, seen as support fields or as building.⁷ This is unlike even landscape architecture where there are multiple paths to professional prominence: ecological design, landscape analysis, cultivated or artistic expression, and so on.⁸ One might want women to reject all this and, say, emphasize sustainable or participatory design. However, it also seems reasonable to expect to see a greater variety of women among the artistic stars.

So, my advice to a male wanting to get ahead as a star designer is the typical set of activities: study at the right handful of schools, work in the right offices, dress the right way, and build a beautiful vacation home for a close relative who can act as a patron when you are very young. (As Garry Stevens points out, once ambitious lower and even middle class architecture students figure this out, they often leave the field).⁹ A woman will need to do all this but, to be safe, she will need to add a number of additional activities—marrying an architect with significant promise, then forming a firm with him, and then staying married. Or else she could get a tenured job at Harvard.

Of course Zaha Hadid broke the rules!

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Peter Brown for suggesting the gold medal lists and for terrific comments; Kathy Crewe gave additional comments.

Notes

1. I wanted to include the Architectural Association, but its staffing structure is too different from typical universities.

2. I include among award winners the signatories of the Ahwanee principles document. Many practice stars have worked at universities, but their university affiliation is not the primary reason for their making the list of stars.
3. Robert Venturi from the practice list is the only additional man I found obviously in practice with his wife, Denise Scott Brown.
4. Tracy Ostroff, "Women in Architecture: Passages and Progress," *AIArchitect* <http://www.aia.org/aiarchitect/thisweek02/tw0322/0322tw2diversity.htm> (accessed April 2002).
5. Garry Stevens, *The Favored Circle* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 156–57.
6. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1994; originally published 1978). Thanks to Dolores Hayden for pointing this out. Vriesendorp is credited.
7. Sherry Ahrentzen and Kathryn Anthony, "Sex, Stars, and Studios: A Look at Gendered Educational Practices in Architecture," *Journal of Architectural Education* 47, no. 1 (1993): 11–29; Linda Groat, "Architecture's Resistance to Diversity," *Journal of Architectural Education* 47, no. 1 (1993): 3–10; Linda Groat and Sherry Ahrentzen, "Reconceptualizing Architectural Education for a More Diverse Future," *Journal of Architectural Education* 49, no. 3 (1996): 166–80; Linda Groat and Sherry Ahrentzen, "Voices for Change in Architectural Education," *Journal of Architectural Education* 50, no. 4 (1997): 271–85.
8. Ann Forsyth and Katherine Crewe, "LandSCAPES: Six Approaches to Landscape Architecture," *Landscape Architecture* (May 2004), 36–47.
9. Stevens, *The Favored Circle*.