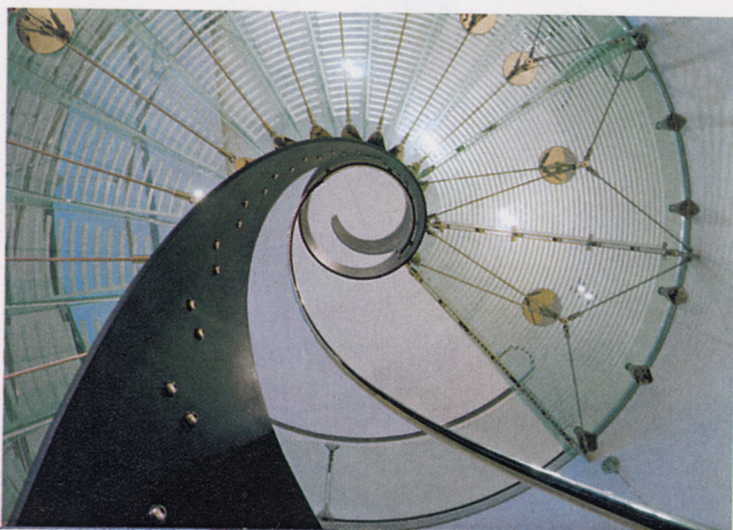


Constructive criticism

Architecture has long been seen as the preserve of men, but a generation of talented women has broken through the industry's glass (and steel) ceiling... **Christine Samuelian** meets four female architects who are shaping the future. Photographs **Gaultier Deblonde**



Women's influence on modern

architecture has long been evident, although the talents of women architects haven't always been widely recognised. Charlotte Perriand, the French designer who collaborated with Le Corbusier, is said to have influenced much of his work. Lily Reich was known for work she produced with Mies van der Rohe, and received credit in her own right. But while inter-war modernist architect Eileen Gray gained respect for her design and architecture, she doesn't elicit the same degree of reverence that many of her male contemporaries still do.

To help highlight the work of female architects, the Royal Institute of British Architects (Riba) is holding an exhibition called *Diverse City* this autumn (15 September to 4 October). Yet even today, with the exception of London-based Zaha Hadid, whose most recent project, the Centre for Contemporary Art in Cincinnati (the first museum in the US built by a woman), opens this month, female architects in the UK

whose practices produce strong work don't get nearly as much public acknowledgement as their male counterparts.

Hadid herself pulls no punches about sexism in architecture. 'You can see if just one of the women does better than men, it affects them,' she said, talking about competition between the sexes in her own office, earlier this year. 'I know if I was not bloody-minded, and I really thought it was worth sticking my neck out and keeping on, there were many moments when I could have just given up... because people treat you badly.'

Czech-born Eva Jiricna, who runs practices in London and Prague, is known as the person who defined 'interior architecture' through her work on Joseph Ettedgui's shops in the 80s. Jiricna's trademark is her light touch with glass, steel and suspended staircases; her recent works include the beautifully ethereal Hotel Josef in Prague, as well as various apartments and conversions in London. She is currently working on a project with the Victoria & Albert Museum, which will include new receptions and entrances.

'My father was an architect, so I was fully aware of what the ►

Glass houses: (right) architect Eva Jiricna's trademark is her light touch with glass, steel and hanging staircases. Left, from above: the Canary Riverside Development, and Hotel Josef in Prague



◀ profession meant,' she says. 'He knew I wanted to be an architect, but was seriously concerned about what that meant for me as a woman. He said, "You are going to be an architect's wife". There were six girls and 60 boys in her architecture class at the University of Prague, where she studied in the 50s. 'Women then were not considered

to be good at mathematics and geometry. But I used to do the boys' homework. I was appallingly bad at drawings, but all the technical stuff was a piece of cake.

'At the time, I never considered that being a woman would make my [professional] future difficult. It worried me much more being a foreigner in London.'

Many women architects never reach this pinnacle of success. Some are discouraged at university level by the male-dominated intake of architecture students at colleges. Along the way, many also drop out, says Angela Brady, chair of Women in Architecture at Riba, a group that conducts workshops and runs various programmes in schools to entice young women to join the field. Even today, women only comprise an average of 37 per cent of students in architecture schools. True, some colleges boast a 50/50, male/female ratio, but others have, on average, only 15 per cent women students. And only 13 per cent of chartered architects practising in the UK are women. Riba is currently conducting a survey to find out exactly how many give up and why.

Brady, a practising architect, has her own theories: 'Architecture is a profession where women are not valued yet. A lot of female architects face a lot of sexism – they find it

'A building site can be a confrontational environment,' says Kathryn Findlay, below, principal at

Ushida Findlay. Above: an indoor pool in England makes the most of its surroundings

tough to stay. But women bring to our profession essential attributes. We are fantastic communicators. Together, men and women make a more human architecture.' Other women who have stuck with the profession have overcome potential problems in part because they say they haven't necessarily noticed them.

'What I may have suffered from is not even realising there could be prejudice,' says Turkish-born Ferhan Azman of Azman Owens Architects, a London practice run with American business partner Joyce Owens. The duo have an impressive portfolio: they recently completed their first new-build, a family house in north London, to rave reviews, and they also count as clients Alexander McQueen, stylist Isabella





Right: Ferhan Azman (left) and Joyce Owens of Azman Owens Architects.

Above: the extension to stylist Isabella Blow's house in a conservation area in Waterloo, London

Blow, photographer Sean Ellis and swanky bakery, Konditor & Cook.

'There's no hidden conspiracy that women should not be in architecture, but it's certainly harder for women. They have to work harder than men, just like in many other professions.' Their thoughts on why women leave the profession? 'It has a lot to do with children,' says Owens, mother of one. 'If you get married and have kids at 25 and take time out, it's too early in architecture to take time off. You need a good 10 years behind you before you know what you're doing.'

'Plus, architects are so badly paid,' says Azman, mother of twins. Which could be a factor in so many striking out on their own: for the freedom and perhaps more control over where the funds go.

Architect Kathryn Findlay, principal at practice Ushida Findlay, says her firm 'seems to attract a lot of high-quality women architects'. 'Women are intelligent and capable but something in the [traditional] workplace sends them away,' she says. 'A building site can be a confrontational environment, but if you know how to carry out your role, how to organise and run a situation and a job, you're fine.'

She, too, touches on how difficult big firms can be for women with children. 'When somebody has a child she can't give the extra miles. It has nothing to do with creativity, but there's a lack of sympathy for a temporary lapse in energy.'

Having trained at the Architectural Association in London, Findlay decamped to Japan, where for 14 years she and partner Eisaku Ushida built up a highly reputable firm and she lectured worldwide before coming back in 1997. She rebuilt the firm on her own (she and Ushida

divorced and he retired) which now boasts several impressive contracts in Qatar: two vast houses and a museum. She will also be one of the UK architects designing one floor in a new Madrid hotel project.

Although all of these women are model success stories, Jiricna admits that it was after reading the work of writers such as Georges Sand that

she began to understand how women could have a difficult role in a male-dominated profession. 'It's only then that I realised how much progress we've made,' she says. 'And how much we still have to make.' **OM**

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