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Architecture

'I get looks of disbelief': women shaking up architecture worldwide



Choppers away ... the mirrored Kyiv tower by Svitlana Zdorenko. Photograph: A Phasenko Architects

Why are talented women still so shunned by the profession? From an epic New Zealand railway to a mirrored Kyiv tower with a helipad, a new book celebrates the thrilling work of 100 groundbreakers



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It is unusual for authors to announce that they can't wait for the day when their book is rendered obsolete. But then the researchers behind 100 Women: Architects in Practice hope that its title will ultimately sound as strange as a book about 100 left-handed architects, or 100 who happen to have ginger hair. We're not there yet. In an industry where the gender pay gap has widened in recent years, where all-male panels at conferences are not unusual, and where macho culture still prevails on building sites, a book like this, sadly, still has a place.

It serves several purposes. First, recalling Mitt Romney's unfortunate phrase, it is a literal "binder full of women" - a bulging 300-page directory of female architects from all around the world. The hope is that it will be used by the conveners of competition shortlists, selection panels, awards juries, hiring committees and biennales - to diversify their male-dominated lists. It is for the headhunters who claim women never apply, for the clients who say they just can't find women with the right experience. They are out there - and this is merely a sample, not an exhaustive survey.

Women's toilets are still a rarity in Bangladesh - Farzana wants this to end

More than just a diversity project, the authors see their work as a decolonisation tool. The aim is not just "sprinkling a few mistresses into the canon of architecture's majority of masters", but to transform the metrics by which architects are celebrated. It therefore includes other kinds of "spatial practice" and different ways of working, beyond the usual high-profile commissions and the conventional architect-client relationship. This is about more than the design of buildings alone.



Making tracks ... CGI of New Zealand's City Rail Link. Photograph: Courtesy of Jasmx

Accordingly, the book includes figures like Bangladeshi architect Suhailey Farzana, who works with communities to design homes and public infrastructure, including women's toilets (still a rarity in the country), that they can plan and build themselves. One project, in the city of Jhenaidah, aims to extend pathways along the river, introducing facilities like an amphitheatre, toilets and river steps for washing and bathing, in a process of "purification" - both literal and metaphorical. Farzana sees her role as a facilitator, empowering local women to learn together. "And in the process," she says, "we try to be invisible." It's not often you hear an architect say that.

In Uzbekistan, we meet Takhmina Turdialieva, who cofounded Shaharsozlik To'liqini, an organisation dedicated to amplifying the voices of young architects, protesting against thoughtless urban development through flashmobs and public talks. "The reason why architects lost their social authority in Uzbekistan," says Turdialieva, "lies in our passive or indifferent attitude to our cities." Young architects, on the other hand, "are brave and bold and full of aspirations". Growing up in Tashkent, she "hardly believed that being an architect was possible" as a woman, yet she now runs her own studio, Tatalab, working on everything from a new science campus to a renovation for the government's anticorruption agency.

The book's authors - Harriet Harriss, Naomi House, Monika Parrinder and Tom Ravenscroft - come from academia and journalism in the UK and US, but they have strived to paint an international picture. They used the UN's "geoscheme" of six continental regions to feature architects from 18 sub-regions, selecting between four and six from each one.

The result is a refreshingly eclectic bunch, ranging from the likes of Ukrainian Svitlana Zdorenko, designer of a mirror-glass office tower in Kyiv topped with a cantilevered helipad, to a Finnish trio - Saija Hollmén, Jenni Reuter, Helena Sandman - who work on humanitarian projects in Africa. Flipping through the book, the selection can sometimes feel scattershot - slick private houses one minute, participatory mapping workshops the next - but it effectively holds up a mirror to the diversity of the architecture profession today. What's more, by interviewing each subject, the authors draw out some common threads.



A pavilion created by Takhmina Turdialieva at the Centre for Contemporary Arts, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 2021.

One is summed up by Niger-based Mariam Issoufou Kamara. "I want to create a universal way of working," she says, "that produces completely different results depending on where you are. It is attention to local conditions - what is available, what the history is - then having this process that can happen everywhere."

Like Turdialieva and others in the book, Kamara grew up never imagining she could become an architect. She came to the profession later in life and has since developed work rooted in its local context that has attracted global attention. In the village of Dandaji, her transformation of a derelict mosque into a library and community centre, in collaboration with Studio Chahar, used compressed earth bricks and mud plaster to create a contemporary addition that feels effortlessly of its place.

She designed the regional market in the same village, with stalls also made from earth bricks, shaded by colourful recycled metal canopies. The challenge, she says, was to "create something that is incredibly contemporary and modern, without making people feel like they don't know how to use it - making them feel inadequate". It has since become a bustling commercial hub, as well as a regional tourist attraction, embraced by its users.



'We try to be invisible' ... Suhailey Farzana, left, in Jhenaidah, Bangladesh, 2019. Photograph: © Co.Creation.Architects

Elsewhere, the spotlight is on architects who are reviving Indigenous practices, against the tide of steel and glass globalism. Sarah Lynn Rees, of the Palawa people of Tasmania, argues that "architecture has the power to give identity and health back that architectures of the past have taken away".

Architecture can be a violent act - but it also has the power to undo that violence. "Every project in Australia," says Rees, "is within an Indigenous country - and architecture can often be destructive. The systems in which architects work often reflect the structures of settler colonialism. They become so deep-seated, they are now our 'normal'."

New Zealand - or Aotearoa, the country's Māori name - has been addressing Indigenous concerns a little longer (although some policies indeed themselves threatened by the new rightwing government). Auckland, or Tāmaki Makaurau, introduced Te Aranga Māori design principles into the city's planning guidance in 2005, and there is a growing number of Māori-led design firms in the city, as well as dedicated teams within larger practices.



'Something contemporary that didn't make people feel like they don't know how to use it' ... Mariam Issoufou Kamara's recycled metal canopies at Dandaji regional market. Photograph: Maurice Asciani/© Atelier masōmi

Māori architectural graduate Elisapeta Heta helped to found the Waka Māia team in the large commercial firm Jasmx, in order to embed Māori principles in the practice's work. As an architecture student, she says, there were few Māori or Pasifika tutors, designers or thinkers to reference, read about or learn from, but there is now a growing awareness. Heta's work on the City Rail Link - the largest infrastructure project in the country's history - has brought in Māori artists to collaborate on parts of the stations, such as a footbridge that evokes the form of Indigenous stone cutting tools found near the site. In Heta's view, "projects, environments and buildings that intrinsically weave through the stories of place from an Indigenous perspective result in all peoples having a deeper connection to that site."

If the book has a fault it is that, by focusing on individuals, it reinforces the very hero culture that it purports to be trying to dissolve. It is odd to see only one person in a partnership singled out for their solo contributions. Still, the conversations with the architects do reveal the collaborative processes behind the finished projects.

Ultimately, we can only hope the book takes us closer to a world where no one has to endure what Sithabile Mathe, and so many other women, have experienced. "Upon telling someone in Botswana that I am an architect," she says, "I am often met with a look of disbelief or, at best, a polite, dismissive smile."

100 Women: Architects in Practice is published by Riba, priced £50.