

Essay **Barbara Weiss**

'Every year, more and more women design larger buildings, win competitions, run the RIBA and become new role models'

The buzzword, these days, is 'confidence'. In the disarray caused by the current recession, we are constantly reminded that confidence, more than anything else, will ultimately determine the outcome of this turbulent time. Consumer confidence, government confidence, investor confidence... Without confidence, it is impossible to think of recovery. And yet this intangible, whimsical and elusive ingredient remains, when lacking, one of the most difficult to generate and sustain.

It is therefore concerning – and indeed frustrating – to conclude, after many long years of reflection on the subject, that in parallel with the economy, confidence and self-confidence are possibly the greatest determinants for women in their rate of success within the still very masculine world of the architectural profession.

While my generation of women architects, graduating in the late 1970s, saw themselves as a small, privileged, elite cohort destined to infiltrate a hostile and largely uncharted territory, it is obvious to current observers that the glossy new generation of young female architects populating today's offices is, on the whole, endowed with a new and impressive sense of worth, entitlement and pride in its own professionalism.

Still basking in the – now sadly fading – memories of boom times, when practices were fighting over too few available graduates and salaries were rapidly becoming unaffordable,

these successful young women mostly hail from egalitarian academic experiences that saw them excel, often surpassing their male counterparts, and from families where mothers were more often than not already employed in some sort of work activity.

However, cracks in this patina of equality of ambition start appearing when you look at the next few rungs up the career ladder. As many a young woman laments, even if her sex is now much better represented in practice than formerly, the vast majority of project architects and associates are still typically male. Salaries for men are often higher, responsibilities demanded of them and challenges offered to them greater, with career advancement training being much more readily available to the 'boys'.

While the profession itself does not do enough to monitor and curtail this culture of sexism in its midst, things only get worse when one considers this inequality at the top of the profession, and what might be in store for an ambitious young woman architect aiming at starting her own practice, braving the world of clients, consultants and planners.

As founder and director of a 15-strong, woman-led practice that has existed for nearly 25 years, it is my conviction that there has been, during all these years, an almost impenetrable glass ceiling capping the opportunities afforded to our type and size of office.

Even if, by now, women practices' own measure of self-worth has risen considerably,

BARBARA WEISS ARCHITECTS

nurtured by years of experience and unflinching determination, it is still incredibly difficult to find clients who are willing to match such newly found self-confidence with their own confidence in such practices.

There is a definite sense that women are still typecast as good at interiors (colours and cushions!), houses, maybe even – giddy thought – designing nurseries or primary schools. Most developers do not feel comfortable instructing a woman-led practice, whether to design a project with a large budget

or one for which it has no previous track record of the specific typology in hand. Similar caution is not often displayed when instructing male counterparts, as ambitious and inexperienced young turks are seen constantly jostling for position in the rush to become overnight the next great thing to watch.

What we, women architects need is a cultural sea-change among existing commissioning clients; we also need a new generation of women clients who will believe in other women; and we need more women architects that can

prove, with their excellent work, that generic preconceptions against them are outdated.

2011 marked the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day and generated widespread debate about the female perspective across many professions. It is fitting, and extremely encouraging, that three women have recently been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, that Christine Lagarde is head of the IMF, and that there are women in power in countries as diverse as Australia, Brazil and Germany.

THE WIENER GALLERY, LONDON

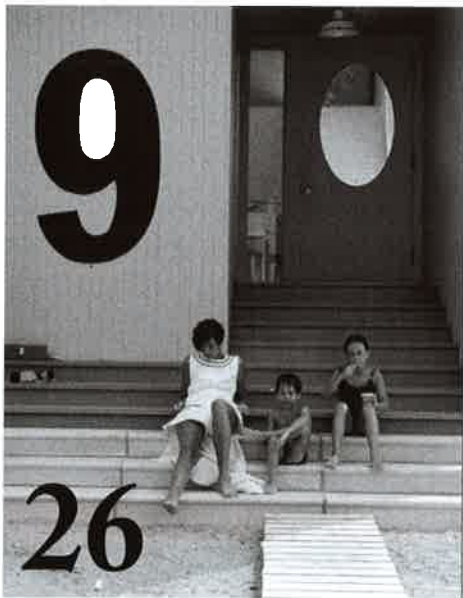
Barbara Weiss Architects has recently completed this refurbishment of the new headquarters of the Wiener Library, the world's oldest Holocaust memorial institution. See exclusive images, drawings and data for the Wiener Gallery in the AJ Buildings Library. www.AJBuildingsLibrary.co.uk



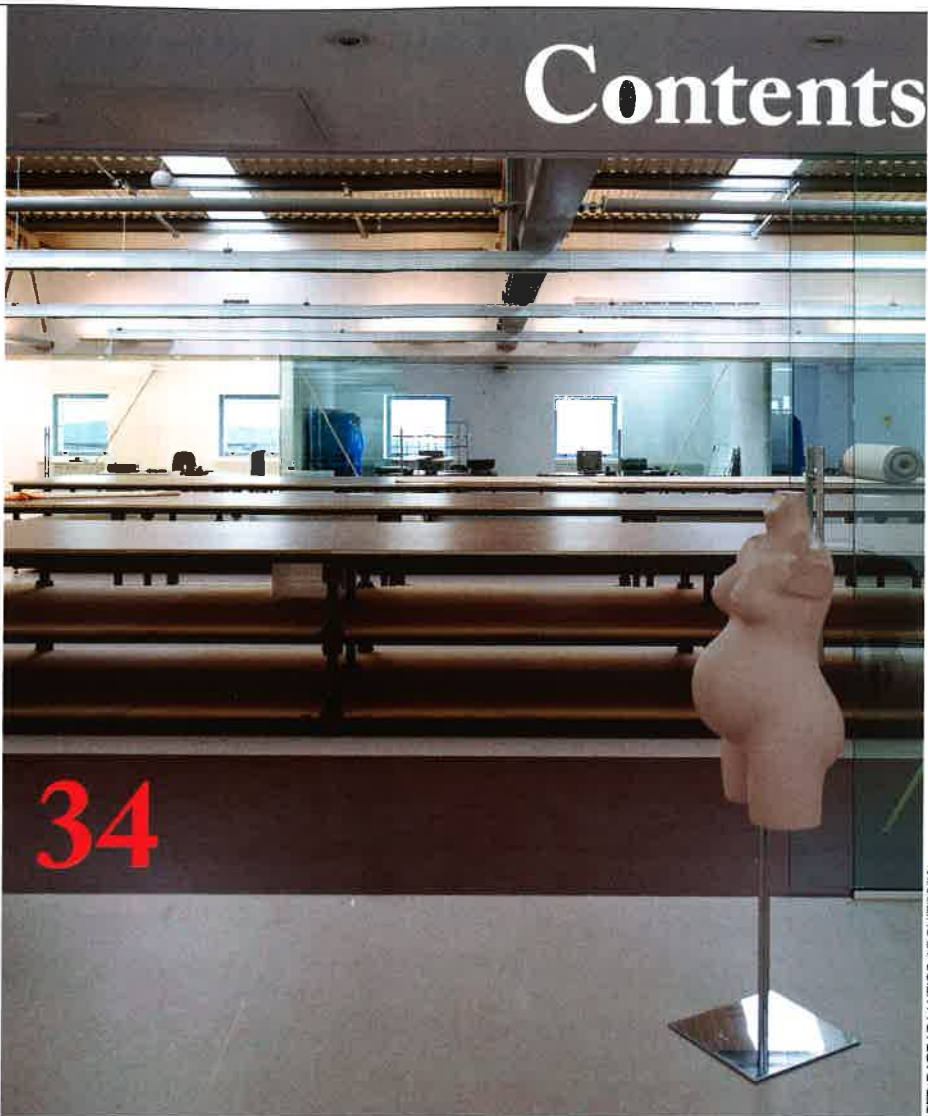
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LEFT: BARBARA WEISS ARCHITECTS

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BARBARA WEISS
DIRECTOR, BARBARA WEISS ARCHITECTS

FIRST PROJECT The Tuscan Regional Centre competition, at Stirling Wilford and Associates
BIGGEST MISCONCEPTION I am forever being asked whether I actually practice. When I confirm this, the next question is: do I do interiors? People still struggle to imagine a woman running anything more than a kitchen-table operation
ON CHILDREN I hardly took any maternity leave, concerned that I might miss out having just set up my practice. However, I took my babies with me everywhere. Babies are very flexible!



PLACE OF STUDY AA
CURRENT PROJECTS The Wiener Library; a surgery; a retirement village; private houses
CLIENTS NHS, Imperial College London, Tate Modern, Derwent London, FIAT UK
FEATURED PROJECT Shubette HQ
CLIENT Shubette of London
COMPLETED 2008
£/SQM £500



PAULINE STOCKMANS
PARTNER, ALLIES AND MORRISON

DESIGN ETHOS Clarity, quality and attention to detail
SECTORS YOU WORK IN Cultural, public, education
ADVICE FOR ASPIRING FEMALE ARCHITECTS Trust your instincts, retain your integrity and seek a good mentor
WHAT WOULD MAKE WOMEN STAY? Greater acceptance of flexible working and raising the profile of female architects to increase recognition
ON CHILDREN Take the maximum maternity leave, and enjoy it
BEST DEFENCE AGAINST SEXISM Confidence and a sense of humour
BEST ADVICE EVER RECEIVED Don't be too hard on yourself



PLACE OF STUDY University of Westminster, University of Newcastle
CURRENT PROJECTS A college; a new academy
CLIENTS Balfour Beatty, South Hampstead Synagogue, South Hill Park Trust, Argent, Scotch Malt Whisky Society, Southampton University
FEATURED PROJECT Rambert Dance Company, South Bank
COMPLETED On site
BUDGET Undisclosed



YASMIN SHARIFF
PRINCIPAL, DENNIS SHARP ARCHITECTS

WHY YOU BECAME AN ARCHITECT Growing up in Nairobi, I began training in architecture simply by appreciating the ingenuity of what was built around me. The fact that there were no other women architects in my Muslim community was not an issue
DESIGN ETHOS Rooted in the ecological Modern movement, maximising views and the context of the site
SECTORS YOU WORK IN Education and housing
BIGGEST MISCONCEPTION That babies inhibit women's professional careers: doctors, accountants and lawyers have babies too
ADVICE TO ASPIRING FEMALE ARCHITECTS Don't let yourself be underpaid or overlooked for promotion
WHY WOMEN LEAVE Discrimination by their employers, ie other architects
WHAT WOULD MAKE THEM STAY? Recognising that there is a problem and doing something about it, such as positive discrimination
HOW TO MAKE IT WORK Network, be determined and just get on with it (yes, it is difficult)
ON CHILDREN There are no simple answers to juggling childcare and work, and it often means that you can't socialise after hours, a big handicap
CURRENT CHALLENGE The lack of commitment by professional bodies and government to make a change at a strategic level. If women had access to clients and got equal pay, then the balance could genuinely be redressed. Giving 50 per cent of client advisory enquiries to women architects may be a start, but the big challenge is getting publicly procured projects open to women architects
BEST DEFENCE AGAINST SEXISM Helping other women stand up for their rights, including all forms of discrimination, especially low pay and harassment
INSPIRATION Erica Mann, a planner in the city council in Nairobi, who edited a magazine for Kenyan architects and encouraged me to write and to attend conferences



PLACE OF STUDY Architectural Association, the Bartlett
CURRENT PROJECTS Schools for a major multi-academy sponsor in very deprived areas. I was shocked to see the level of poverty and how important free school meals are to so many
CLIENTS Santiago Calatrava, Ascot Racecourse Authority, the RIBA
FEATURED PROJECT Strawbale dance studio
CLIENT Fabrizia Verrecchia
COMPLETED 2000
BUDGET £5,000
£/SQM £200