

Conjunctures.

What are Irish women architects speaking about?

Coyunturas. ¿De qué estamos hablando las arquitectas en Irlanda?

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Irish women architects are mostly a happy lot. Ireland is more considerate of its women now than it was in the past, with growing momentum in recent years to correct inequalities in Irish society. Irish women are well-educated, well-respected, and hold important positions in public life, albeit not in the numbers they should.

The Irish struggle for equality is complex, and beyond the scope of this article, but the following facts provide a background sketch: the constitutional 'marriage bar' forbidding married women to work outside the home was lifted in 1973; free secondary education was introduced in 1967 and the first State-run co-educational school opened in 1972 (until that time many girls' schools did not offer higher level mathematics or science subjects); the first woman president of the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI) was in 1996 and since then there have only been two more.

From the late 1970s, the numbers of women studying architecture began to increase in two Schools of Architecture, both in Dublin. There are now six Schools in the country (four of which are headed by women) with the student gender ratio close to 50:50 since the 1990s.

More recently, this ratio has manifested in RIAI membership statistics. RIAI student and graduate membership stands at 48% and 55% women respectively. Women account for 30% of Registered Architect members, and 16% of retired members.



Figure 1. Grafton Architects, School of Economics at Toulouse University.
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Source: <https://arquitecturaviva.com/works/escuela-de-negocios-toulouse-0>
(Accessed November 12, 2021)

The most significant disparities lie exactly where they need most change – at principal level in practices. In 2018 Ireland's five largest architectural practices had 46 directors, with only two women, i.e., 2%. In 2021 that number stands 11%, with one practice having no women directors at all. Across all RIAI registered practices, women principals total 16%.

Despite the challenges, there are a number of women-led practices whose work stands head and shoulders above their peers. Three Irish women are recipients of the RIBA Gold Medal, Sheila O'Donnell (2015), and Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara (2020) making up half the total number of women to win the international award. Farrell and McNamara have also won the Pritzker Prize which, since its establishment in 1979, has been awarded to three other women: Zaha Hadid, UK (2004), Kazuyo Sejima, Japan (2010) and Carme Pigem, Spain (2017).

Farrell and McNamara's achievement is all the more remarkable when we consider there are over 300,000 architects in Japan, 47,600 in Spain, 42,500 in the UK, and less than 3,500 in Ireland. The majority of Irish architectural practices that have made their mark internationally have women directors.

In addition to Farrell, McNamara and O'Donnell, the list includes Valerie Mulvin and Ruth O'Herlihy of McCullough Mulvin, Jeana Gearty of O'Donnell Tuomey, Roisin Heneghan of Heneghan Peng, Alice Casey of Taka Architects, Angela Brady of Brady Mallalieu, and Karen McEvoy of Bucholz McEvoy. Irish women Caroline O'Donnell and Sarah McGann lead the architecture departments at the universities of Cornell, USA and Fremantle, Australia, respectively.



Figure 2. Studio Red Architects, House at Lough Melvin, Co. Leitrim.
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In Ireland, we are lucky to have strong and dynamic women role models. In addition, schools are enabling change by ensuring gender balanced staff and visiting lecturers, while precedent studies assigned to students include the abundance of wonderful buildings in the world designed by women.

In this way, gender equality becomes the norm for all students. Strengthening the role that women play in architecture will help to shift the two biggest impediments to women – lack of confidence and lack of opportunity. For many women, lack of confidence leads to difficulty in sustaining career progression if they decide to have children.

Figure 3. LUCA Architects, Two houses at Ailesbury Drive, Dublin.
© Donal Murphy



The financial penalties can be severe as many Irish practices do not supplement meagre state maternity benefits and there is no state-subsidised childcare.

Parenthood forces many women architects onto one of two paths: either a job with a local authority or state agency (for job security and structure), or establishment of their own small practice (to enable flexibility). The second impediment of lack of opportunity manifests in different ways: some women-led practices find it hard to secure high-profile commercial projects because of (male) client preconception that they will not be able to manage the “heavy lifting” involved.

However, the most obvious bastion of inopportunity is large practice.

*Why are large practices so hostile to women?
Are they not sufficiently well-resourced to support their women
colleagues when they take time out to raise a family?*

Having a family should neither arrest nor slow career progression, unless by choice. A profession that remains predominantly male at senior level will surely fail to adapt to future challenges.

Female leadership should be recognised as a valuable asset, and space must be made at the boardroom table. It is time to work together—women and men—to rectify the enduring aberration that has held women architects back for too long. .

I would like to thank the following colleagues for sharing their stories and assisting me in my research: Noelle Angley, Sinead Bourke, Anna Donegan, Aisling Kehoe, Emma Louise Leahy, Kathryn Meghen, Alexandra Pickerill, and Charlotte Sheridan.