

Whether we recognise it or not, our experiences and the decisions we make throughout our lives, both professionally and personally, have a substantial impact on our career path. From the place where we spent our formative years, to the roles models we identify, to our education and our professional roles, there is no doubt that the influences are many and varied. Paula Whitman Prize winner and NCGE member Melonie Bayl-Smith spoke to Gill Matthewson about how she found herself analysing data in the landmark research project that kicked off Parlour, how much more research is needed to understand and improve the participation of women in architecture, why committees need academics, and what roles can research, education and the academy take in shaping the future of the architectural profession.

This is your second time around as the Academic Member on the NCGE. As the newest member, I feel like I've got a bit to learn from you!

Yes, well when the NCGE was founded, there was a decision to structure the committee with particular roles - the Academic Member being one of them. For various reasons I think it's useful for the committee as a whole, as well as for other committee members, to have an academic member on the NCGE. And in my case I'm also a member of Parlour and that's useful for the committee, because there is a lot of overlap in what we are doing. The focus of the NCGE is obviously a key area of interest for me, so I suppose you could say I am a "willing captive".

Over the past few years, your name has become closely associated with surveys and research into gender participation and equitable practice in the architectural profession. When was your interest in these aspects of practice piqued, and why?

In about 2004, I became fed up with hearing 'Where are all the women in architecture?' I thought "Haven't we already asked this question twenty years ago? What's going on that we're still asking it?" So I gathered some data on women working in architecture in New Zealand. Then some time later I commenced my PhD as part of the

ARC research project on equity, diversity and women in leadership led by Dr Naomi Stead. It was this project which resulted in the establishment of Parlour.

One of the aims of the research project was to map the participation of women in architecture, so this became a chapter in my book. We had a research assistant, Kirsty Volz, who did the hard yards of digging up some of the numbers and I did the analytical work which became a core part of pulling the research together.

At the time, it seemed like I was the only person in Australia who seemed interested and able to do this kind of work in the architectural field. So, when the Association of Consulting Architects (ACA) established their annual salary survey in 2013, but it became apparent that no-one knew what to do with the data collected... I appeared on the scene! Since then I suppose I've continued to be a bit of a 'go-to' person for looking at the profession through different data sets.

You seem to like studying and research...which comes with the territory of being the Academic Member of the NCGE! But what was your experience as an architecture student, a graduate and then with later post-graduate studies?

My early interest in architecture or perhaps awareness of architects came from observing my father - he worked as the premises manager for a bank and dealt with architects in

the course of his job across the country. I guess I knew what an architect did, you could say, from that. I studied at the University of Auckland and the year I started there was a significant enrolment of women in architecture schools in New Zealand: one-third. That level of intake was a blip which wasn't reached again until the mid-80s. But I went through with a strong female cohort. Then we hit the profession in the eighties which wasn't really ready for so many of us,

In the 1990s I travelled to London and undertook a Masters degree by research there, looking at Gender and Architecture. Going back to my comments about the questions being asked in 2004, I thought we had sorted that in the eighties and through my Masters I was quite comfortable being female in architecture. So you can see why I was thinking, "surely this issue is sorted now?" and when I heard about how there still seemed to be a noticeable lack of women, my interest was somewhat reluctantly sparked and I really began to wonder why every generation had to go through the same process.. What was going on.

How do you think that gender equity plays out in academia and non-traditional practice?

Well, as Julie Willis (UoM) said at the Parlour 'Data at Work' event here in Melbourne, in academia there is 'a transparency about things' - but that's not to say that gender doesn't play out. There are

still implicit and unconscious biases, so the some of the same sorts of issues exist and need attention. The most recent study looking at architecture and academics in Australia is from 2012, so we don't really have the most up to date data, but what I can tell you is that we have seen quite a few women who have been appointed professors since then.

Academia though has a whole other set of issues going on. It's far more difficult to be an academic now – in the past you just had to teach, and maybe write one book over the course of your career (I'm exaggerating here a bit). Now, your research outputs are examined very closely, and you are expected to raise income for the faculty – bringing in the 'research dollars'. You also must be doing 'impact research' – the impact of your research is meant to be measured, which I really do think is potentially flawed because the universities are trying to measure quality by measuring 'quantity'. It doesn't really work that way.

Historically speaking, it was always quite difficult for women in academia. When I think back about where I studied, at the University of Auckland, they didn't appoint their first female member of staff until 1981 – and then she was the only permanent female member of staff for at least a decade. I think it's better now. In fact the last at least three heads of school there have been women. So I would say that it is probably easier for women in academia than it might be in the profession and the representation of women in academia is pretty good and probably better than the profession.

Lastly, what tangible benefits do you see for the profession if more inclusive models of practice are adopted?

Well, my fundamental belief is that we always design from 'where we are' and where we have been. Who we are has a bearing on how we design and what we design. So ultimately the profession benefits from having a wider group of people working in it – people from a broad range of backgrounds to inform architecture and for architecture to better relate to everyone in the community.

Regardless of what we like to think, architecture has lots of specialisations – and along the way women can get pigeonholed into areas where they allegedly have 'more insight.' So, you find women in health architecture, in education architecture, in residential architecture – because apparently these are meant to be 'women's areas' in architecture. This is not really an inclusivist approach.

I think we need architects who ask questions like 'Why is it like that?' Asking 'why' often is important, because decisions have been made many years ago and applied ad infinitum – and they don't necessarily apply now. Ultimately, part of design and part of being a good architect is asking the right questions to gain insight. With an increasing number of participants from diverse backgrounds, we will hopefully have more people in the profession asking the good questions from different points of view and as a result have more inclusive, thoughtful design.