



# Melonie Bayl-Smith

Whether we recognise it or not, our experiences and the decisions we make throughout our lives, both professionally and personally, has a substantial impact on our career path. From our familial upbringing, our roles models, employment and employer exposure, the demographic we live in, to our choice of partner. Co-Chair of the National Committee for Gender Equity (NCGE), Kellie McGivern talks to one of the newest members Melonie Bayl-Smith, to look beyond the long list of her esteemed endowments to discover what has influenced this successful woman, what were her motivations for joining the committee, her aspirations to create an impact on diversity and equity in architecture and what that really means.

**Congratulations on the Paula Whitman Leadership in Gender Equity Prize for 2018. Can you tell us a little about the influences in your life and how they have shaped your career choices?**

There are three people worth mentioning here - my mum, my uncle and my piano teacher. My mother Evelyn said that she would support me whatever I chose as a career direction, and once I went down the architecture path, she suggested that having my own practice was a path to autonomy and self-direction. This probably reflects her close knowledge of my personality (!) but also what challenges might lie ahead for me as a female architect. My uncle Louis was an architect and from a very young age he fostered my burgeoning interest in buildings, design, materials, space, drawing – he even taught me how to lay bricks! My piano teacher Ann always reminded me that if I became an architect, I could always practice architecture AND music, but that a career in music was unlikely to deliver opportunities to participate in architecture. She also taught me that practice makes perfect, something that still drives me today. Also I would not have been able to return to work (after having a family) and maintain my practice without the amazing commitment and support of my husband Piers.

**What was it do you think that made your mother suggest your own practice was the best employment model for you?**

My mother was an early role model for me, she would say I was driven since I came out of the womb. She gave up a lot for her children and instilled in me that I could do anything. Having your own practice is not for everyone, for me it provides the flexibility

that I need to raise my family at the same time as my focusing on my career. In the early days when selecting a location for our practice, one of the first things my mother commented on was its close proximity to a good local primary school. I remember thinking how irrelevant that was at the time, but now with the office a three-minute walk to school, I can tell you it is extremely relevant!

**Melonie, you are one of the newest members to the NCGE. What prompted you to join the committee and what benefits do you see for the profession as a more inclusive model?**

My diverse experiences gained over twenty years of practice and teaching have provided me with a deeper understanding and more critical position on the challenges facing everyone participating in architecture. The NCGE wants to change the paradigms surrounding work and work cultures, so as to improve the practice and business of architecture, and I joined the committee as it provided an opportunity to use my knowledge and experiences to make a contribution to this important work.

**What do you see as the industry's current challenges and emerging areas of positive change?**

The industry's greatest challenge – across all scales of practice - is setting appropriate fees and maintaining sustainable businesses where people want to work and are able to build up the profession. For example, when we cut fees, everyone suffers, because fee cutting devalues the work of ALL architects. Coupled with the everyday inherent risks of professional practice, fee cutting endangers


quality work cultures – with the expectation that workers will contribute unpaid overtime and/or continually work long hours to deliver the work to deadlines and with less billable time. I think positive change can come from flexible work practices, job sharing and part time roles, and mentoring and educating students, graduates and architects in strategic and robust business management practices that propel and communicate the value of architects.

**What are your priorities during your time on the NCGE? If you had to focus on one issue which would it be?**

My priority is to create tools / forums / opportunities for practices to find and establish a better work culture and work opportunity for their scale of practice. It's important to move past 'preaching to the converted' and find compelling ways for more conservative or resistant practices to become interested in moving towards an inclusive, flexible practice model.

**What does leadership look like to you?**

Leadership is about being a good communicator, to understand people and what is important to them. When we see things that aren't right – to speak up about them, "*Put your money where your mouth is*" is my mantra. I tend to take the slower, difficult route, forming an opinion and doing something about it. With leadership comes a responsibility to contribute in a positive way, - not talking about issues but striving to achieve positive outcomes.



**You have a long list of accolades, representation on boards, adjunct professor at the University of Technology Sydney School of Architecture, Director of your own practice, not to mention mother of two young children - HOW do you find time to contribute?**

Yes I am busy! But to be honest, my current crop of appointments is about more than my practice leadership – it's about having a consistent involvement in the profession over many years, such as being part of different committees and activities such as tutoring, lecturing, mentoring, speaking, writing and juries. I've never done all of those things at the same time, but I'm an opportunist so often one thing has led to another, with some hectic overlaps at times!

Piers and I see ourselves as a team and this collaborative approach to everything we do in life has ultimately benefited our family. We may not have much in our bank accounts, but we have a family life rich in purpose. I'm interested in people, what motivates us, and how we can leverage the potential in our profession and in our communities for good – so the honours and recognition are wonderful, but the friendships, the networks and the opportunity to give back is the ultimate reward for me.