

architecturenz



Making room



Lynda
Simmons

ON REMOVING BARRIERS

AT THE ARCHITECTURE+WOMEN-NZ (A+W·NZ) AGM, held on 19 June 2019, I stood down from the position of Co-Chair, a role I have been in since our founding days in May 2011.¹ In an attempt to flatten the hierarchy of the organisation, we established Co-Chair positions and, over eight years, I have shared this role with Megan Rule (2011–2016), Elisapeta Heta (2017) and Divya Purushotham (current).²

At the AGM, I read out a ‘resignation letter’ – one which was filled with the names of the many people I needed to thank, the pride I feel in the organisation we have created from the ‘ground up’, the effect A+W·NZ has had through a clear philosophy of small and potent targeted action; the changes I have seen, and the optimism I have regarding the younger generation of incredibly talented graduates and architects.

But I also reflected on some things that haven’t changed, prompted by an email received by A+W·NZ in the days before the AGM. It was completely typical of the many emails we have received over the last eight years but it affected me deeply because,

Portrait illustration by Julia Gessler.

as I prepared to step down from the Co-Chair position, I had to confront a major barrier that has not shifted.

The email asked:

“Just wondering if there are any resources, precedents or information available on how practices can successfully manage females returning to work following maternity leave.”

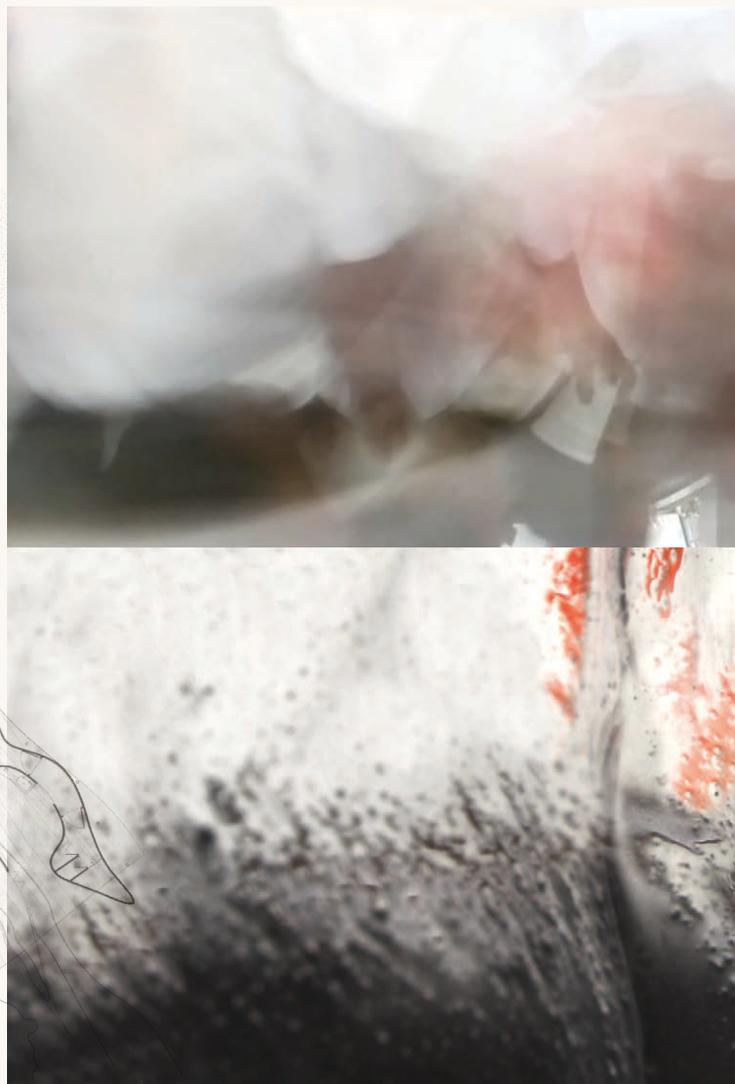
It was a simple question but, unfortunately, the answer is no, there are no resources³ (although there are plenty of precedents). It is effectively the same question I asked when my children were born (the oldest is now 21) and the same question asked by the Women’s Institute of Architects in 1979, and by many before them.

And it is the same question Julie Wilson asked me on that fateful day

in St Lukes in 2011,⁴ when we decided that, to help answer it, an exhibition of architecture by women was a good idea – to show publicly that we were not an anomaly and that we survive, despite the odds.⁵

To create the national exhibition, Julie, Megan Rule, Sarah Treadwell and I formed A+W·NZ, an organisation based on networks. We understood that the only way to answer ‘that question’ for the many to come is to share stories and that we could provide the connections and a structure for those connections.

The A+W·NZ team⁶ has spent the eight years since building our networks (database, mentoring, events, awards, research and publication), simultaneously





connecting and making visible the many women in architecture. We like to believe that we are now one resource and that the asking of this question is exactly why A+W·NZ exists. And yet, despite all efforts, here is the question again, in 2019.

Unfortunately, the answer from the industry and profession to this recurrent question has consistently been no – there is no advice available for either the practice or the returning worker regarding negotiation for employment with reduced hours. In fact, the NZIA response to my own questioning in the early 2000s was that, as a part-time, self-employed architect, I was a liability to the profession and should stop practice completely, returning when our

ABOVE AND LEFT

Theja Jayalath 'Perforated' – from 'Drawing Inhabitation,' (2016) MArch (Prof) thesis. Original 600 x 400mm (framed) digital photography composition. Top: Poson Festival (19/6/16), Base: Thermoformed PET model 250 x 200mm. Above left, Community Śālāva Plan.

Theja Jayalath's design research used recordings of Sri Lankan community events to instigate 'atmosphere' artworks, composed from drawing, photography and modelling. The nine artworks were taken as her design brief for a community building located in Potters Park, Mount Eden.

Theja was voted in to the A+W·NZ core team as Events Leader at the A+W·NZ AGM on 19 June 2019.

children were older. I am glad that I did not accept that advice.

So, how can architectural practices be assisted to accommodate their contemporary workforce? This is effectively what I asked in an earlier column,⁷ and I believe the answer lies in developing respect and support for part-time working weeks, specially targeted for males so they can make room for their partners' careers.

I have taught almost a thousand women during my 24 years in education, and have watched sadly as so much talent is lost or reduced to the profession over time at a higher rate than is the case with their male friends. (How dare the profession benefit from the skills of graduates for their first five to 10 years of working, then ignore them when the issue of reduced working hours arises? And how foolish.) I want to be part of a profession that is able to offer more than that to the incredible talent that we benefit from working with.

It is interesting that A+W·NZ was founded on the question of navigating an architectural career while raising children, yet A+W·NZ is not all about having children or not, or how. We have worked hard to increase the conversation beyond raising families and beyond gender, removing barriers and supporting diversity in all of its forms. We are not reduced to our biology, we are architects. And we look forward to the day when the question in the recent email is no longer raised in the context of women only – because men raise children as well.

Often, when gender becomes a topic, the conversation falls to difference – but, as an organisation, A+W·NZ ignores difference and, instead, focuses on the ways in which architecture binds us all. As I step down from Co-Chair,⁸ I am proud to leave the organisation in such strong form, with a talented, energetic and thriving core team. Making room for their leadership. **1**

REFERENCES

- ¹ For more information about the A+W·NZ organisation, see architecturewomen.org.nz
- ² Lindley Naismith was voted in on 19 June 2019 to fill the space I leave, alongside current Co-Chair Divya Purushotham. There are nine other roles in the A+W·NZ core team; see architecturewomen.org.nz/about
- ³ The NZIA, under Christina van Bohemen's presidency term, established The Diversity Agenda in April 2018, in collaboration with ENZ and ACENZ. The Diversity Agenda provides an intention and a framework, although the resources themselves are yet to be built up.
- ⁴ The A+W·NZ 'founding story' has been told many times in many forms, and one example can be found on the bfm podcast *Ready Steady Learn*, 22 November 2011. architecturewomen.org.nz/archives/bfm-podcast-22-nov-2011-lynda-simmons-interview
- ⁵ The National A+W·NZ Exhibition 2013 exhibited the work of more than 500 women. architecturewomen.org.nz/archives/between-silos-exhibition-info-mill-space
- ⁶ For lists of the many wonderful people involved, see architecturewomen.org.nz/about
- ⁷ Opinion L. Simmons, 'The Issue of Unpaid Hours', *Architecture New Zealand* July/August 2019.
- ⁸ As I am the last of the original core group to leave, with me goes some institutional memory. To maintain this for the organisation, I will stay on in the newly created position of 'Archivist', as well as Research Leader.