

architecturenz



Change is difficult



**Lynda
Simmons**

ON SOLVING PROBLEMS

WHEN I WROTE ABOUT THE

undervaluing of 'care' work in this column in July 2019,¹ it was intended to be a single opinion piece, based on the importance of Marilyn Waring's work concerned with the economics of unpaid labour. Yet, the topic was re-addressed in the very next issue,² in the form of a personal reflection on changes I had seen – or not – since the forming of Architecture+Women·NZ. Both pieces highlighted the need for architectural practices to adjust to a changing workforce.

Already, there is a third (unintended) instalment on the same topic, inspired this time by the recent *Making Ways* exhibition at Objectspace, curated by Dr Kathy Waghorn.³ Practice models other than the traditional one were put into sharp focus over the month-long rolling exhibition, and the excellent discussion provoked throughout, thanks to the breakfast and evening events, highlighted a current hunger for adaptability.

One of those evening panels was the Fast Forward Activism

panel 'Making Waves' and, at the invitation of Dr Karamia Muller, I participated alongside Julie Stout and Dr Elizabeth Rose.⁴ This column is a reiteration of what I said that night, where my personal focus was again on this need for the architectural profession to adjust to its contemporary workforce, and how valuing part-time workers is central to this adjustment.

We know that the current and emerging workforce does not fit the traditional model, which relies on the separation of work and domestic lives. The reality that approximately 50 per cent of architects will be on reduced-hour working weeks at significant times in their careers will require structural change to current practice management norms.

And change is difficult. At an individual level, we all have personal or encountered stories of the attempt to accommodate part-time weeks, often with unsatisfactory outcomes. Continuity of communication is essential in all architectural projects, and many practices cope by putting reduced hour workers on smaller projects or in roles with less responsibility. This can result in staff losses, as a result of a lack of meaningful work. Other practices simply state that complex projects cannot be led by those on reduced hours and let their staff go before any perceived lack of project continuity becomes a problem.

Almost all on reduced hours have their career progression put on hold.

Rather than dealing on a case-by-case basis, it is time for the profession to find collective solutions for this growing issue – support for both the employer and the employee from the profession as a whole. In other words, a shift in practice culture.

Here, I want to draw attention to a parallel shift in practice culture that the profession has recently coped with – the move from hand drawings to digital platforms. The last three decades have seen a slow, expensive and, at times, painful change in the entire industry: one that has been managed collectively as well as individually. This has not been an easy process, with the significant shift in technology affecting every aspect of practice, including collaboration, procurement and contracts, design methodology and staffing.

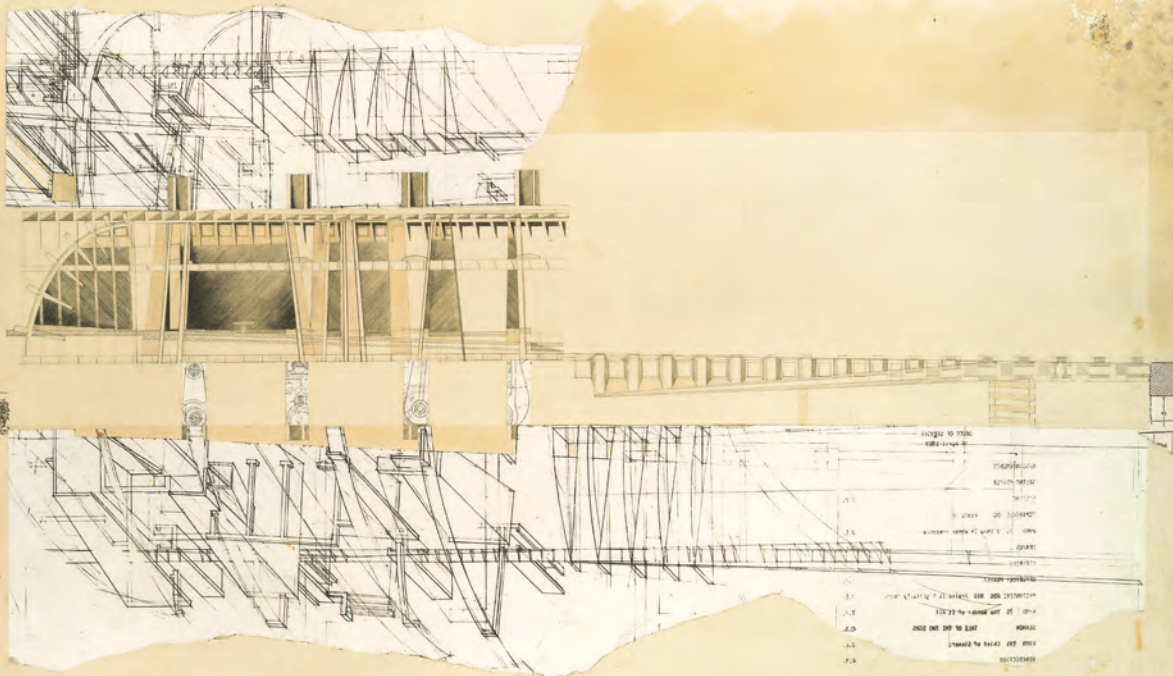
The entire profession responded to this challenge with a huge amount of resources and support. I have observed over these years: the large number of education programmes that have been supplied to practices (from large to small) by the institute, universities and wider industry; the continuous research that has been carried out by universities and industry providers; the huge practice management support that was established from the institute and other organisations; and an organic, mutually supportive sharing of coping strategies set up between practices.

Everyone knew that we were immersed in a wave of change, and addressed the difficulties with the development and sharing of technical, legal, contractual and practical resources.

Now, there is another massive wave, already set in motion, also having a significant effect on architectural project and practice management.

As mentioned, 50 per cent of architects may (or may not) give birth several times throughout their early-to-mid careers, and need reduced hours to accommodate their other

Portrait
illustration
by Julia
Gessler.

**ABOVE**

Albert Livigisitone Refiti, 'O Le Loa o Fesulufaiga: A Tomb in Flight', Panel 1 of 4 from a submission for (and winner of) the Jacobsen Student Travel Award 1989. Derived from 'The Embassy of the Non-Dweller' (1989), BArch thesis. Pencil and ink, collage (original size A1).

The Bachelor of Architecture degree at the University of Auckland in the 1980s required the submission of a sub-thesis (six-month) to complete the five-year course. Albert Refiti is my partner and the father of my two children, born in 1998 and 2001. When they were young, he and I worked hard to maintain our ideology of sharing 'work' and 'care' equally, in an effort to maintain both of our careers. During this time, each of us noticed that having a part-time status had a huge effect on career progress, regardless of gender.

full-time jobs of 'care'. In addition, the non-birthing parents are asking for flexible hours so they can support their partners' careers and have stronger connections to their families.⁵ That's a lot of flexible time the profession needs to cope with.

What I cannot see, however, is the same huge amount of resources and support being targeted to cope with this increase in flexible time, from practices, the universities,⁶ industry providers or the institutes. Instead, combining architecture with raising a family comes under the sidelined category of 'personal choice' and architects who are parents are left to navigate a generally unsupportive environment as best they can. This is the individuated approach to

an issue that requires a collective solution – a strategic and optimistic approach, addressing the needs of practice leaders as well as architects and graduates with young families. For example, the digital platforms we now use can enable job-share positions of leadership to be established. A job-share structure allows two project architects on three-day weeks to run large, complex projects, with successful examples emerging.⁷

Graduates⁸ are looking for the adaptability they require in a profession that seems slow to move. Change is difficult but solving problems is what architects are good at. Let's hope that real change means I can avoid a fourth column on this topic. **①**

REFERENCES

- ¹ 'The issue of unpaid hours,' *Architecture New Zealand*, Issue 04, July 2019, pp 14–15
- ² 'Making room,' *Architecture New Zealand*, Issue 05, September 2019, pp 14–15
- ³ *Making Ways* (14 September–13 October 2019), Objectspace. objectspace.org.nz/exhibitions/making-ways-alternative-architectural-practice-1/
- ⁴ The University of Auckland Fast Forward 2019 series. festivalofarchitecture.nz/2019/08/15/fast-forward-ockham-residential-lecture-series-hosted-by-objectspace-architecture-and-activism-making-waves/
- ⁵ Five stories from such parents were told at the A+W·NZ Fathers' Forum 2019, held on 11 November 2019 at the Te Iringa Room, AUT City Campus. architecturewomen.org.nz/news-events/aw-nz-fathers-forum
- ⁶ Noted exceptions are the current project led by Professor Errol Haarhoff, Dr Paola Boarin and Dr Natalie Allen, which continues Haarhoff's 'Practice and Gender: A Survey of New Zealand Architecture Graduates 1987–2008' (2010). The main data resource for gender in the architectural profession comes from the extensive Australian research work of Dr Gill Matthewson for *Parlour*, most recently the 'Parlour Census Report 2001–2016'.
- ⁷ See, for example, the case study by Jessica Farrell and Rachel Wardrobe from BVN in 'Let's talk about flex,' *Parlour*. archiparlour.org/lets-talk-about-flex/
- ⁸ The movement towards the profession being accessible and equitable is strong; this is especially evident in the discussions of students enrolled in the practice management course at the University of Auckland: a course run by senior lecturer Bill McKay (and AAA Chair) and myself.