

**COME  
AS YOU  
ARE!**

# A CAREER AROUND ARCHITECTURE!

Text by

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I am not an architect; I was trained as an art historian. In 1990, I made the choice to take a job as an assistant professor in an architecture school rather than an art history department. I spent the next 16 years teaching architecture at the University of Minnesota and the University of California, Berkeley. I returned to the United States from Ireland in the autumn of 2015 and again in 2016 to teach at Yale. The rest of my career, I have spent back in my home discipline, although many of my students, including most of my doctoral students, have trained as architects.

This matters because art history is, especially in the United States, where I am from, the most feminized of all disciplines. The humanities are typically the most feminized parts of any university, whereas architecture schools, although most have had at least 40% female students since at least the 1980s, were much slower to hire and promote women faculty. This meant that I always

had models—strong, bright women who encouraged me. In Germany, by contrast, it has been more difficult for women to build careers in art history than it has been in the United States, and easier, although not easy, in architecture schools.

It also matters because I have never practiced architecture. I know best the problems that female students and faculty encounter. I am familiar with the often even more burdensome ones faced by practicing architects, mostly by hearsay.

In my experience, there are at least four ways in which women are discriminated against in the field of architecture, none of which are entirely exclusive to it. First, and this is my field as a historian of architecture, they are left out of the histories students are taught. This is finally beginning to change, but considering that women have been writing since the 1970s in the United States and for nearly as long in Germany about the roles that women have had as architects, clients, and construction laborers, it is absolutely outrageous that this material was so slow in reaching most architecture classrooms. Part of this is because of the degree to which the starchitect was lionized on both sides of the Atlantic, and perhaps nowhere more than Berlin, New York, and London, from the 1980s through the 2010s, without any regard for issues such as sustainability, the supply chain for materials, or the labor involved in construction. Certain approaches to architecture were lauded as “critical,” even when they were used above all to support the worst aspects of neoliberal globalization. This included white men in expensive clothing flying around the world in business or even first class to tell everyone else how they ought to design. This creates the impression that if you are not already a certain kind of person in terms of how you design, the way you dress, the family connections you already have, and so forth, there is not much place for you in this line of work.

Second, there is the issue of actual sexual predation. Young women, especially students or women at the early stages of their professional career, are particularly vulnerable, but a not inconsequential number of young men are victims, too. The extremely hierarchical nature of German academia makes this even more likely than in the United States, where it has also been an enormous problem. Until #metoo, many women refused to talk about their experiences, so notes were not often compared about which men were particularly awful, but we know that they included such luminaries as Richard Meier, who, of course, built in Germany as well as the United States. Remember, too, how very well-connected Meier was. He is a second cousin of Peter Eisenman, had lectured at many of the world's leading architecture schools, and had a large office that had already gotten into labor relations trouble when he was designing the Getty. You cannot tell me that a lot of men did not know all about this, and yet they did little or nothing to protect the women who were his victims. And that is part of the problem. Lots of men who would never grope, much less rape, a woman themselves are unwilling to do anything about those who do. And the women who will speak out have not, until recently, been sufficiently powerful to effect change; indeed, they have often paid a high price for their integrity.

Third is that fact that women can, in theory, become mothers. Not all women are actually fertile, and not all women want children, but most men involved in hiring cannot tell the difference until women are well into middle age. Many employers discriminate against women for this reason well in advance of any possible pregnancy, but historically, tolerance of such discrimination has been particularly high in architecture firms. This, by the way, is a significant difference from architecture schools as most, although not all, are more likely to abide by national employment laws than are relatively small practices run by men who have built careers on flouting convention. What makes mothers particularly vulnerable is

that architects, unlike most other professionals, are trained to believe that they should work impossible hours for almost no money. Heavily pregnant women and new mothers simply cannot do this as easily as the many ambitious men who go along with such a system. And, aside from turning down a pass from your boss, nothing has historically been likely to get you fired faster than getting pregnant. Employers know that working for them 60 to 80 hours a week for a 40-hour paycheck is likely to matter to you less once you also have responsibility for a kid, especially if you have a partner who is more likely to focus on earning an income than on changing diapers and making sure that dinner is on the table. Countries like Germany and the United States that have been slow to build good daycare systems make women particularly vulnerable.

Finally, and this does not go away no matter how old you get, many men simply do not like women who challenge or exert authority. They view it as inappropriately unfeminine behavior. You are a witch. Zaha Hadid was lauded for being original, but she was also treated much worse for being "difficult" than her male counterparts ever have been. A good architect will challenge convention, clients, and contractors, and she should be respected for doing so in a professional, authoritative manner. Yet this is often not yet the case. Older successful women like myself nonetheless have to continue to be very difficult, much more difficult than when we were younger. We have a responsibility to call out bad behavior so that younger women do not have to endure the discrimination and harassment that has scarred most, but thankfully not all of us. The next generation deserves to not have to address these issues and instead to be able to focus on building a better tomorrow and a sustainable future for all of us.

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