

## ARCHITECTURE

# THROUGH THE GLASS CEILING

*Long dominated by men, the architectural world is slowly finding that some of its best work is being done by women*

WRITER NONIE NIESEWAND

In the early 1990s, Zaha Hadid was two hours late for a portrait by Lord Snowdon in her own home for *Vogue*. Impossibly grand, she swept in wearing Issey Miyake upside down with the sleeves sashed around her midriff—the pleated waistband a ruff around her face. Snowdon was instantly disarmed, and charmed.

When I was dispatched by him to make coffee, the hair and make-up artist asked me what Hadid did for a living. “What do you think?” I asked. “She’s an opera star, a diva,” she said, opening the fridge to get milk. Then she saw the Gitanes packs stacked on almost empty shelves. “Think again,” I said.

At the time, Hadid wasn’t the world’s most celebrated architect. She had only one building to her name, a fire station with vertiginous angles at the Vitra furniture factory in Weil-am-Rhein, Germany. When the BBC reviewed it, firemen found it wanting for emergency services. Still, she sportily posed at their fire station in one of the fire engines, wearing a fireman’s helmet.

Today, her buildings are world famous—the London Aquatic Centre, the Haydar Aliyev Center in Baku, the MAXXI museum in Rome, BMW’s factory in Leipzig, and the Guangzhou and Dubai opera houses. In 2004, she won the Pritzker Prize for her Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, the first of only two women in the 39 years since its inception to have been awarded the Oscar of architecture. Kazuyo Sejima was the second woman to win in 2010, jointly with Ryue Nishizawa, for their 21st Century >

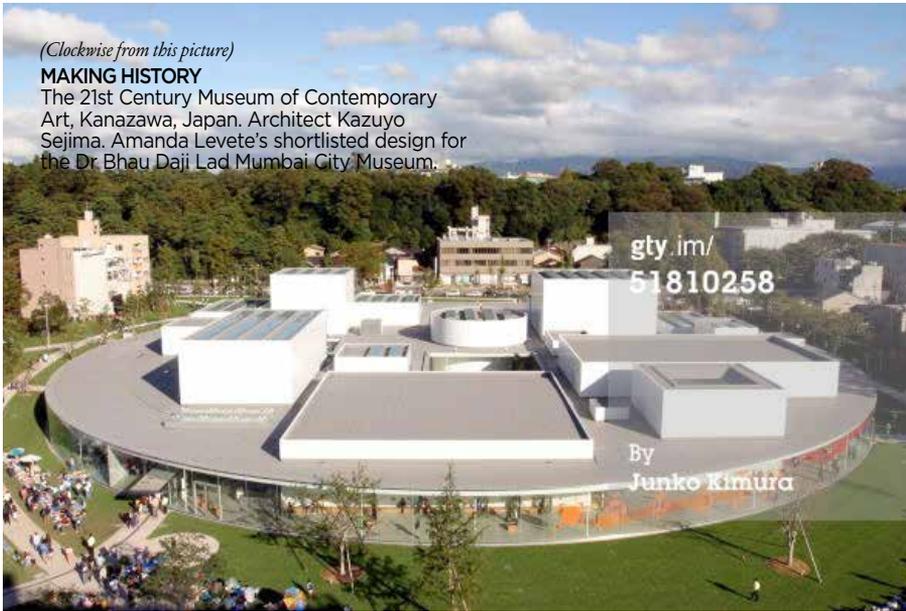


TOP-NOTCH  
Architect Zaha Hadid.

(Clockwise from this picture)

**MAKING HISTORY**

The 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan. Architect Kazuyo Sejima. Amanda Leveté's shortlisted design for the Dr Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum.



< Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, Japan, which jury chair, Peter Palumbo, described as “delicate and powerful, precise and fluid, ingenious but not overly, or overtly, clever.”

**DRESSED TO BUILD**

Swapping stilettos for steel capped boots to work on a construction site takes nerves of steel. This is the toughest workplace in the world for a woman. But Hadid shrugs off the difficulties. “Well, I’m a woman, and an Arab,” she told me. “What do you expect?”

A 2014 survey in an architectural weekly reported that two thirds of women architects found the building industry hadn’t fully accepted their authority. Some indomitable women architects play up their femininity. Behind the bollards and barricades around Kensington and Bloomsbury where her master plan will impact London, Deborah Saunt (the DS of the practice DSDHA she shares with her husband David Hill) dresses to kill. “I grew up on building sites, as both my grandfather and uncle worked as bricklayers,” Saunt told me. “Early on, I developed the habit of making sure I was dressed in the most ladylike fashion. There’s an assumption that if you try to be one of the boys your intent is questionable. By appearing quite feminine, I almost play to the stereotype and demand to be treated differently.”

Dress codes in establishment circles can be as exclusive. Discrimination isn’t always one of gender. When I was appointed architectural correspondent for *The Independent* newspaper, I interviewed Jan Kaplický and his partner, Amanda Leveté, whose practice, Future Systems, won the Stirling Prize in 1999 for their

Lord’s Media Centre. Yet when Leveté first went to the Lord’s Cricket Ground to show the MCC their plans for the aluminium goggle box on a slender stem, she wasn’t allowed into the hallowed pavilion, and stood outside in the rain. “The steward told me, ‘You can’t come in because you’re a woman,’ and pointing at Jan, ‘He can’t come in because he’s not wearing a tie.’ To the MCC’s great credit they gave us that commission.” Leveté now runs her own practice, AL\_L. In December 2014, she and Hadid earned honourable mentions in the shortlist to build the Dr Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum.

**ROLE MODELS**

Recognition of the role women architects play in world-class buildings is becoming an issue. Feisty Harvard graduates in a group called WID (Women in Design) in 2013 asked the Pritzker jury to consider the joint role played by husband and wife team, Robert Venturi with Denise Scott Brown, in winning the Pritzker for London’s National Gallery in 1991. Only, her name didn’t appear in the honours. Lord Palumbo, the chair of the Pritzker Architecture Prize jury since 2004, wasn’t prepared to “second guess” the decision of a previous jury to retrospectively award her the Pritzker. “As a woman I’ve felt excluded by the elite of architecture throughout my career,” Scott Brown told a news channel afterwards.

By contrast, Jeanne Gang who founded Studio Gang, the hottest name in architecture at present, got the American Institute of Architects to award a posthumous prize to Julie Morgan >





(Clockwise from the top)

**ARCHITECTURAL ICONS**

Levete's completed Media Centre at Lord's Cricket Ground. Architect Jeanne Gang. A rendering of Gang's design for the Tellapur O2, a residential complex in Hyderabad. Architect Amanda Levete.



< (1872-1957), designer of the Hearst Castle in California. "I'm pretty proud of that," says Gang, who has the distinction of designing the tallest building in the world by a woman—the 859-foot-tall (262 metres) Aqua Tower in Chicago. It's also the smartest, with an undulating facade that extends the floor plates into wafer thin concrete balconies so that inhabitants can step outside, no matter how high in the sky they live—cooled by the wind in sweltering Chicago summers, and warmed by the sun in winter. "I'm really into performance, how a building responds to needs, not just how it looks" says Gang. While she grew up doing math on bridges with her engineering father, she admits that, "to win projects, women have to go above and beyond."

When Sarah Wigglesworth, of Sarah Wigglesworth Architects, graduated in architecture from Cambridge University in 2006, there wasn't a single female in the faculty. "No role models, no buildings by women to review or study. I felt like a round peg in a square hole." Today, she teaches graduates at Sheffield University, male and female, to remain true to their vision, and "to debunk the mystique of the single male hero who, with one sweep of a pen, achieves genius."

The first woman in India to open her own practice, Shilpa Architects, in 1979, Sheila Sri Prakash nearly didn't get the chance to study architecture. When she applied to Chennai's Anna University, the dean questioned her conviction. "He asked if I would be depriving a male aspirant of a career! With hindsight, these challenges drew me to my profession with even greater ferocity," she says. "At an international seminar, I was appalled to be asked if good Indian design was an oxymoron. Indian corporations today rival the world's wealthiest, and it's a challenge to convince them to emerge as patrons of holistic sustainability or indo-centric grandeur."

**ON THEIR OWN**

Just over 20 per cent of architects are women according to the most recent statistics, with only 14 per cent working as directors or partners of practices. Worse, according to 2014 data by the United Kingdom's Office of National Statistics, women architects working part-time earned 25 per cent less than men, while full-time women architects earned 17 per cent less than men.

Cindy Walters—Director of Walters & Cohen Architects, which she co-founded with fellow woman architect Michal Cohen—believes the only way to break the glass ceiling is for women to start their own practice. Walters & Cohen's first big project was the Yehudi Menuhin School in Surrey, and ever since, the two-woman team has gained a reputation for designing schools that kids want to attend. Currently, they are building a huge one in Moscow. The number of women graduates still practising after 10 years drops, as having children disadvantages women architects. Neither of the two women who won the Pritzker have kids.

In 2007, Anna Heringer won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, two years after she started her own practice in Germany. She still gets asked her why she hasn't built so much since. "I tell them it's because I have a five-year-old daughter, so I can't manage a large office and travel on international projects," she says. "So I concentrate on sustainability and quality, not quantity. It's not all about number crunching, more a question of aesthetics and ethics."

"Beautiful, meaningful and humane" was the verdict of the >



(Clockwise from this picture)

**NATURAL DESIGNS**

Architect Anna Heringer. Heringer's design for the Majiayao Ceramics Museum in China. Two views of Heringer's METI school in Bangladesh. Hadid's design for the Al-Wakrah stadium in Qatar.



◀ Aga Khan jury on Heringer's handcrafted METI school, built with lashed bamboo in Rudrapur, Bangladesh. Her circular, thatched kindergarten in Zimbabwe is another example of vernacular architecture for the community that involves local craftsmen, while her ceramics museum in Lintao, China in 2015 is literally ground-breaking. "Made of rammed earth like parts of the Great Wall," she explains, "it uses the same material, clay, as its contents, which are exquisite 5,000-year-old ceramic pieces. I really wanted to show that there's a viable alternative to concrete."

When I moved from writing about design and architecture for British *Vogue* to *The Independent* newspaper in 1998, my first assignment was the opening of Norman Foster's aircraft museum in Duxford, Cambridgeshire. On the press bus, I was silently scrutinized by the all-male architectural press. When we disembarked, one member, wearing a Fedora hat like Frank Lloyd Wright, by way of introduction hissed at me, "Frocks was it? Your background?" "Sharpen up," I thought. Little did they know that by appealing to the vanity of architects in the wake of the bleak 1970s, faced with little work and the Prince of Wales's consistent criticism, I had interviewed every British architect. I even knew what labels they wore. So when Norman Foster greeted me warmly on the runway, I enjoyed the look of combative hostility that swept my way.

How much harder to be a woman architect when the stakes are so high, the achievements so much greater, the vitriol so much more calculated, and your name enshrined in history?

It would be unthinkable for a building designed by a male architect to be described as a vagina. Yet that is just what happened to Hadid when she unveiled her Al-Wakrah stadium in Qatar for the 2022 football World Cup, a building inspired by the sails of the dhow. *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart on American TV screened an image of it sprouting pubic hairs, while the feminist website blog *Jezebel* said: "Any discerning human will be quick to recognize that the building looks exactly like an enormous vagina."

Frocks it isn't. ❖