

DESIGN *for the* Future

By Shalane van Rensburg



Since architecture became an organised profession in 1857, the number of women in architecture has remained miniscule. At the end of the 19th Century, starting in Finland, certain schools of architecture in Europe began to admit women to their various courses. From the 1980s, women, as housewives and consumers, were instrumental in bringing new approaches to design, achieving a shift from architecture to space. Only in recent years have women begun to achieve wider recognition as prize-winners and been awarded architectural tenders for large-scale projects.

Architecture can be described as the design of the human environment, buildings and the spaces between buildings. The design, the documentation of designs, the inspection of the construction of buildings, the contribution to urban context, and the design of gardens and interiors all form part of the activities of the architect. Architectural design projects range in size and complexity from small alterations for a single house to large, multi-level commercial, industrial or public buildings. Architects are expected to develop and practise a wide variety of skills including: creative design, planning skills, technical expertise, problem-solving, managerial functions, financial knowledge, legal requirements and communication skills

The Mind behind the Art

To showcase the success women can achieve in this field, we chatted to Sarah Calburn – one of our country's leading female architects. Sarah founded her award-winning, Johannesburg-based architectural practice in 1996, which has produced many outstanding houses and small commercial projects. She believes one of her successes is the pleasure she still takes from being involved and completing each project.

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Sarah graduated from the University of the Witwatersrand, where she initially enrolled for town planning. Architecture wasn't her first choice, but a rather excited mother, who was an architect, persuaded her to pursue the career after a three-day stint in town planning. She then 'moved downstairs' to architecture and has never looked back. "I feel that my greatest formative influences came from two particular pieces of architecture, the Herbert Baker buildings at Roedean School, which I attended from Grade one to Grade 12 and a classic 60's house built by Neil and Sheena Duncan on a beautiful river stand in Parkhurst. The spaces in which you grow up are crucial to the shape of your future attitudes to society and the world. The generosity, intimacy and beauty of these buildings literally opened my consciousness to the enormous power of space."

Sarah has worked as an architect in Paris, Hong Kong and Australia. She shares her knowledge by teaching design at various educational institutions, as well as through her own initiatives. She started a series of critical design master-classes called 'Rapid Thought Transport: Architects Re-imagine Joburg' - while she was on the board of the Gauteng Institute for Architecture. She was instrumental in organising the first biennale of Architecture ZA, AZA 2010. Sarah makes a vocal contribution to urban debate through her writing, and, apart from her houses, has a number of buildings about town: Gallery Momo, the Paul Smith Shop, Togu'na, in Swaziland, and the House on Fire.

Architect or Therapist?

Sarah believes that her 'spatial memory' has assisted with her fluent and effective design. "I love being an architect precisely because it demands a complex mix of skills. The most rewarding part of the job is having happy clients who love their buildings, and return for other projects." The trust between client, architect and builder needs to be built and conflict management is

a strong skill that every architect needs to develop. Listening to the client and becoming attuned to their desires is imperative in a successful relationship. "Architecture is a lot like being a therapist - often one deals with people who don't always want the same thing. You need to be calm and be a creative mediator. It is possible to transcend these kinds of difficulties by focusing on other kinds of potential inherent in well-constructed space. In the end, this is better than being a therapist, because the castle in the air is thereby enabled, imagined, and then built," she laughingly comments.



When Sarah was asked which of her projects she would consider her favourite, she responded by saying, "All buildings are challenging; one is intimately invested in each one, sometimes for different reasons. My favourites are the ones that give me kick each time I return to them." Sarah is completely involved in all her projects from the design to the last brick. "If we just tossed things off, what joy would be had from the finished product?" she asks.

Sarah shares some of the challenges she has faced as a professional, "I was most delighted to hear Blade Nzimande talking about a new Artisanal Vocational Training programme the other day. Ambition in this 'computer generation' has removed itself to the virtual realm. Clean work or the mastery of Microsoft Word and Excel is the ambition of young people. We are in a pretty pickle if we forget how to build our world." □

Past and Future

The first documented female architect in South Africa was Sophia Gray, wife of Robert Gray who became bishop of Cape Town in 1847. Sophia assisted her husband with his administrative and social obligations, but, above all, by designing at least 35 of the South African Anglican churches. Both Sophia and her husband favoured the neo-Gothic style of church architecture which was fashionable in Britain at that time. Sophia has been honoured in many architecture lectures and exhibitions around the country.