



A major exhibition focusing on projects, ideas and future directions taken by women architects begins touring the country on June 27 from various venues nationwide. NZ Home & Building asks some of those involved to consider what it means to be a woman architect in this country.

# WOMEN *in* ARCHITECTURE

*Text: Carol Bucknell  
Photography above: Donna North*



CAROLYN SMITH

Women architects are on the increase. Around 50% of the Auckland School of Architecture's intake this year were women. Even if not all who graduate do eventually practise as architects (as has been the case in the past), women are still continuing to make significant inroads into a male dominated profession.

The six women interviewed here all trained as architects but each has chosen a different course in which to continue their work. Why did these women choose architecture as a profession, what difficulties did they encounter and what are their attitudes towards design?

#### BECOMING AN ARCHITECT

Lillian Chrystall opened her own practice, Chrystall Architects, in the early 50s. She cites a fascination with architecture as her reason for becoming an architect, a fascination that is as intense today as it was 40 years ago.



MARY JOWETT

Architecture as a career seemed inevitable to Amanda Reynolds, currently a director of Hames Sharley (NZ), a multi-disciplinary Australian practice. She grew up in a household with strong links to the profession: her father a practising architect and her mother (who trained as an architect) continued her involvement while raising a family.

A comment from a male architect family friend that "girls can't be architects", was an extra incentive, Reynolds recalls. "I suppose I'm still subconsciously proving him wrong!"

Family was also an important influence for Wellington-based architectural consultant Anna Kemble Welch. Three generations of her mother's family (all males) practised architecture, town planning and landscape architecture. As a child Kemble Welch drew house plans and made model buildings. Growing up in a house designed by the Group Architects was probably another factor, she adds.

Although a registered architect, Sarah Treadwell defines herself as a teacher and a researcher whose field is architecture. One of her lecture courses at the University of Auckland School of Architecture is Women and Architectures in which issues of the position and practice of women architects are examined.

Carolyn Smith recently set up her own practice in Auckland. She felt architecture would enable her to "do something constructive with lots of people contact. It also offered possibilities of resolving some of the traditional problems for women facing the decision to have children and taking time out of the workforce."

ANNA KEMBLE WELCH



An interest in photographing buildings led to Mary Jowett's enrolment at the Auckland School of Architecture in 1987. While at the school her motivation was high, she says, and this has continued now that she is in practice.

#### CAREER DIFFICULTIES

But for those who have been in the workforce a lot longer, keeping going has been more difficult. Reynolds found her architectural career path hard for a number of reasons. The unpredictability of the building industry makes job security extremely tenuous, she says. On the other hand architecture can be practised in a number of different ways and it is this flexibility which was an important factor in the continuance of Reynolds' career which has included practising on her own, being part of a co-operative and working for several large practices.

"Having experienced a number of different ways of working, my experience has made me committed to the need for teamwork as an essential part of the architectural process ... regardless of the way in which the office is organised."

Kemble Welch encountered "patronising and chauvinistic attitudes" from the all-male staff at the Auckland School but things improved with her move to Wellington where Helen Tippett and Wendy Light were teaching. Perhaps more than most, having a child has been an overwhelming influence on her career due to the fact that Humphrey (now 10) has a severe genetic skin condition which requires constant care. She and her husband Martin Hanley (also an architectural designer) spend hours doing the painful bandage changes Humphrey needs.

"I think we are both very lucky to have a skill that we can use, being self-employed, working part-time in our own hours and needing no more than a pencil, paper and drawing board. We could never be employed by anyone because the demands on our time for Humphrey's care are

unpredictable still, although we now have other people coming in every night to do his bandage changes."

#### DO WOMEN DESIGN BUILDINGS DIFFERENTLY?

"Probably not," says Kemble Welch. "I know men who design the way I do, although they are not mainstream types. Some men seem to want to leave their mark on the world and be remembered, but not all of them. The difference is more a product of being involved in many facets of life rather than all our energy, time and commitment going into architecture."

Chrystall agrees. "Some men/women design buildings differently from others. I do not agree that sex is the determining factor. Many other attributes such as ability, personality and experience influence the differences in design between one architect and another."

Men and women architects are taught the same values, the same aesthetic and techniques and in our cultural context their buildings are not notably different, says Reynolds. "Architecture is a complex and loosely-defined field providing ample opportunity for a broad range of differences, but as a generalisation I find that women are more natural team-workers, better at production and management-oriented roles; whereas men are more attracted to the 'having a great idea' end of the spectrum. I can, of course, think of plenty of exceptions to this."

*Below: Amanda Reynolds designed her own home as part of a residential development.*





LILLIAN CHRYSAL

Smith considers the design process as individual as the designers themselves. "Maybe just the basic intentions of the designers vary, ranging between architect as artist and expressionist and architect as catalyst and problem solver. But I don't think you could slot men or women entirely into either category."

Treadwell points out that women architects are faced with a unique dilemma. The affirmation of "women's values" tends to ground women in their biology, she says, because an emphasis on the physiological roles of women (child-bearing and feeding) is part of the same mechanism which is used to limit the participation of women in the public arena.

"It seems that it is not possible to either act like a man or to engage with only the so-called female attributes of architecture (two strategies that women have traditionally utilised) without a reduced access to and engagement in the field of architecture. That there are other possibilities is apparent in the work of high quality produced by women within the two university Departments of Architecture and in numerous architectural practices in New

Zealand."

#### WHY SO FEW WOMEN DESIGN STARS?

"Lack of numbers" was generally the first response to this question. "There will be in the future," was the second. That 95% of women architects in this country are under 40 is another factor, says Reynolds, because most "stars" in architecture have achieved a broad body of work over decades, are enthusiastic self-promoters, or both.

Smith agrees. "Women have not been programmed to push themselves forward particularly forcefully, and you do need to market yourself well to become an architectural 'star'. It doesn't happen by accident."

Jowett adds that stardom and competitiveness have been considered male qualities in the past. In the future this distinction will be lost, she hopes, and it will be regarded more as "a personal striving to do your best" without negative or gender associations.

#### DESIGN MYTHS

A number of preconceptions exist regarding the work of women architects. One is that they focus on detail at the expense of the larger picture. But Chrystal points out that she has worked with men who have done precisely this. The others also deny this suggestion although Smith allows that a focus on detail is the role



AMANDA REYNOLDS

of support staff in an architectural office "and that's generally where you'll find most women architects in larger practices. They are not focusing on the detail at the expense of the larger picture, rather the issues of detail are what they're required to sort out."

Reynolds continues: "Good architects are those who can integrate the details within the overview, to handle the complexity of issues that is an essential property of any architectural project. Personally I am happiest at the 'big picture' end of architecture but find that this necessitates an understanding and thorough follow-through of a project to the smallest detail. Or the big picture can easily lose its focus."

Kemble Welch countered the suggestion that women shy away from establishing hierarchies with the argument that women are more likely to have participated in groups where they have learnt about consensus decision-making.

A third preconception – that women architects tend towards curvilinear forms – was described as rubbish by Chrystal. Kemble Welch and Reynolds were equally dismissive. Says Reynolds: "The fantasy of women architects designing 'curvy' buildings must surely be a hopeful male sexual projection!"

"There is a current and growing field of architecture that explores organic forms (eg *Architecture New Zealand* Mar/Apr 93: Martyn Evans' delightful houses) and this could possibly be ascribed to the growing sensitivity towards non-rigid structures generally – social, psychological, personal and architectural."

Smith says that curvilinear forms are simply part of any architect's vocabulary while Jowett adds that they are very hard to use successfully.

Treadwell finds the three "myths" discussed above "depressingly familiar". Women architects are said to "be 'better' at areas that are considered to be secondary in architecture, the detail (opposed to structure) and colour (again opposed to structure through its interpretation as a concern of surface). The qualities that are traditionally associated with women working in architecture tend to be areas marginal to the profession."

*Right: Women continue to make significant inroads into a male dominated profession.*

#### THE BEST THING ABOUT BEING AN ARCHITECT?

For Kemble Welch it is "the glowing feeling when I am working on a design and everything falls into place as though conforming to some mysterious mathematical formula and I know it works. The other time is when the clients are really happy with the finished building and I feel I've played a positive part in the ebb and flow of their lives."

Jowett says: "The best and worst thing about being an architect for me is that my main interest is also my job. It's great as there are so many different ways of approaching architecture and we experience it everywhere. It can get claustrophobic and daunting when you see it as a never-ending learning process."

Chrystal says: "The creative pleasure I get from doing it, and hopefully the enjoyment my clients get from experiencing the results."

Smith says: "The constant variety of challenges within architecture and the great cross-section of people involved in the process. The best thing is design; I love being able to take a client's initial set of ideas, circumstances or aspirations and mould them into something that satisfies their practical and aesthetic needs, at the same time reaching an integrity that satisfies me. The worst thing is the smug assumption that we (particularly women architects) are dreamy designer types with not a realistic bone in our bodies."

Treadwell says: "Over the years a number of women architects have very generously presented and discussed their current projects in the Women and Architecture lecture course revealing the depth of technique and



thought in the projects. The most interesting work from my point of view is utterly engaged in architecture yet also critical of the discipline and seems to allow a position from which to proceed, to work architecturally, while still remaining skeptical of its own structuring and foundation."

Reynolds says: "The best and worst aspects are often very close in architecture. One of the best things is the excitement of the construction process. It can also be a nightmare as the unexpected will happen. The variety, the potential to freshly solve an old problem or find the magic of a new solution keeps all architects entertained, challenged and firmly attached to the drawing board (or telephone, word-processor, Cad machine). It's an addiction."

#### BIOGRAPHIES

Lillian Chrystall graduated in 1947. She spent four years in architectural offices in London and Paris before setting up her own practice, Chrystall Architects, in New Zealand. She has continued to run her practice and raised three children. Awards: NZ Bronze Medal 1967, Auckland Branch Award 1979.

Amanda Reynolds graduated in 1977. Worked in her own practice until 1980 when she travelled to London. She was a partner in a co-operative practice there for five years specialising in community orientated and institutional projects. Returning to New Zealand in 1987 she joined Hames Sharley a year later and is now one of two New Zealand directors working on large scale retail and urban design projects. She received an

RIBA/TIMES Community Architecture Award in 1987 and an Auckland Branch Award in 1990.

Sarah Treadwell graduated in 1977 and is currently working on her PhD at Auckland University. She practised in New Zealand and the UK before joining the staff of the School of Architecture in Auckland where she is now a senior lecturer. Her PhD subject is New Zealand Architectural Drawing, focusing on Rangiatea, the Maori church at Otaki. Treadwell has written a number of academic papers, has spoken at numerous conferences and was one of the judges for the 1992 AAA Cavalier Bremworth Design Awards.

Carolyn Smith graduated from the School of Architecture in Auckland in 1986. She worked for Sinclair Johns Architects for a year then joined Bossley Cheshire in 1988. After two years the practice became part of Jasmay Architects where Smith worked on residential and restaurant design projects. Six months later she passed the AERB registration and travelled to London where she worked with Bill Chew & Associates on pub, cafe and small commercial and community building projects. Two years later she left London to take a year off in Greece. In 1993 she returned to New Zealand and formed her own practice, ArtBuild with partner Gary Bickerton.

Mary Jowett graduated in 1992. During that year she was part of the winning Venice Biennale student exhibition team from the Auckland School of Architecture. She also won the 1992 Cavalier Bremworth poster design competition and was a design award winner. She joined Dodd Paterson & Bukowski Rehm Architects in July 1992. An Auckland Architectural Association committee member, Jowett is on the editorial committee of the new AAA Bulletin.

Anna Kemble Welch graduated from the Wellington School of Architecture in 1981 and spent six months with the (then) Ministry of Works and Development. Her son Humphrey was born six months later and from that time she has been self-employed. She has tutored in design at Wellington Polytech and the School of Architecture. Currently her work includes designing houses, gardens and alterations, writing occasional articles and renovating the house where she and her partner work. ■



SARAH TREADWELL