



CHICKS WITH BRICKS IS NOT ABOUT ALTRUISM OR POLITICAL IDEALS. IT'S ABOUT ECONOMICS, PURE AND SIMPLE

Well-behaved women rarely make history. The Suffragettes, Mae West, Frida Kahlo, Margaret Thatcher: whether or not we agree with their politics, beliefs or lifestyle choices, these are women who have taken life by the balls and haven't been afraid to defy social and political convention to succeed.

So where are the women making history in the construction industry? As a young female architect I've been surrounded by women my own age in the profession but finding role models at a more senior level has proved difficult. Two years ago, it made me ask whether they existed at all and, if so, why was their success not visible? So I decided to create 'Chicks with Bricks'; an event space to seek out these women, not just within architecture but within the wider industry of construction – architects, developers, clients, engineers, contractors and policy makers – and allow them to meet, debate and celebrate their success.

Following the first dinner in March, 'Chicks with Bricks' has snowballed into a pan-industry network and last week our event brought together an incredible group of 260 women at London's best room with a view – the top of the Gherkin. The attendees – peers, role

models and friends, from young entrepreneurs to senior partners – were sharp, sassy and successful women, making their mark on the built environment by commissioning it, designing it, building it and, most of all, enjoying it. Outside was a city in transformation and inside were the women who were creating that change through their own strength of mind, talent and ability. From the private sector came Sara Fox, former new buildings director for Swiss Re, the Gherkin's client, and from the public sector was Sarah Ebanja, who heads the £700 million Arsenal Development Scheme.

There are many women's groups in the industry but 'Chicks with Bricks' is different for one reason: it is not about promoting gender equality in the industry as an altruistic or political ideal. It's about economics, pure and simple.

Women are an increasingly powerful force in the economy and the construction industry. In this generation, we have seen women in government heading the DTI, the DfES, the Department of Health, DEFRA, English Partnerships and winning us the Olympics. In the private sector, female-owned companies contribute £75 billion to the economy

a year and 69 per cent of FTSE 100 companies have a woman on the board. Women are increasingly numerous on planning committees. Practices engaged in education, cultural or residential work will probably already have pitched to mixed-gender selection boards and be dealing with female clients.

Five years from now, the firms at the top of the game will be those who have recognised this change. They will be those who can engage with female clients and decision-makers, who recruit from the entire talent pool, who can tap into the intellectual resource of intelligent, successful women and who can retain key staff of both genders by providing career development, a healthy work environment and work-life balance for all.

'Chicks with Bricks' is about opening up a debate. Our aspiration is to find an inclusive vision for the industry, focusing on collaboration between all sectors of the built environment and accepting absolutely nothing less than the very highest standards of design. Visit: www.chickswithbricks.com

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SHOT OUT OF AN EDUCATION SYSTEM DRUNK ON DESIGN AND QUICK-FIRE PROJECTS, WE LAND STRAIGHT INTO THE REALITIES OF PRACTICE

Leafing through a back catalogue one recent Sunday afternoon for the 40 Under 40 Awards, which celebrate promising young architects, it struck me that, with an age criterion of under 40 for the awards, architects seem to have a strange conception of the category 'young'. Not that I want anyone to take this the wrong way: we're all as young as we feel and once I approach that age limit I will be the first to say it again. But, considering that the majority of applicants are between 35 and 40, what bothers me is where that leaves all the others, like me, between the ages of 25 and 35. Where's our category? What's our title?

These are the formative years of our architectural careers, when we have the fewest responsibilities and therefore endless opportunities to experiment, but it is also the time when our careers are at their most static. Shot out of an education system drunk on design and quick-fire projects, we land straight into the realities of the architect's office. This, for many, means being trapped in front of a computer screen from nine till six every day, with little or no outlet for creativity, paralysed by student debt, isolated from the architectural peer network

and distinctly underpaid for long working hours.

It is traditional during this time to gain experience within an established practice. Alternative ways of working are still viewed with suspicion. But the parameters of the architectural profession are expanding at an alarming rate and built work now makes up just one facet of what architects can offer. Architects no longer have a monopoly on building design and must continuously adapt to what is now an industry in flux. Cross-discipline design is booming and the market economy is full of ideas.

A new breed of talented and innovative practices run by people in their twenties, such as Design Heroine and AOC, has emerged in response. Full of media and business savvy, these young practices offer a broad spectrum of services, from consultancy and research to built work. They are seeking new ways to interact with their clients and forging new avenues for the profession as a result.

Attending a pan-industry network for young members' groups, Generation for Collaboration (part of Be), I was astonished by the size and support that other young professional groups enjoy

within the industry. Matrics and MECHS (young quantity surveyors and mechanical engineers) receive substantial funding from their parent institutes and each operates 30 active regional groups, which organise, support and assist their membership community. It is also inspiring and encouraging to see government initiatives, such as NESTA's Creative Pioneer Programme, offering advice and start-up funding to assist young designers and architects.

Not all young architects want either the responsibility or the associated risk of running their own practice, but it is important that they perceive the breadth of possibilities out there for them. For this to happen, young architects forging their way need to be showcased and encouraged. The architectural community and its associated institutes, such as the RIBA, should also rally to their support, as they creatively explore alternative futures for our profession.

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