

## Where is the missing 32%? ARCHITECTURALLY SPEAKING

By Leticia Fornataro, Liz Reynolds, Aly Mancuso

The American Institute of Architects (AIA) San Francisco chapter's The Missing 32% project examines the challenges faced by women in the field of architecture. Specifically, on the delta between women studying architecture in college where enrollment is approximately 50-50 men-women to the number of women getting licensed to practice architecture dropping to 18%.

Formed in 2006, the Boston AIA Women Principals Group, comprising about 300 members, expanded discussions nationally and, alongside The Missing 32% project, formed the national AIA Women's Leadership Summit. Since its first event in 2009, the sold-out conference has been attended by women in all different career stages and with diverse backgrounds.

"After attending my first Women's Leadership Summit in 2017, I realized that there were many things that can be done to better the profession for women," says SWBR Principal Leticia Fornataro, AIA.



Fornataro

"Despite progress, the field of architecture still faces gender inequity." In response to these initiatives, additional research, and the growing awareness of equity issues in the architecture profession, AIA national published "Guides for Equitable Practice." The guide provides tools to help architecture firms address diversity and inclusion in the workplace, including gender bias and career obstacles for women in the industry.

So where are the 32% of women that are leaving the profession going? And why are they leaving? In 2015, The Missing 32% project changed its name to Equity by Design. They deploy a survey every other year, to examine career pinch points and bias in the profession and identify factors that contribute to the drop-off in number of women getting licensure, including lack of mentorship and role models, pay

inequity, and the glass ceiling.

Strong mentorship and female leaders as role models for young designers goes a long way to advancing gender equity in the profession. Female designers thrive when they have a mentor they can relate to who supports their growth, and encourages licensure. More women in leadership empowers aspiring female designers with the career support they need to flourish.



Reynolds

"I think one of the most meaningful things you can do in your career is find a mentor to help you navigate that career, and then pass that knowledge along to others behind you", said SWBR Project Architect Liz Reynolds, AIA. "It's particularly important when you're part of a minority in the industry. Advocating for and mentoring others is how we bring positive change to the field of architecture."

Many firms support the cost of testing and encourage study groups to keep young professionals engaged and on the path to licensure. However, the historical trend of after-hours meetings may deter participation, particularly for women with caregiving responsibilities. Encouraging learning within the workday, such as providing resources for study during lunch breaks, could mitigate this challenge and counter the departure of women from the profession.



Mancuso

“I am fortunate to work for a firm that supports designers getting their licensure, both financially and by encouraging regular study groups”, said SWBR Project Designer Aly Mancuso. “Sharing resources and supporting one another maintains engagement and increases exam success rates. This level of support can also help close the gender gap of women licensed in architecture.”

Gender pay inequity is a persistent issue in the field of architecture. According to the Harvard Business Review, women ask for pay raises as frequently as men, yet often do not receive them. New

York’s pay transparency legislation aims to address this, while nationwide, third-party pay equity surveys highlight disparities and advocates for pay transparency.

Hiring and promotion bias, also known as the glass ceiling, is another factor. The study “Orchestrating Impartiality: The Impact of ‘Blind’ Auditions on Female Musicians” published in the American Economic Review Journal in September 2000, highlighted that bias can be overcome in the selection process by, in this case, holding auditions “blindly,” or through a screen. This resulted in more women being selected to the symphony orchestra as compared to traditional stage auditions. Studies show that hiring biases do exist, and one way to counter it is to have representation at the (proverbial) table. This can mean a policy reform to use a blind hiring process, such as redacting name, gender, age, or school attended, as these can hint to ethnic backgrounds and privileged or underprivileged upbringing. Conversely, where intent exists to hire from minority pools, these strategies show to be inefficient or, at a minimum, immeasurable when compared to traditional hiring process.

Encouraging and supporting more women to pursue licensure creates a more equitable and vibrant architectural profession. Diverse teams foster innovation, leading to better design solutions and more sustainably built environments. We also see that clients are in tune with asking for diversity in firms – be it gender, race, ethnicity, etc. They seek designs that resonate with a diverse user base. Gender equity contributes to economic growth, and a more balanced representation of women in architecture can positively impact the industry’s overall performance.

“While women make up nearly half of architecture students, as of 2023, they represent only 25% of licensed architects in the field. If we don’t encourage and support women through the pipeline, first in their early careers, and then into positions of leadership later in their career, this trend – of either slow growth or stagnate progress – will continue,” said Fornataro.

*AIA Rochester contributes a quarterly column entitled “Architecturally Speaking,” which features articles from its members. Leticia Fornataro, AIA, is Principal at SWBR. Fornataro and coworkers Liz Reynolds, AIA and Aly Mancuso attended the Women’s Leadership Conference last fall. They are active mentors that support and encourage women to persevere and thrive in the architectural profession.*