



Alex Njoo in conversation with

Bronwyn Dowie-Rudolph, Building Designer Principal, Design Connections

The recent furore about the gender gap in graduates' remunerations highlights the distressing fact that we are still locked in the previous century as far as the role of women in our society is concerned.

Although this social discrepancy is not evident in student enrolments in architecture and design university courses, the fact remains that too few women are represented in the composition of some of the major architectural practices.

However, what is generally not acknowledged is the number of women who are active participants in the design and construction industry. These are the design industry's quiet achievers, who have significantly altered the face of our urban landscape with their relatively modest building projects.

Bronwyn Dowie-Rudolph is principal of Design Connections, a member of the Building Designers Association and a Registered Building practitioner. She studied Interior Design in the 1970s in the former School of Architecture and Building at RMIT University. She is an active participant of the Association's continuing professional development programmes. She has been one of the mentors of the RMIT Building Design & Construction course, where students benefit from the experience of practising designers.

We were sitting in the dining area of her well-appointed apartment in one of Melbourne's rejuvenated inner-city suburbs. The apartment block was designed by one of Melbourne's celebrated architects, Nonda Katsalidis (Eureka Tower). We were talking – among other things – about the vagaries of juggling motherhood and running a design practice.

"If I am asked to define my practice, I would say that it is basically 'grass roots'. By that I mean, keeping one's overheads down but at the same time offering my clients practical solutions to their building problems; avoiding excessively overblown design ideas that would only serve my ego. To be a good designer and a successful practitioner, one needs a broad base of experience and skills," said Dowie-Rudolph. "Together with a deep understanding of the many tasks involved in producing the final product, whether that is

a storage unit, an extensive interior re-jig, a new house, an upstairs extension, a bathroom, or deck and outdoor living space. The course I did at RMIT prepared me well for this."

In the beginning it was the nurturing of a growing family that took precedence over Dowie-Rudolph's practice. Design Connections began after her youngest child reached school age in 1994. At first, the practice started servicing small projects. "I was working part-time and fitting in all the family and home-based demands with my flexible hours and my home office," she reflected.

"There is certainly a need for discipline when working from home," she added, "but I found the flexibility it gave me was essential to getting both my jobs done well. And as my family grew up I was able to devote more time to Design Connections."

Dowie-Rudolph's "grass roots" approach by acting as a facilitator to her clients, instead of the *designer as the master* approach, means that she has never needed to advertise her design services. She gains her commissions through word of mouth, as it were.

"I like to help people to feel empowered about changing their environment hence I encourage open dialogue with my clients that record their dreams of how they would like their homes to work and to look. I help them to explore their



priorities and their budgets. Then together we develop a brief for the project.”

She describes that she has often provided a colour and finishes package as part of each project. She has been known to take her clients shopping for materials such as ceramic tiles, for instance.

“When we – the clients and I – are standing looking at the ranges of tiles, I will make suggestions that appeal, so they feel that they have been involved with the choice rather than being presented with a colour board and told ‘this is how it will look.’”

It is this inter-personal approach, giving her clients the ownership of their project that makes Dowie-Rudolph rare among designers in a genre of celebrity “starchitects” and designers.

Designers are purportedly insightful when it comes to solving their clients’ problems. In Dowie-Rudolph’s case her insightfulness is not derived from some psychic ability. It’s her professionalism that places her clients’ needs first that is most evident.

“Recently,” she recalled, “a senior client needed to make her bathroom more accessible by removing the bath in her 1930 flat in St Kilda. The bathroom had been ‘updated’ in the ‘70s, fortunately leaving the warm gold terrazzo floor intact, although a part adjacent to the bath was damaged. My solution was to remove the bath and widened the space a little, by removing the damaged terrazzo and installing rich gold mosaic tiles to the floor area abutting the existing floor and shower screen. The rest of the bathroom was then retiled with square cream ceramic tiles that complemented the 1930 style of her flat. The client is delighted, not only is access to

her bathroom safer but the aesthetics of the era is maintained.”

According to Dowie-Rudolph, the advent of television programmes such as *Grand Designs* has generated a class of clients that are more demanding. “They believe that they know it all, that they have all the ideas. I believe that such programmes tend to send out mixed messages that often lead to clients not respecting the professionals’ advice. Forgetting, of course, as informative



and entertaining as these programmes are, the dream factor dominates. Most of my clients are ordinary people, like you and I. Their budgets are modest. What we’re dealing with are the realities of economic cause and effect.”

Dowie-Rudolph’s world extends beyond her design practice. Like most designers who are critically concerned with urban and environmental issues, she believes that the regulations covering building sustainability, for example, are too prescriptive rather than consultative; the design professionals experience in some areas is often overlooked by the legislators.

Many of the developments that are presently taking place in the CBD,

although they go some way in responding to the city’s accommodation demands, tend to meet their economic criteria at the expense of quality living spaces.

“Take the apartment that we’re in now. Every habitable room has windows. The occupants’ private space has been designed in the context of the exterior public space. The orientation is such that we’re shaded from the hot summer sun and protected from the cold winter winds. I would call this place a well-designed apartment building, because the architect and developer have thought of the comfort of the occupants first rather than just economic gains.”

Finally, I asked her how she would like to make the city that she loves so much more people friendly and liveable.

“Make the public transport system more accessible. Melbourne is not just a weekend city. People go out almost every night. They need to have a public transport system that is both safe and operates beyond midnight. Public facilities should be located within walking distances. We need to encourage people to walk and ride their bikes. We try to only use our family car for long distances and most places that we visit are reached on our bicycles.”

To some, Dowie-Rudolph’s utopian ideals for a more liveable environment may sound like a dream. But isn’t this the stuff that designers like her are made of? To evoke changes in our daily lives and make them better for all of us? **TT**

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