

**LWK  
+ PARTNERS  
ENVELOPE**

**03** WOMEN

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# + MISSION STATEMENT

This journal is the third installment of a three-part series entitled, 'Red Envelope', and is themed 'Women'. The series was first published by LWK + PARTNERS in September 2020 and aims to encourage debate and challenge, on a global stage, what this most unique of conditions offers for readers interested in architecture, design, development, theory and the built environment.

# INDEX

10 **Karwa Mosque**

16 **Yasmeen Lari**

22 **St. Regis Chicago**

26 **Q&A: Alejandra Celedón Förster**

32 **Beyond the Quinquennial Years**

# FOREWORD

## Dedicated to Barbara, my mother.

We recently celebrated International Woman's Day at a time marked by crisis and uncertainty, with design professions around the world at a crossroads. The choices practices make today will have consequences on gender equality for decades to come.

Women in architecture and design have been documented for many centuries, as educators, professional practitioners and commissioners. Since architecture became organised as a profession in the mid-1800s, the number of women in architecture has remained low, but by the end of the 19th century, certain schools of architecture in Europe began to admit women to their programmes of study.

In 1980, Italian architect M. Rosaria Piomelli became the first woman to hold a deanship of any school of architecture when she assumed the position of dean of the City College of New York School of Architecture. However, only in recent years have women begun to achieve wider recognition, with many outstanding female practitioners including five Pritzker prize-winners since 2000.

Until recently women's contributions have been largely unrecognised, despite exerting significant influence on architecture over the past century. It was Susan Lawrence Dana, heiress to a mining fortune, who, as commissioner in 1902, chose to have her house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in Springfield, Illinois, facilitating his breakthrough as one of the 20th century's most significant American practitioners.

Women have also played a key role in historic preservation through organisations such as the International Archive of Women in Architecture, founded in 1985 by Bulgarian architect Milka Bliznakov, to expand the availability of research materials concerning women in architecture.

Recent research indicates that from around the beginning of the 1980s, housewives and female consumers were instrumental to the instigation of new approaches to design, especially interior design, achieving a shift from architecture to space generally.

Despite these significant contributions, it is sadly difficult to identify reliable statistics on women's place in architecture and design across the globe. Much of the information is dated and some is based on surveys inviting responses but with no guarantee of comprehensive coverage.

For example, in Europe during 2010, a survey conducted by the Architects' Council of Europe in 33 countries found that there were approximately 524,000 architects across the continent, of whom 31 percent were women. Yet, the proportions differed drastically from country to country.

Interestingly, the countries with the highest proportion of female architects were Greece (57 percent), Croatia (56 percent), Bulgaria (50 percent), Slovenia (50 percent) and Sweden (49 percent), while those with the lowest were Slovakia (15 percent), Austria (16 percent), the Netherlands (19 percent), Germany (21 percent) and Belgium (24 percent). Over 200,000 of Europe's architects are in Italy or Germany, where the proportions of women are 30 percent and 21 percent respectively, which leads to the question, why so?

A study conducted in Australia in 2002 indicated that women accounted for 43 percent of architecture students – a reasonable proportion; however, their representation in the profession varied from 11.6 percent to 18.2 percent depending on the state, indicating an underlying set of challenges to retaining female graduates in the profession.

More recent Australian research as part of the Equity and Diversity in the Australian Architecture Profession, showed that whatever measure used, women continue to depart from the profession. Women have consistently accounted for over 40 percent of Australia's architecture graduates for over two decades, and yet only make up 20 percent of registered architects in the country. Is this a failure of the profession to support female architects, or is it perhaps reflective of a broader set of societal issues? The answer most likely falls somewhere between the two.

A similarly lamentable set of statistics can be identified from South Africa to the United Kingdom and perhaps most surprisingly of all the United States. It would not be difficult to continue this litany of underrepresentation and suggest numerous reasons for it, however the purpose of this issue of LWK + PARTNERS' Red Envelope series is to celebrate women and their contributions, achievements and successes in design and the formation of our built environment, as well as the undeniably different value they contribute to urbanism.

Before touching upon the articles featured in this issue, I would like to note several remarkably different female architects that have had considerable success in recent years, gaining wide recognition for their achievements and contributions.

In 2004, Iraqi-British architect Zaha Hadid became the first woman to be awarded the Pritzker Prize. The chairman of the jury committee spoke of her "unswerving commitment to modernism", explaining how her practice as an architect challenged and "transformed the conventional geometry of buildings." Until her untimely death in 2016, she completed many notable buildings, including the Rosenthal Centre for Contemporary Art in Cincinnati, the BMW Central Building in Leipzig and the Guangzhou Opera House in Guangzhou, China to mention just a few.

In 2010, Sheila Sri Prakash was the first Indian architect invited to serve on the World Economic Forum's Design Innovation Council. There, she created the 'Reciprocal Design Index', a design tool for holistically sustainable development. Her credentials as a pioneer and innovator of environmentally sustainable architecture date back to 1992, when she designed one of the first homes with recycled material. She is also the first woman in India to have established her own firm.

Again in 2010, Kazuyo Sejima from Japan, in partnership with Ryue Nishizawa, became a Pritzker Prize winner. Particular reference was made to the Glass Centre at the Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio, and the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa in Ishikawa, Japan.

Our journal seeks to be a global chronical of the people, places and ideas that aim high, deliver innovation, challenge the conventions and force us all to reevaluate our own perceptions. The essays laid out in this issue operate within the context of celebrating the contributions of women to the disciplines of the built environment, while furthering interdisciplinary understanding across five contrasting narratives.

We open with Seema Viswanathan's interview with an emerging female architect in Southeast Asia, Eleena Jamil, who designed a mosque that challenges traditional precepts of local Islamic design in a suburb of Penang Island in Malaysia.

Yusra Alvi examines the legacy of the acclaimed Yasmeen Lari, Pakistan's first female architect, who is as determined as ever to continue improving the quality of life of her country's most afflicted through the Heritage Foundation of Pakistan, an organisation she founded in 2000. The foundation has, since its establishment, built over 36,000 houses for marginalised communities most affected by the numerous floods and earthquakes prone to the area.

While in the United States, Erin Hudson explores the St. Regis Chicago, which represents the single largest Chinese real estate investment in the country and is the world's tallest tower designed by a woman.

Our editor Rima Alsammarae conducts a Q&A with Santiago-based architect, researcher and curator of two Chilean pavilions, Alejandra Celedón Förster, about the importance and future of architecture education.

And lastly, LWK + PARTNERS's head of marketing Tala Alnounou joins UAE-based architect and writer Yosr El Sherbiny to close the issue by addressing the atypical gender phenomena around architectural education across the UAE, and how this, in conjunction with the shift in perceptions sweeping across the industry, has shaped and will continue to shape the planning of cities and urban environments in the decades to come.

Returning to my opening, the current crisis we are experiencing also represents an opportunity. If our profession and practices make significant investments in building more flexible and empathetic workplaces – there are signs that this is starting to happen – we will be able to retain the employees most affected by today's crises and nurture a culture in which women have equal opportunity to achieve their potential over the long term.

Progress toward gender parity is not only important, but it must be recognised, and this issue of the Red Envelope covers the diversity of working women and the need for both recognition and opportunity.

We hope our general optimistic take on the world, and in particular the leading part that women are playing in it, will find a following of readers looking for fresh glimpses and aspirations in both emerging and established conditions. Because in a world where knowledge, equality and discourse are establishing new paradigms of opportunity and challenging the perceptions of the traditional, urbanism and architecture may indeed be able to carry continued value, conveying meaning through physical metaphor and embodying cultural understandings by creating places for all to cherish that revel in their own point of difference.

**Kerem Cengiz**  
Managing Director - MENA  
LWK + PARTNERS



# EDITOR'S MESSAGE

Putting together a journal themed 'Women' proved to be more contentious than I had expected. While topics like gender, religion and race typically spark strong emotional reactions, I was particularly surprised by one growing trend: women in architecture often do not want to be referred to as 'women in architecture'. Of course, this does not apply to architects all over the world – I would note that the journal was very much welcomed by those we reached out to working in the global south – however, the number of female architects who rejected participation in this journal citing that they did not want to be associated with gender-driven narratives was high.

It is a difficult conversation to navigate, and I understand the arguments against doing something that separates women from men, even if for the sake of acknowledging contributions and achievements. However, while many have their own way of working within a disadvantageous system, I still find it relevant to highlight those who have historically been (and who continue to be) marginalised, either in a society or in an industry. 'Not seeing gender' helps no one – we should be able to see it, and celebrate it, especially without fear of being weakened by such associations.

That is why this journal is so important to me. The point here is not to say that women can do whatever men can do, or that women can be architects. We already know that – and most of us (hopefully) do not need to be told that. The point here is simply to tell stories that are incredibly diverse, and that are great on their own merit thanks to the messages and lessons that they contain.

Of course, the stories are also strung together by the fact that at their centre is a female architect. And while these are stories of achievement, when considering the amount of challenges that have been overcome, such stories are given an element of strength, endurance and humanity. Here, on the pages ahead, is a very small collection of examples that illustrate how women in architecture have surpassed long-held limitations and, in the face of adversity (small and big), which still very much exists all over the world, they have marched on without looking back.

I hope this journal is met with warm welcome, as it was done with warm intent. From Pakistan's first female architect to Chile's leading architecture academic and Malaysia's rising star, the stories on the pages ahead are part of a larger narrative still being woven together, and they help colour in some of the gaps left empty in the bigger picture of global development.

**Rima Alsammarae**  
Editor

# KARWA MOSQUE

In a suburb on a Malaysian island, a mosque designed by an emerging female architect, Eleena Jamil, challenges traditional Islamic design in Southeast Asia.

**Words by Seema Viswanathan**

**Images courtesy of Marc Tey & TWJPTO**

**“Dome-less, chalk-white and fronted by vertical lines, the Masjid Karwa, or Karwa Mosque, challenges locally held perceptions of how a Muslim prayer space should look.”**

Positioned near a busy intersection in Tanjung Tokong, a suburb of George Town in Penang, Malaysia, sits a mosque of a sort seldom found in the Southeast Asian country. Dome-less, chalk-white and fronted by vertical lines, the Masjid Karwa, or Karwa Mosque, challenges locally held perceptions of how a Muslim prayer space should look.

“Mosque architecture in Malaysia did not originally have domes,” said Eleena Jamil, Karwa Mosque architect and founder of her namesake practice based in Cyberjaya, a town 40 kilometres southwest of Kuala Lumpur. “Domes are a Middle Eastern and Indian architectural feature. They’re more cultural than religious, while mosques in Malaysia, or in Southeast Asia in general, were originally very different, and this was due to climate, available materials and culture.”

Yet, the dome has pride of place today, and many of Malaysia’s biggest mosques feature at least one, if not several, from the recently built, but otherwise traditionally styled Crystal Mosque in the state of Terengganu, to the Green Building Index-credited and modern Raja Fisabilillah Mosque in Cyberjaya with its futuristic glass dome. Nonetheless, Jamil’s client for the Karwa Mosque was very clear: “I was approached by someone who wanted to donate to build the mosque,” she explained. “This person, who’d rather remain anonymous, is also a Penangite (like Jamil). His brief was simply and firmly, ‘no dome.’”

Jamil was given a small budget to work with, and she was tasked with designing the project to assume as much built-up space as possible within the given site, and raising it slightly from the road to separate it from the vehicular congestion so close to its border.

“We also had many meetings with the mosque committee, the squatters on the land, the Penang state government authorities and the mayor,” she said. Other than that, though, she “had a free hand.”

The project involved removing the original mosque that was on the site. Built in 1897, it was timber and looked like the elevated houses common among village homes in Malaysia. But it was “run-down and messy,” said Jamil, who also noted the many structural issues and spaces that were added haphazardly over time. “So many things were done to it that it had become unrecognisable,” she added. “There had been natural light in the inner sanctum and good wind orientation, but with the additions, those elements were lost. There were several levels of it, stalls outside, and zinc roofs on the additional buildings.”





**“The challenge was in the design stage, not the build. It was in trying to convince the people who live there and would use the mosque that it would improve the area.”**

To design the new mosque, Jamil went back to basics – the rectangular site itself – and decided to keep some key elements while discarding what she believed did not serve the community.

“The site doesn’t face Mecca, so we had to skew the building,” she said. “We also needed an intermediate space between the mosque and the road, so we put in the terrace between the prayer area and the road.” Providing a buffer, Jamil designed the patterned exterior screen, which also offers shade to the intermediate seating area.

“It’s a simple geometric pattern, but it’s not common to have that repeated pattern in Islamic architecture. Usually, it’s one pattern with a central focus...It’s more interesting this way,” she said.

The result, she added, is akin to having a *serambi*, the Malay word for ‘porch’. “We wanted a receiving area, like in the old houses. The idea was to be welcoming, so it’s very porous,” she said.

The terrace is popular with the local community, which hosts its functions there. Every time Jamil visits the Karwa Mosque, she finds locals *lepaking*, a colloquial Malay word for ‘loitering’. “I’m really happy to see people using the space. It’s like an outdoor room for the community,” she said.

Another important requirement was for the new mosque to be elevated, as the original one was. According to Jamil, the sea once reached the site, hence the need for the original mosque to be on

higher ground. Now, however, with the booming popularity of the larger Tanjong Tokong area among property buyers, there’s almost one kilometre of high-rise condominiums sitting on reclaimed land between the project site and the coast.

“The current mosque is still elevated but it’s not immediately apparent. Mosques can be quite inaccessible to the public as they’re almost always gated in Malaysia, so here was an opportunity to make it as welcoming as possible to the public, with steps along the front.”

For Jamil, getting the community to embrace her clean-lined design inside the mosque would prove more challenging. “We had a tough time trying to convince people about the mihrab. We wanted to keep it simple, but some said the design was not decorative enough. It was not a hard protest, though. The client is quite easy, so it was just a matter of convincing the others,” she said.

Overall, Jamil said, the challenge was in the design stage, not the build. It was in trying to convince the people who live there and who would use the mosque that it would improve the area, a largely lower-income neighbourhood of families living in *kampung* (or ‘village’ in Malay) homes.

“They’re used to timbered mosques,” Jamil said. “They don’t own the land they live on. The English owned the land and set this area aside for them, and it now belongs to the government. So, there’s a certain [tension] – there’s a feeling of impermanence.”

**“They don’t own the land they live on. The English owned the land and set this area aside for them, and it now belongs to the government.”**



**“Although Jamil is aware that the Karwa Mosque is not for everyone, (“people say it doesn’t look like a mosque”), she’s a firm believer that mosque architecture doesn’t purely signify certain design and architectural elements; rather, mosques and otherwise sacred Islamic spaces can come in many forms.”**

The *kampung* house vernacular is somewhat echoed in the Karwa Mosque, which reflects a modesty that’s rooted in the land it sits on and the village it serves. It was important for Jamil to instil a Malaysian sense of place. “When I came back from my studies overseas, it was a struggle to find a recognisable impact in buildings, that they belong.”

Jamil’s background, which roots her in Penang, a historic island-state 360 kilometres north of the Malaysian capital, had a hand in her heightened situational awareness.

“I come from a family in the construction business, so it’s always been a part of my life, and I would say I was encouraged to enter the field. But it worked out very well for me,” she said.

“I’ve always loved watching things getting built, and then my designs getting built. I’m aware of how projects are put together, and I’m interested in detailing and finding new ways to [create].”

At the end of the four-year design and build process, which came in December 2019, the mosque issued some resolution, providing a sense of permanence, despite its ever-changing urban surroundings.

And although Jamil is aware that the Karwa Mosque is not for everyone, (“people say it doesn’t look like a mosque”), she’s a firm believer that mosque architecture doesn’t purely signify certain design and architectural elements; rather, mosques and otherwise sacred Islamic spaces can come in many forms, which evolve over time and respond to cultural and social development.

And Jamil is happy to see mosque design evolve in her home country, and she cited two other Malaysian mosques – the modern TNB An-Nur Balai Islamic Mosque in the suburb of Bangsar, and the climatically-informed Cyber 10 Mosque in Cyberjaya – as evidence.

“I’m happy to see things like that – modern, a bit better in context, and not all curvy,” she said. “Curvy can be anywhere. Karwa has many tall windows, offering cross ventilation and natural light. The terrace is also naturally ventilated. I feel that this mosque is quite suited to the area.”

It’s also quite suited to the increasing diversity in mosque design in the country, Jamil pointed out. However, she’s also firm about not pushing an agenda in her designs. While she likes to work with bamboo, for example, she insists on not trying to insert it into every project.

“I wasn’t doing things to push a philosophy or change people,” Jamil said. “I do things that come to me. I do what’s right and suitable. You change by doing, not telling people to change.”





# YASMEEN LARI

Pakistan's first female architect is as determined as ever to continue improving the quality of life of her country's most afflicted

**Words by Yusra Alvi**

**Images courtesy of Heritage Foundation of Pakistan**

"We have to be talking about dignity for women," said Yasmeen Lari, internationally renowned as the first female architect of Pakistan. After graduating from Oxford School of Architecture in England in 1964, she embarked on a prolific career in Karachi by establishing her architecture firm, Lari Associates. During this time, her most influential works included a series of Brutalist homes, the Karachi Finance and Trade Center, and the Pakistan State Oil House; all of which showcased her design prowess. Decades later, in 2000, Lari retired from architectural practice and founded the Heritage Foundation of Pakistan. Between 2010 and 2014, she built over 36,000 houses for those affected by floods and earthquakes. "In most of the work that I have done, heritage and traditions have played a really important role," she noted.

Lari spoke about her switch from 'starchitecture' to humanitarian work, and having to relearn a lot of things upon her return to Pakistan from England at the age of 23: "My whole life has been a journey of relearning things and being able to tackle various issues that I had not been confronted with before."

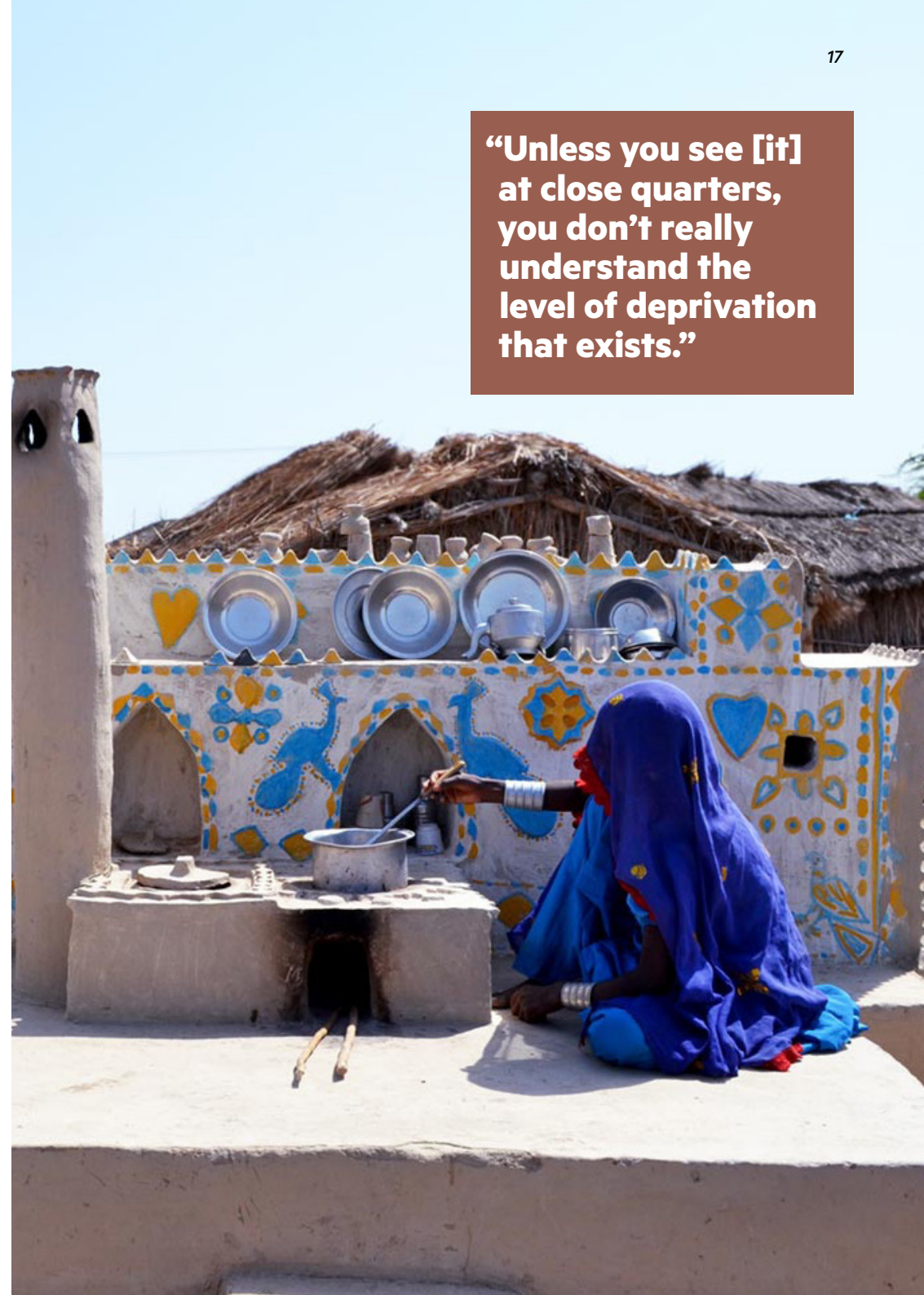
Before her career transition, Lari had made a name for herself thanks to a number of prestigious state commissions throughout the 1980s, including the previously mentioned Karachi Finance and Trade Center, a large hotel development and a host of military barracks. Her designs, like that of the Taj Mahal Hotel, sometimes featured monumental volumes and were often cloaked with extravagant and polished elements, such as gilded surfaces. Some could argue the architecture reflected the architect, and even Lari herself noted the presence of an "architect's ego". Overtime, though, her approach began to shift, as did her focus, particularly after spending time with underprivileged communities during Karavan Karachi, a cultural festival that focuses on conservation, in 2001. "I learned to respect people," she said.

**ENVELOPE 03**



**"How do you alleviate the suffering of so many millions of people? What's possible? With just a little bit of intervention, you can improve the quality of life. I think design has that power."**

**"Unless you see [it] at close quarters, you don't really understand the level of deprivation that exists."**







In 2005, when a magnitude 7.6 earthquake struck Kashmir, Lari was inspired to use her role as an architect to help devise solutions. “Everybody in Pakistan wanted to go and do something, and I was one of them,” she said.

Lari was able to design and teach a method of construction utilising local materials, such as bamboo, lime and mud, to build better and safer homes for the victims of the natural disaster. She also encouraged the affected to work on a self-help basis rather than be dependent on relief funds.

“I believe there are four things that are necessary: a safe room that would not be washed away during a flood, a toilet, clean drinking water and a chulah,” Lari said, referring to the low-cost smokeless stove that alleviates the challenges of poverty in rural Pakistan.

“If you can provide these four elements to each family, then you can tell them to be productive. If one does not even know whether tomorrow, they’ll still have a roof over their head, how can they do something productive? How could you expect them to work or be creative?”

In 2018, Lari was awarded the World Habitat Award for her design of the smokeless chulah. Women have largely been ignored in the field of architecture, both in terms of being acknowledged as designers, as well as design acknowledging their needs. Lari, in turn, focused her attention toward women, and used her position to connect to marginalised communities.

“Being female, I was able to enter people’s homes and talk to the women who were cooped up and had no way to mourn their losses,” she said, referring back to her work in aiding communities after the 2005 earthquake. “Every family had really suffered; women more so than others, as they were isolated from one another. We all know that there’s poverty and that



**“I consciously try to see that I work with women, or for women, or try to fulfill their needs somehow. If I were a man, would I have done the same? I’m not sure.”**



**“I was privileged all my life and when you start at that level, reaching a little bit higher is not that difficult. But if you're at rock bottom, then how do you get up to that height?”**

people are living really hard lives, but unless you see [it] at close quarters, you don't really understand the level of deprivation that exists.”

Lari's chulah design drastically improved both women's health and status in their communities. While traditionally, cooking is done on open-flame fires on the floor, causing respiratory issues and eye problems, Lari's chulah consists of an enclosed stove on a raised podium, built and decorated by local women. Her design offered a cleaner, safer solution to meal preparation.

“The chulah gives you dignity,” she said. “[It] immediately improved the lives of these women who built the chulah because they sit on a platform which raises their status, while also helping them have clean food and reduced health issues.” She went on to speak about how women all carry the proverbial triple burden (a reference to Caroline Moser's studies); and thus, we have to find convenient ways of working.

“We have to find ways for women to be productive without really inconveniencing themselves or going against the grain of society,” Lari added.

Lari was awarded the Jane Drew Award in 2020 for raising the profile of women in architecture. The annual prize is presented by the *Architects' Journal* and the *Architectural Review* as part of its W Awards series, or Women in Architecture Awards. Previous winners include Denise Scott Brown, Zaha Hadid and Elizabeth Diller. Over time, Lari said, she came to the conclusion that women have a different lens. “I do look at things with a different perspective. I consciously try to see that I work with women, or for women, or try to fulfill their needs somehow. If I were a man, would I have done the same? I'm not sure.”

Lari went on to express her surprise to receiving the Jane Drew Award as her work is not considered mainstream. She also critiqued other architectural award bodies for not acknowledging women's contributions to the field of design and architecture. “There has been discrimination. Recognising women for what they're worth is one way of saying: look, women have also contributed. They have also done work, which is of value,” she said.

Lari is very cognizant of her privilege, though, and recognises the benefits of her advantaged upbringing. “Everybody feels that I must have struggled so much to be able to do something, but I never believed that I had to struggle that much.

**“I do look at things with a different perspective. I consciously try to see that I work with women, or for women, or try to fulfill their needs somehow. If I were a man, would I have done the same? I'm not sure.”**

“I was privileged all my life and when you start at that level, reaching a little bit higher is not that difficult. But if you're at rock bottom, then how do you get up to that height? That's the problem; most women in our country do not get a chance. They do not have the background, the resources, nor the family support [needed to] get ahead. There are very few of us who have been able to do that. And having done that, to think that I struggled, it doesn't make sense to me.”

She concluded, “All of us must know that we need to use this privileged background in a manner that can also help others. I think women have to support other women as much as possible. Only then will they have a chance to go forward.”

At the time of writing, Lari is in the United States recovering from COVID-19. She spoke briefly about the post-pandemic plans for the Heritage Foundation, and its mission to continue its efforts to improve the quality of life for many.

“The poor need as much design as the rich,” she said. “We have to understand that disparities are rising, but I think a lot of solutions can be realised with very little money. How do you alleviate the suffering of so many millions of people? What's possible? With just a little bit of intervention, you can improve the quality of life. I think design has that power.”



# ST. REGIS CHICAGO

An exploration of the world's tallest tower designed by a woman, and the legacy it carries.

**Words by Erin Hudson**

In September 2016, when the St. Regis Chicago broke ground, there were three major expectations for the project. Comprising three towers, the complex's tallest structure would stand 1,186 feet tall, making it the third tallest building in Chicago after the 1,450-foot Willis Tower and the 1,388-foot Trump International Hotel & Tower Chicago.

The project, slated to include a hotel and luxury condominiums, would also represent the single largest Chinese real estate investment in the United States with one of China's largest real estate companies, Dalian Wanda Group, which partnered with Chicago-based developer Magellan Development. At the time, the project was valued at about one billion dollars.

**“The only other female architects known for designing tall buildings included the late Zaha Hadid with her Miami condo project, One Thousand Museum, which stands at 709 feet, as well as her Beijing tower that measures 656 feet tall.”**

The third and final expectation was that, the structure, when completed, would be the tallest tower designed by a woman – American architect Jeanne Gang – in the world. That third point is not heralded with much if any fanfare, even now, more than four years later, as the project approaches completion.

Perhaps the lack of attention is because Gang already held that achievement thanks to a 2009 project she designed, also in Chicago, thus making any further celebration a bit tiring. Or it could have been due to the rocky road the project and its stakeholders encountered once development got underway.

Two years into construction, Dalian Wanda Group wanted its money out, but it only succeeded in exiting the project last summer by selling its stake to Magellan for \$270 million. The upheaval caused panic among some of the condo buyers who tried to renege on their contracts. But Magellan hasn't given up hope; the local developer rebranded the project and secured a new hotel operator: St. Regis Hotels & Resorts, which has become the tower's new namesake.

A representative for Gang declined to be interviewed, as did Chicago developer Magellan, saying that it had no executives fit to speak on the topic. Why wouldn't they, or the profession at large, want to acknowledge Gang's accomplishment? It may have something to do with the idea that female architects seldom seem to get ahead when they acknowledge their gender.

In fact, when it comes to designing tall buildings, there's a gendered, and occasionally punishing, history. The female architect who had previously held the record for the tallest building designed by a woman was Natalie de Blois, an American architect who began her career in 1944. She was the first woman to become a senior designer at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM). And in 1961, de Blois' design with SOM partner Gordon Bunshaft for a modernist skyscraper at 270 Park Avenue in New York City was completed.


How much credit she deserved for her work later became a point of contention within the profession, as preservationists and architectural historians attempted to save the building from demolition by its contemporary owner, JPMorgan Chase. The bank ultimately prevailed and is in the process of tearing down SOM's project only to construct an even taller skyscraper to take advantage of new zoning rules.


## Tallest buildings in the world designed by women

 **362m** St. Regis, Chicago  
by Jeanne Gang

 **262m** Aqua, Chicago  
by Jeanne Gang

 **227m** The Leonardo, Johannesburg  
by Malika Walele & others

 **216m** One Thousand Museum, Miami  
by Zaha Hadid

 **215m** 270 Park Avenue, New York City  
by Natalie de Blois



The St. Regis Chicago by Studio Gang. Image by Rajesh Vijayakumar



Aqua Tower by Studio Gang, also in Chicago.  
Image by Raoyang Yang

Gang first surpassed de Blois' record in 2009, nearly five decades after 270 Park was built, with her design of the Aqua tower, another Chicago skyscraper that stands 859 feet tall. But she doesn't have much competition. The only other female architects known for designing tall buildings included the late Zaha Hadid with her Miami condo project, One Thousand Museum, which stands at 709 feet, as well as her Beijing tower that measures 656 feet tall. There's also a 745-foot mixed-use building in Johannesburg where the majority of the architectural team were women.

Gang's approach to the design of tall buildings is significant for multiple reasons, including her view that height is not enough to make a tower extraordinary. With her design of Aqua tower, Gang introduced a textured layering of balconies meant to promote a sense of community among residents of the building.

"We're not only thinking from outside in on these buildings, but also from inside out," said Gang in an interview about her philosophy to designing tall buildings. "We come at it from the scale of the living space, then the scale of the social space, and the scale within the city."

Within the St. Regis, the three towers' undulating outline seeks to maximise views of Lake Michigan for units otherwise blocked by the structure in front of them. When looking up at the buildings from the ground, the geometric shape of a frustum, or a truncated pyramid, is visible. "That gives it this dynamic, rhythmic appearance," said Gang in another interview with *Chicago Magazine*.

The complex has more than 390 condo units and over 190 hotel rooms, many of which have recessed outdoor balconies to reduce the wind Chicago is famous for. The outdoor space that Gang compared to an "innie" belly button are the highest residential balconies in the city.

**"We're not only thinking from outside in on these buildings, but also from inside out."**

The wind was also a driving force for the blow-through floor on the 83rd storey. The floor was left open, exposing the skeleton of the building and allowing wind to permeate the interior structure. "It's not a big, fat building that can just overcome [swaying] with stiffness, which is the other tactic you can use," Gang explained. "I'm always in favour of a lighter-touch solution."

When it comes to how the massive buildings intersect with ground level, Gang has taken thoughtful steps to promote activity around the base of the towers. A thoroughfare has been carved underneath the second building to create a pathway for pedestrians to go between Lake Shore East Park, with its botanical gardens and lighted fountains, and the riverwalk along the Chicago River. Gang likely knows this walkway is how most people will interact with the complex and described her design as more of a bridge — the same way some may look back on her career designing tall buildings.

**"It's not a big, fat building that can just overcome [swaying] with stiffness, which is the other tactic you can use," Gang explained. "I'm always in favour of a lighter-touch solution."**

Chicago Architecture Center

St. Regis Chicago

Aqua at Lakeshore East Apartments

Cloud Gate

The Art Institute of Chicago

Chicago Harbor

# Q & A: ALEJANDRA CELEDÓN FÖRSTER

Santiago-based architect, researcher and curator of the 2018 Chile pavilion at Venice Biennale speaks with Rima Alsammarae about the importance and future of architecture education.



**“Buildings have shaped our environment across civilisations and time, and thus, education on the built environment should start as early as possible.”**

**Tell us about your recent efforts in academia, as well as the MARQ programme.**

For a number of years, we have been trying to merge local concerns with the international agenda, which has attracted professionals of excellence from all around the world to teach, as well as a multicultural group of students. This has to be continued and enlarged, while incorporating a stronger agenda that contests specialisation. MARQ is the programme within the school that does not aim to provide a specific set of tools or knowledge (whether environmental, technological, landscape architecture or heritage), but rather enlarges and deepens the limits of the discipline. I see the programme as a bastion of resistance against the partialisation and atomisation of knowledge.

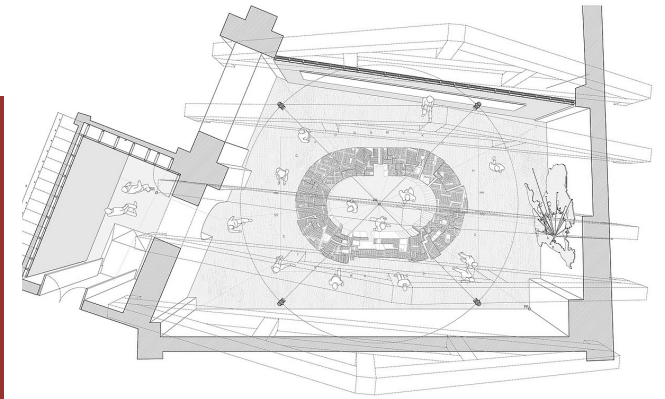
**How do you view architecture education – its strengths and weaknesses – and how do you feel it is changing?**

Architecture is a lens through which to see, understand and intervene reality. Buildings have shaped our environment across civilisations and time, and thus, education on the built environment should start as early as possible – ideally, as part of the curricula of secondary school. If we aim to imagine other, better futures, it is not only important to teach about our current environmental circumstances, but to understand them as part of the history and culture of the discipline.

Based in Santiago, Alejandra Celedón Förster is a Chilean architect, researcher and curator currently positioned at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, where she directs the Magister in Architecture and investigates educational infrastructure, from the scale of furniture to that of classrooms and buildings. Her work is simultaneously local and global, and draws together places and their histories through unexpected lines of connection. Here, she speaks with *Red Envelope* editor Rima Alsammarae about her work – from Chile’s pavilions at the Venice and Chicago biennials to her independent multidisciplinary practice.

**Words by Rima Alsammarae  
Images courtesy of Alejandra  
Celedón Förster & Omar Faundez**

**“The pavilion not only installs a scale stadium ‘in’ an exhibition space, but – and this draws from Cezanne who ‘painted only for museums’ – the show conceives and builds a stadium ‘for’ a museum.”**



The role of architecture education will be to rethink how we live together as societies in relation to our environments. In a future world that is both politically and environmentally challenging, architects play a key role in articulating (and composing) different fields, while giving them meaning and material form. Architecture academies should keep up with the times, considering building as a sound board and thermometer for society as a whole, and as an active agent of change. Universities and academia should continue being places where knowledge is produced and exchanged; places where we can, collectively, imagine and reinvent the future.

**What are your day-to-day responsibilities?**

I divide my days among a couple of research projects and teams, which is what I enjoy most. I am part of Ciudades de Octubre, an associative group of Chilean students, architects and academics that intersects problems of the city with those of architecture through a critical approach where representation and the media are at the centre of its concerns. Those interested can find us on Instagram at @ciudadesdeoctubre. I also lead a research project on education infrastructure, called Las Escuelas. And lastly, I teach the first design studio at the master's programme that I am running.

**You've published your research quite frequently – could you tell us more about these various publications, and what your aim is in addressing and exploring the topics that you do?**

Writing is yet another format and mode of register in which ideas can be tested and developed, just as drawing, designing and exhibiting. Some of the essays I have published aim to tell untold stories from the past that can illuminate current debates and problems.





**Tell us about the Chilean pavilion that you worked on for the Venice Biennale.**

*Stadium* was the exhibition that represented Chile at the 16th Venice Biennale in 2018. A year later it was adapted to be exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Santiago de Chile. The main operation was to compress a large building, the National Stadium of Chile, into a small exhibition space: first the Salla del'Isolloto del Arsenale, and the central hall of the museum later. The pavilion not only installs a scale stadium 'in' an exhibition space, but – and this draws from Cezanne who “painted only for museums” – the show conceives and builds a stadium ‘for’ a museum. Part of a more extensive research project on housing policies and rhetoric used during the dictatorship in Chile, and as a result of conversations with female residents about the origin of their houses and places, is that a drawing appears from the hands of one of them. Also exhibited is a non-scale plan of the National Stadium of Chile on rooneo paper, which, instead of bleachers and seats, encloses in more than 60 polygons and boxes the names of different towns and villages of the 17 communes that then made up the outskirts of Greater Santiago. On 29 September, 1973, the drawing was recorded about 30cm high and 55cm wide, with a fold in the middle and marks of brackets, as if it had been part of a larger issue.

Chile's National Stadium was both a building and a city for a day. On 29 September, 1979, 40,000 families filled its seats – these 250,000 people were from all over the city of Santiago. The occasion was not a sports game or a cultural or religious event, but the collective act of signing the documents that would transform them from *pobladores* (dwellers) into proprietors. On the days prior to the event, a booklet circulated in the official press bearing the list of summoned people together with a plan of the stadium – both a diagram and a proxy for the whole city. The appointed were mostly beneficiaries from *Operación Sitio* (Site Operation), a national self-help housing policy that responded to the severe housing crisis by providing people with access to urban land, but above all, to a private plot within the city. Its critics referred to it as *Operación Tiza* (Chalk Operation), since the outline of a plot with chalk in the peripheries of the city was what most people received. The naturalisation of private property logics, land liberalisation, deregulation and housing atomisation were massively celebrated that day at the stadium's full capacity.

The Chilean pavilion exhibits a double-sided story: that of a building (with its dissimilar and even contradictory past uses) and that of a city (with its atomised housing underpinning an unequal development), both overlaid in a single event. In it, the floorplan of the stadium no longer delineates bleachers, but visualises a ‘other’ city, marginalised from its centre, arresting different scales in a spatial and temporal panorama. The exhibition recreates, revisits and actualises this floorplan. Every section of the coliseum has a *población* (slum) extruding as a block, engraved with the urban fabric of the fragment of the city from which it comes, miles away, reconstructing the perimeter of the stadium-city.

**Your work seems to balance between the study of micro and macro designs (from building to urban design) – what interests you about each and how do you find resolution between the two?**

Architecture is all those scales at once; it cannot be separated from the city and its cultural context. Architecture is the city.

**Can you discuss *The Plot: Miracle and Mirage*?**

*The Plot: Miracle and Mirage* was an exhibition commissioned and funded by the 2019 Chicago Architecture Biennial, “... and other such stories ...”. The call of the event's curators was to trace narratives – micro-stories originating in Chicago, revealing connections between varied practices and common questions. The contribution of *The Plot* focused on the relationship between Chicago and Santiago, two cities that are distant but connected through their housing and land market policies. *The Plot* presented Santiago as an experiment, not only an economic one, but also social, in which urban land was subjected to market forces. Without possible resistance, the house was displaced towards the outskirts of the city under pressure from speculators and private real estate developers. The investigation prior to the exhibition consisted of, on one hand, a look into the past, through archival work on statements about the city made by the 'Chicago Boys' and their followers. And on the other hand, it consisted of an inquiry about the city present in the search for symptoms of an implicit urban model, barely pronounced. The city and its evidence, recorded audiovisually, became traces of a retroactive manifesto on the city of Santiago.

The exhibition uses the most typical closure of an empty lot under construction, as a resonance box where these forces become visible: the pressures and frictions on the urban land. The confined void serves as support to present a multimedia audiovisual project. Inside this box, surrounded by mirrors, the images of the present city are replicated and amplified, until the city becomes totally unlimited, and the model, no longer apparent but unmistakable.

*The Plot* is both a manifestation and a manifesto of the not-so-miraculous consequences of the urban model that was founded on the premises of the Chicago School of Economics on Santiago. While it has been said many times that the global free market revolution began in Chile in 1975, this was just an essay – the first draft. Ideas developed and spread in a different order, with Chicago being the centre of a world game. Decades have passed since this experiment began in Chile. The miracle of Friedman's Chilean disciples has turned out to be a mirage in many ways. The vision and dream of a free-market economy produced a blurry picture, one in which the real object always drifts toward a myriad of unfulfilled possibilities. The Chicago Boys managed to establish an unrestricted framework of action, harboured by an absolute lack of civic rights and political freedom, securing power (economic and political) for a select and dominant group.





**“The binary view of the world between women and men can no longer hold either; yet, on the other hand, conditions differ greatly between different points of the planet, and a woman’s visibility still needs to be reinforced and valued.”**

The 9x18-metre-lot, which the exhibition cites, not only stands as the common housing solution to accommodate the most vulnerable on the outskirts of Santiago, but also as the key to understanding the conditions of possibility of a future Santiago. The urban block ceased to be the development unit of the city, due to the independent private lot. The images of the film projected in *The Plot: Miracle and Mirage* come from Santiago today, tracing a city that vanishes in its borders in an endless land market. Policies implemented in Santiago during the 1970s and 1980s resulted in a city in which access to urban land and its distribution is based on the purchasing power of private lots. The city is a game board where, in some places and at some times, the rules can be changed, or even suspended, like the mirage of a miracle.

**Can you tell me more about your architecture practice?**

I would define my practice as multifaceted, dispersed and promiscuous in the sense that it allows dissimilar ambits and disciplinary fields to cross in each project, from history to art, film to archeology, narrative to cartography. It is not something that I seek deliberately, rather it occurs naturally. They interest me and I see connections between rather distant things that, over time, become tied and decant into unlikely formats: from exhibitions to essays, audiovisual to design projects, editorials to curations.



Moving or dislocating formal research projects outside the academy classrooms not only implies a registration and exposure of aspects of the research to a mass public, but also builds a new epistemological site that coexists in the production and reproduction of the research project. I try to open up alternative places for architecture: the possibility of a new space of knowledge with its own logics.

**The theme of this journal is women in architecture – how does the topic make you feel?**

I understand why some people might be bothered by the topic of women and architecture. Myself, I prefer to believe that you are interested in my work and not in me simply because I am a woman. On one hand, the binary view of the world between women and men can no longer hold; yet, on the other, conditions differ greatly between different points on the planet, and a woman’s visibility still needs to be reinforced and valued. In many countries, the distance between the genders is still enormous. I believe that, perhaps for a while longer, we have to continue to insist on inviting, promoting and giving visibility to more women, but hopefully in the near future, we will only have to care about good work, regardless of gender, race, religion, ethnicity and so on. For a while more, it will be necessary to continue promoting the figuration and development not only of women in architecture, but also of many other silenced voices.



# BEYOND THE QUINQUENNIAL YEARS

An analysis of the rise of female students of architecture in the UAE, and the paths that lay ahead of them.

**Words by Tala Alnounou & Yosr El Sherbiny**  
**Images courtesy of Dr. Nadia Mounajjed**

**“To much surprise, 52 percent of participants interviewed did not grow up around architects nor the practice of architecture, and were only introduced to the field upon enrollment.”**

It can hardly be disputed that women are assuming more and more leadership positions in our globalised world, especially across the Middle East and North Africa, where businesswomen rank among Forbes' topmost lists. This gradually increasing balance in leadership is visible in many sectors, and architecture, as an interdisciplinary profession, is witnessing fundamental shifts as more female graduates enter the industry.

There has been a noticeable trend in the rising number of women studying architecture in the GCC over the past 10 years, with an average ratio of four women to every one man – an increase from the two to one ratio (respectively) just six years ago in 2015. It's an observation that, beyond the hard data, students, alumni and professionals have also acknowledged.

While reasons behind choosing the profession for women are quite diverse and reflect differing cultural, political or even social POVs, spending one's quinquennial years at architecture school is not the traditional first choice of many Middle Eastern families for their children.

The authors of this article conducted a survey of a small pool of students and faculty at universities in the UAE to understand the drivers behind the growing gender imbalance in regional architecture departments. To much surprise, 52 percent of participants interviewed did not grow up around architects nor the practice of architecture, and were only introduced to the field upon enrollment. This poses interesting questions regarding influences and reflections on the type of design output we see in the Middle East, a region that is in no short supply of borrowed references from foreign examples and which has, until relatively recently, rarely engaged with minute drivers that leverage change and identity.

**“The rise of ‘archipreneurs’ is proving that innovation, great business and passion all trump traditional perceptions of the architecture profession.”**

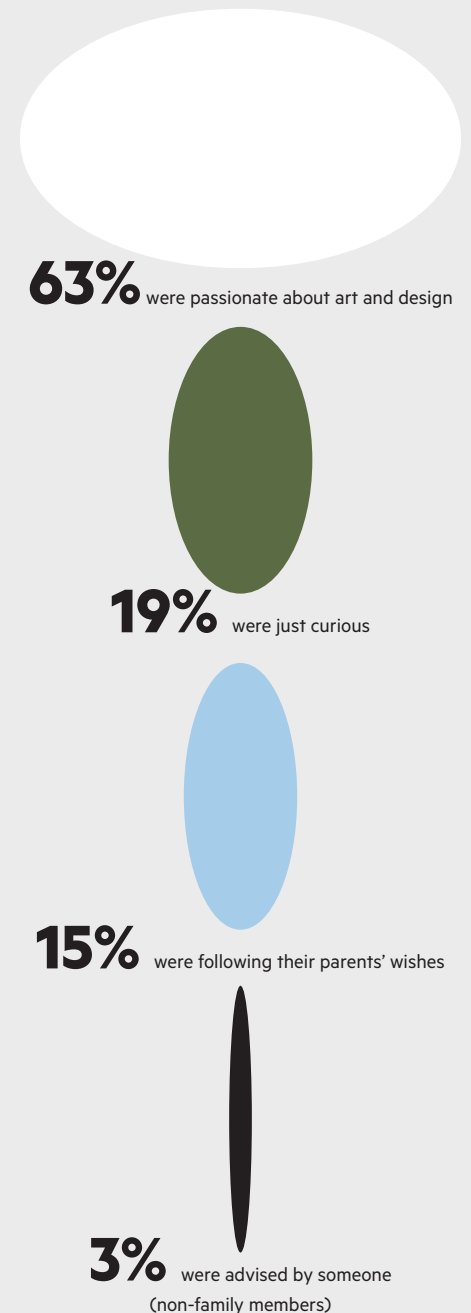
Influential architects such as Zaha Hadid and Hassan Fathy were among the names most commonly shared that inspired local students to study architecture. Being a creative and interdisciplinary field that interweaves art and design with technical engineering and which covers varying project scales, from city planning to small residential units, captivated others.

School programmes are slowly introducing design and architecture into their curriculum, which is fundamental to creating awareness of such professions at elementary levels, thus tipping the scale to attract more students and achieve diversity that will eventually benefit the industry. This will also help reassure the multifaceted opportunity spectrum that awaits post-graduation, breaking down some of the stereotypes associated with architecture.

The rise of ‘archipreneurs’ is proving that innovation, great business and passion all trump traditional perceptions of the architecture profession. On joining architecture school, 63 percent of surveyed students stated that passion for art and design was the main factor; and a few of the participants further stated a leaning towards entrepreneurship and wanting to start their own design companies.

Beyond technical and theoretical responsibility, academia has an important role to play in attracting and retaining talent – little more than half the surveyed participants (59 percent) grew to love architecture more throughout their school years and chose to continue exploring opportunities in the field. Yet we cannot deny the numbers here are very close.

**On Joining Architecture School**  
Q: Why did you choose to study architecture?





**“Some institutions prefer to teach students how to be creative designers using savvy technologies, while others focus on the technical and business dimension, which is a must for an interdisciplinary subject such as architecture.”**

30 percent of the participants regretted their decision of studying architecture and considered changing their majors in the middle of their undergrad experience (the remaining 11 percent remained unchanged in their opinions). This might help explain why some women are shifting from practice to academia, as noted in the increase of qualified female faculty joining institutions in the GCC and nearly completely balancing the gap between women and male academics, or, in some instances, even outweighing their male counterparts.

As a young art enthusiast, Dr Nadia Mounajjed, now an educator at Abu Dhabi University, found herself drawn to architecture and was encouraged by a family friend to pursue higher studies, which eventually led her into academia.

One of the challenges she faced was finding balance between being a practicing architect and a teacher, leaving little room for the ambition of combining both. On freelancing, she mentioned the challenges for independent designers to get commissions, as the regional architectural field is dominated by large international firms. Thus, full-time academia became the preferred option.

Q: Do you have anyone in your family who is an architect?



**78%** No



**22%** Yes

Q: Did you know anything about architecture before enrolling?



**52%** No



**48%** Yes

Q: Did you have to study design before you started your architecture degree?



**85%** No



**15%** Yes

Q: Did you think of changing majors while studying architecture?



**52%** No



**48%** Yes

Q: Did you grow to love architecture more/ or less throughout your years of studying?



Discussing the gap between academia and profession, Mounajjed, who has taught in different institutions, stated, "Some institutions prefer to teach students how to be creative designers using savvy technologies, while others focus on the technical and business dimension, which is a must for an interdisciplinary subject such as architecture."

Finding the right balance, though, is important to enable students to understand that career options are versatile. Exposing them to different experiences will also impact student retention in creative fields. Mounajjed added, "I would say the gap [between practice and academia] is slowly decreasing and students are better prepared to disrupt the market facing the ever-evolving industry."

Research culture is critical to the development of the architectural study, particularly in a region such as the Middle East, where we still have a long way to go from building on other people's research to those who contribute new information. There is a growing belief that the system should create more opportunities for educators to get involved in developments and projects being realised, empowering them to lead research labs that contribute to new forms of knowledge. The retention of knowledge centres is very important for the sustainable development of this ecosystem, although, sometimes it is difficult to manage due to the transient nature of work across the region.

Research and development are fundamentals in the collection of data and the advancement of the practice. And although innovative firms and studios engage in the process, they struggle with funding. Architecture has always been a discipline that is not necessarily associated with research, and culturally, there is a disconnect between the general understanding of the field and the reality of its importance. A positive

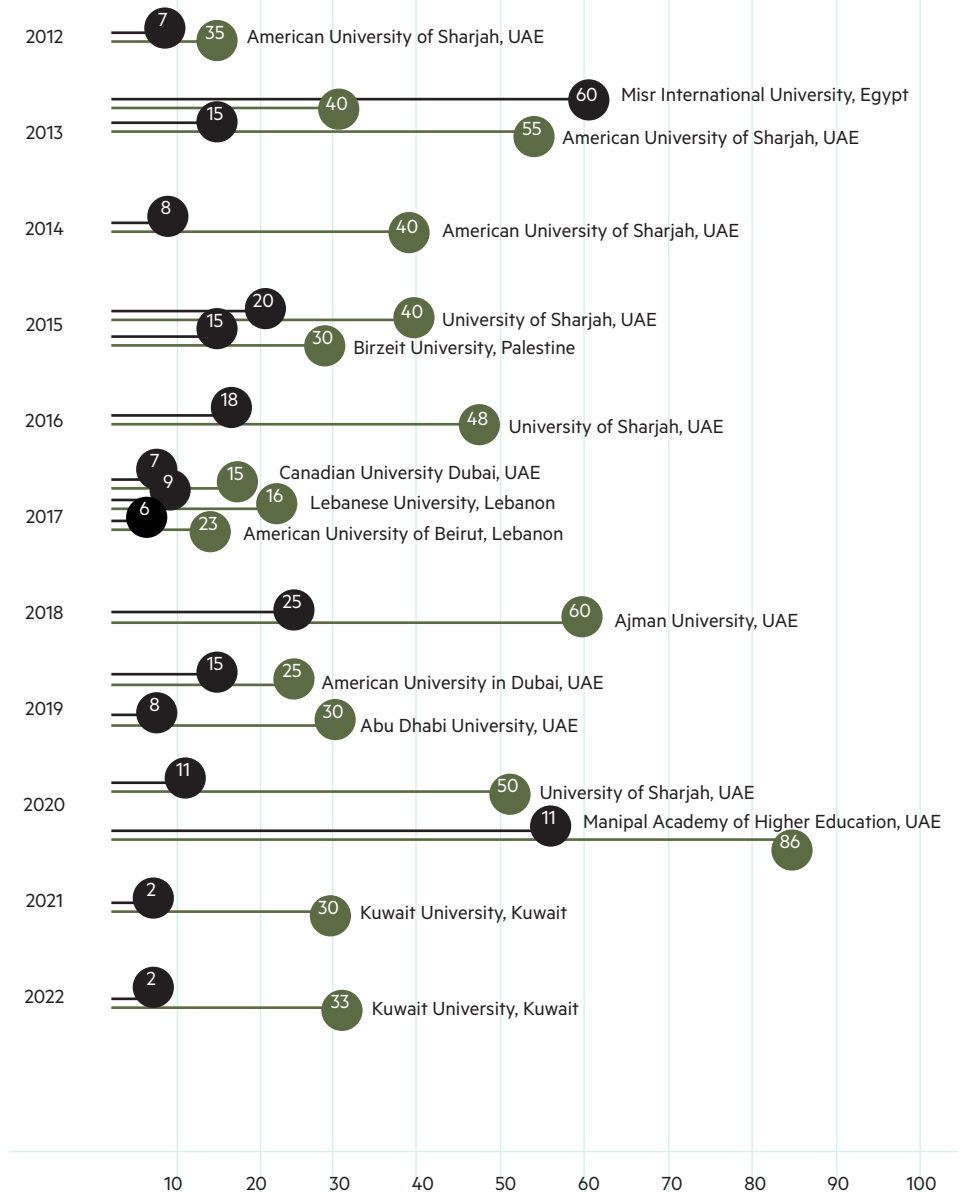
**"At worst, there is an immeasurable pressure that inspires career changes, and at best, it's a reality that professionals face together."**

scenario sees the industry and academia having a more symbiotic relationship, learning from each other to maintain progress and improve frameworks that lead to a greater benefit of the industry in the region.

Both men and women face equal difficulties in the fields of architecture and design as they are undergoing great changes due to globalisation, new technologies and their expansion from traditional practice to new areas and ways of working. At worst, there is an immeasurable pressure that inspires career changes, and at best, it's a reality that professionals face together. Introducing change is inevitable yet must happen at fundamental levels starting with academia.

Curiosity and self-development are keys to success in this profession and whether you are a 'he' or a 'she', a professional or academic, commitment and motivation are likely your drivers. As women slowly brake stereotypical associations, it is within their hands to acquire their dreams.

Average Numbers (females & males) collected from various universities - Data  
Name of University, Location, Female and Male Ratio, Year of graduation (batch)



# CONTRIBUTORS

## **Rima Alsammarae - Editor**

Rima Alsammarae is an architecture and culture journalist based in Dubai, UAE. She is the co-founder of *Round City*, an online publication that reports on architecture, art, design and construction from the Near East and North Africa, as well as a project manager for Tamayouz Excellence Award, an architecture awards programme. In the past, she was the editor of *Middle East Architect* and *Brownbook* magazines, among others.

## **Aman Darwish - Designer**

Aman Darwish is a graphic designer and artist based in Dubai, UAE. She studied visual communications and photography at the American University of Sharjah. Aman also acquired a master's of art in communication design from Winchester School of Art in 2018. Through her practice, she explores the art of storytelling and different mediums of communication.

## **Erin Hudson**

Erin is a journalist based in New York City writing about real estate and development. Originally from Toronto, her work has appeared in *Architectural Record* among other places.

## **Seema Viswanathan**

Seema is a journalist based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and has 25 years of experience covering politics, business, fashion, beauty, travel and social trends. In the past, she was the editor-in-chief of several women's glossies, including *Cleo*, *Female*, *Her World* and *Shape*. She now runs a content consultancy, Content Salad, and works with a wide variety of businesses to craft communications campaigns for launches, corporate social responsibility initiatives and branding revamps. In her free time, Seema indulges in her love of hiking.

## **Tala Alnounou**

Tala is head of marketing and research for the MENA region at LWK + PARTNERS. She's also an independent published researcher, interior designer and art enthusiast. Fascinated with storytelling, she has, over the past 10 years, explored various aspects of the industry through design, academia and management. As a former research assistant, she has contributed to investigations at the American University of Sharjah and led the research committee at an Aga Khan Award-winning practice.

## **Yosr El Sherbiny**

Ever since she was old enough to express her imagination, Yosr has been writing fiction. In addition to being a serial-writer, Yosr has worked in the AEC industry as an architect since 2013. She graduated with a bachelor's in architecture (BArch) from the American University of Sharjah, and a master's in architectural management and design from IE University in Madrid. A firm believer that design and storytelling are correlated, Yosr founded Wrichitects, a creative writing and educational platform for stories about art, architecture, design and everyday people.

## **Yusra Alvi**

Yusra is an architect and design researcher. She earned her master's in design research from the Bauhaus Foundation in Germany and is interested in charting the affinities between local events and the global forces that produce them. With a focus in spatial reorganisation and regeneration, she is an urban feminist who believes that social change can be propagated through designed spaces and structures. She is currently teaching future architects at COMSATS University, Lahore.



