

Architectural Success: A Gendered Perspective

Éxito en arquitectura: una perspectiva de género

Sucesso na arquitetura: uma perspectiva de gênero

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Artículo de investigación

Abstract

This paper considers the meaning of success. Architecture defines success in terms of publications in journals, winning awards, and being promoted to director; however, it is clear that these indicators of talent are predominantly male-orientated; and this in itself affirms that success is intertwined with gender. This paper considers the position that different groups within architecture have in historical notions of success. In order to explore this idea students, academics, and architects were asked to respond to matched questions regarding success. This paper argues that the norms of success are already pluralized and that this insight provides a challenge to conventional and hegemonic understandings of success.

Keywords: gender, success, architects.

Resumen

En la arquitectura se considera el éxito en términos de publicaciones en revistas, obtención de premios o recibir un ascenso; sin embargo, es claro que tales indicadores de éxito están predominantemente orientados al sexo masculino. Este artículo considera la posición de diferentes grupos que en la arquitectura tienen nociones históricas sobre el éxito. Con el fin de explorar esta idea, se encuestó a estudiantes, académicos y arquitectos para que respondieran ciertas preguntas relacionadas con el tema del éxito. Se argumenta que las reglas del éxito están pluralizadas y que dicha perspectiva constituye un reto para las interpretaciones convencionales y hegemónicas del éxito.

Palabras clave: género, éxito, arquitectos.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa o sentido de sucesso. A arquitetura define sucesso enquanto a publicações em revistas, obtenção de prêmios ou ser promovido a diretor. Contudo, é claro que esses indicadores de sucesso são predominantemente orientados ao gênero masculino. Este texto considera o posicionamento de diferentes grupos que, na arquitetura, têm noções históricas sobre o sucesso. A fim de explorar essa ideia, foi realizada uma enquete com estudantes, acadêmicos e arquitetos para que respondessem perguntas relacionadas com esse tema. Argumenta-se que as regras do sucesso já estão pluralizadas e que essa perspectiva constitui um desafio para interpretações convencionais e hegemônicas a respeito dele.

Palavras-chave: arquitetos, gênero, sucesso.

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Introduction

Traditional measures of career success are salary, salary growth, and promotions. For Heslin these “are the most widely used and readily accessible indicators of career success.”¹ One of the problems with the notion of success is, for Heslin, that we all have the same idea of exactly how to define it.² But success, or the assumption that it is experienced by everyone in the same way, is actually problematic in architecture because if what counts as success is understood in terms of awards, scale of a project, number of publications, or being a director,³ these markers are predominantly achieved by men. The fact that this is the case is itself a mechanism that affirms how success is intertwined with gender. The success of women who make their ‘break’ into architecture via anonymous architectural competitions are moments in which this gender bias becomes evident.

Through looking at success, I add to the narrative on how normative and hegemonic systems are maintained in architecture. An example of this narrative is Bridget Fowler and Fiona Wilson’s critique of the gentlemanly artist as an individual or Hilde Heynen’s critique of the star system and authorship.⁴ The similarities between these two works are that they both question the norms of masculinity as social and cultural constructs as well as the corresponding claims or expectations

of universality.⁵ This assumption of an architect as someone who is ‘masculine’ also serves to bind and connect architectural expectations and values in a regulatory system. Butler’s notion of gender as a performative concept helps to explain how practice operates in a highly regulated matrix in which gender is perpetuated as inalterable and timeless.⁶ Butler asserts that gender is not an essence, nor is it biologically determined, but rather gender is a ‘doing’ where one enacts gender norms. These enactments of gender are not singular; central to Butler’s theory is that they are a “reiterative act, a citational practice where discourse produces the effects that it names,”⁷ which creates the illusion of coherency. Moreover, through the enactment of gendered norms, bodies are produced and represented as being intelligible: male or female, centre or margin, and proper or improper. Performativity thus provides us with a way of contemplating the grid of power relations, which are both institutional and structuring. Significantly, in this social constructivist perspective, recognition, support, and promotion are often granted to masculine subjects as they are seen as stable entities who demonstrate coherence with the neutral and natural norms of architecture.

In this paper, I also draw from Karen Barad’s work because Butler’s theory of discursive performativity has consequences, which tend to focus on

1 Heslin, “Conceptualizing and Evaluating Career Success,” 115.

2 *Ibid.*

3 Whitman, “The Career Progression of Women in the Architectural Profession”.

4 Fowler and Wilson. “Women Architects and Their Discontents”; Heynen, “Genius, Gender and Architecture”.

5 Bastian, “Finding Time for Philosophy”.

6 Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 48.

7 Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 2.

disembodied subjectivities that are isolated from the world. This, in turn, means the business of making, enacting, and connecting with the world is not acknowledged. Barad's material-based theory of performativity deals with the agential world around us and how it unfolds through constant meeting and entanglement of matter and meaning.⁸ Barad does not refute Butler, but rather questions the over-reliance on a discursive approach to performativity. Barad's "agential realism" serves instead to help us attribute agency to matter and also agency to the relations between different material actors.⁹ Importantly, whilst discursive theories of performativity presume there is no doer behind the deed, Barad does not smuggle agency back in but rather considers how agential action emerges through the act of interaction with the material and discursive norms—including the idea of success.

To explore how success shapes architectural values, this paper has the following structure: The survey on the values and experiences of students, academics, and architects is first explained and contextualized. Then, in the findings section, I discuss how each group responded to questions about success. This paper seeks to clarify the different stories of success that are part of architecture.

Method

This survey is the result of a conversation that started between Gerrard Hoffman (Counseling Services, Victoria University of Wellington [VUW]), Glenda Weston (provides support for students through lectures and small group work), and me. We discussed the differences and similarities between values and expectations for staff and students—and how a difference of values, potentially, has an impact on student wellbeing. These discussions were suggestive rather than conclusive. The resulting survey set out to analyse notions of success and brilliance, and also expectations in the relationship between well-being and work/life balance. This paper focuses on the questions that dealt with success.

The survey consisted of a 38-item self-administered questionnaire, which was emailed to students and staff at VUW Architecture School as well as practicing architects in the local Wellington region (22 questions).¹⁰ 118 people responded to the surveys, including 64 architects, 40 students (first year Masters), and 14 staff. Where possible, questions were matched between the different groups. The survey used a Likert scale. Respondents were also given the opportunity to write comments or to respond to open-ended questions. This provided a less threatening context and allowed an opportunity for free and unrestrained responses. This method seemed appropriate for a group of articulate respondents. The majority of literature on work/life balance, careers and employment, as noted by Caven, focuses on women's experience.¹¹ Diversity and how class and race intersect was an important consideration underscoring this survey, but are unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper due to its brevity. However, it is worthwhile noting that, in this survey, the majority of females and males are white and from a middle class background.

A positive element of this survey is its cross-sectional design, which allows insight into different groups within the community, rather than just viewing the conditions of students, academics, and architects as isolated accounts. Potential limitations of this study are the sole focus on a cohort from Wellington, which limits the generalizability of these findings to other populations.

Cohort Effect and Meanings of Success

In organisational research, the main measures of success, traditionally, were objective criteria such as pay and promotion. Current research suggests that success in organisations is equally, and increasingly, likely to be measured in subjective ways through concepts such as work/life balance and fulfilment.¹² In the field of architecture, Paula Whitman in her 2005 study of Australian Architects found that 69.1% of women she sur-

8 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

9 *Ibid.*, 129.

10 The communications manager of NZIA sent the email to list members in the Wellington region.

11 Caven, "Designing a Career," 617.

12 Heslin, "Conceptualizing and Evaluating Career Success".

veyed were willing to forego career success if it threatens personal happiness and balance in their lives.¹³ She found women “reject the scale of a project, practice size, awards and journal coverage as measures of their personal success, but believe that the profession generally values these factors as indicators of career progression.”¹⁴ This survey was followed up by the Royal Australian Institute of Architects in 2007, which looked at male architects, and found correlations between male and female architects, with 61% of male architects prepared to sacrifice career success if it threatens personal happiness.¹⁵ A similar number of men (23%) as women (26%) had turned down promotion in the past. The survey findings from 2005 and 2007 indicate a general shift in expectations where happiness is seen as important, rather than value being placed on work alone. One of the main differences in this research was that “only 4.3 per cent of men perceived family commitments to be a barrier to career success compared with 24.5 per cent of women.”¹⁶ The following findings look more closely at the definition of success itself and how it is viewed by students, academics and architects.

Students

All students surveyed were in their fourth year of a five-year architectural degree. 50% of the class responded, and there were an equal numbers of male and female responses. Students answered three questions on success: two are the focus of this paper. The first, an open-ended question, asked how they defined success as a student. The second, a multiple-choice question, asked what a successful career might look like for them. Multiple answers were allowed, and space was provided for them to define success in their own terms.

The definitions of success provided by students varied. They used a combination of subjective and objective measures, so while a student might suggest the importance of grades, this was aligned with skill development, social life and happiness. For example:

Having a balance between good grades and other achievements like sport whilst maintaining good health and a social life. (M)

Getting good marks. Learning a variety of skills that will prepare me for the industry. Making connections with other students and people in the industry. Still having time to have a life and enjoy spending time with friends. (M)

Achieving goals and being happy with my work. (F)

The responses clearly repudiate the notion of success as singular and indicate it is more complex. Success is an assemblage of different meanings—but it still clearly related to the norms and pressures of the university where grades are, predominately, still the measure of success.

Of note in the survey was the repetition of words such as “developing”, “learning”, “understanding”, and “expanding”, which were predominantly used to describe success as a process rather than an end-point:

Learning and developing key techniques and skills that can be applied in all areas of life. (M)

Producing a project in which I'm pleased with the outcome & which progressed my learning and skills. (M)

Architecture school opens up the possibilities in or for architecture, expanding thinking and ways of working. Success comes through design, research, engagement and opportunities that cannot be generated without energy and enthusiasm from the student body. Anything is possible... (F)

For both male and female students, success was defined actively, is future orientated, and being engaged where learning is seen as an important measure of success.

Next, students were asked to respond to what a successful career might look like. Both the male (75%) and female (67%) students produced similar results in terms of the broad categories, placing work/life balance and a good job as significant measures of what their career success would

13 Whitman, “The Career Progression of Women in the Architectural Profession,” 8.

14 *Ibid.*

15 Australian Institute of Architects, “Men’s Survey Prompts Questions”.

16 *Ibid.*

look like. But having work recognised by 'others' ranked second for both males and females, followed by awards and publications. A successful career was further defined as:

Helping (F), Enjoyment (F), Significant engagement with the profession within the public realm (F).
 Enjoying what I do and viewing it as a mission or career rather than "job" money orientated purposes (M), Helping people gain a better standard of living (M), Designing environments that better the life of people and increase their happiness (M).

What was clear across the comments was the altruistic desire of students: they wanted to contribute to society, and success is seen in terms of fostering community and connections rather than individualisation and division. Following Barad, despite different choices around success, each person takes up the constraining possibilities offered by success in their own way, forming a theory or their own habits as variations on those possibilities, or actively trying to resist or reconfigure them.

Academic Staff

Universities teach both an explicit curriculum of abilities and skills but also a hidden curriculum of values, tastes and beliefs,¹⁷ which Croat and Ahrentzen argue are far from neutral and "support the values of a more traditional constituency (i.e. male and of mainly middle class backgrounds) including the maintenance of a star system."¹⁸ We may, or may not, be aware of prejudices that we too have enculturated. This still raises questions about how values of success have the potential to shape teaching.

This research began by asking academics two questions about how they perceived students' understanding of success, both now and in the future. The first asked how they thought 'students defined success' (an open ended question). The second question asked what for a student 'a successful career might look like'. This was a multiple choice question, with multiple answers allowed, and space for comments.

The academics' responses to how 'students defined success at university' showed little divergence. Most were brief—one word. What was clear for both male and female academics was the belief that students are focused on grades, prizes and scholarships, with grades being the dominant response (86%). Other responses included: graduating, getting a job and developing marketable skills. Only two female staff suggested more complex responses:

Achieving good marks. Feeling personally satisfied with work. Getting a good job on graduation.

I think there are a range of definitions of success.

But from when I have talked to students it is about balance. They want to be able to do a good job (and it is not always about grades)—but also spend time with family, friends or doing other activities.

There are some that strive for success in a more traditional sense and they are happy with this, most of the time.

Success was, however, defined through grades, perhaps because architecture academics have to operate at the intersection of two spheres: The profession and the university, which is a complex relationship in which values and expectations do not always harmoniously coincide. But there was also a similar response to the second question. In terms of what academics thought students would perceive as a successful career, the majority of responses by staff (70%), both males and females, indicated that recognition by others was key. Two respondents suggested all the criteria defined success, and added good health and earnings as criteria. Only 14% of responses suggested that success for students would be work/life balance. Their responses were brief, with less commentary compared to students or architects.

Students and staff responded to a third question, but due to the brevity of this paper this response is noted but not fully elaborated on. But both groups were asked what the profession values as success. Once more, the students saw success as much wider—with the main response being client satisfaction. Staff thought that the profession valued awards primarily but practice size and journal coverage were also signs of success.

¹⁷ Dutton, *Voices in Architectural Education*.

¹⁸ Groat and Ahrentzen, "Reconceptualising Architectural Education for a More Diverse Future," 166.

Butler's work seems pertinent in describing how normative ideas of success appear to be natural and beyond question, repeated rather than singular. What was clear among academics is that success is considered as a singular and objective quality. Furthermore, success as defined by grades, graduating and getting a job are all similar in that time is understood as singular, linear and progressive. Notions of balance, and personal success and development, both in university and the future, were seen as less significant. And it does raise the question of how 'success' or 'excellence' is currently being shaped within the university, within architectural school, and the intersection with students' expectations and values. Academia is powerful mechanism that affirms a particular view of the profession.

Architects

The survey was shorter for architects; they only had to indicate how they defined a successful career in architecture. This was a multiple choice question that allowed multiple responses, and space was provided so they could define success more personally. For women, work life balance was an important measure of success (64.5%) while for males, this was a less important measure of success (40%). This was one of the responses that differed across the various categories in the survey. However, as already indicated, family commitments are seen as a barrier to success for women in the profession, and for Fowler and Wilson, within architecture's inflexible working conditions and time constraints, "the effect of women's responsibilities for children continues to be disadvantageous."¹⁹ It is no surprise that women see the ability to balance both spheres as a sign of success.

Both males and females, defined success as a combination of different meanings. Here are two examples of female responses:

Satisfaction and growth in my own work, but also contributing to those around me - my team, clients, the community.

A combination of integrating work with family/ other commitments, and recognition from others in the profession is a bonus [sic].

This was also the case in male responses:

Balance work with pressures of life, and enjoy solving problems for people [sic].

The architects' responses show a desire for 'both/ and' rather than 'either/or' definitions of success. Furthermore, ingrained in a number of responses by both male and female architects were personal satisfaction, balance and happiness, which were interlinked with other measures of success.

For females in this survey, the importance of client satisfaction was a key dimension of success. This finding is supported by Valerie Caven and Marie Diop,²⁰ who found that women in architecture focus on the pleasure of shared work, social connections and working with clients:

Success in architecture means a happy client.
Success means that I am enjoying my work and my clients are happy.

This was true, but less evident, in the male cohort:

Success means that I am enjoying my work and my clients are happy.
Success in architecture means achieving and if possible exceeding client's briefs.

However, there was also a clear sense that the architects wanted to be ambassadors for the profession and also do good work, not only for the client, but for the users and the public:

Success in architecture for me means being a good representative of the profession in terms of working with clients, contractors and friends and family outside of the profession (M)
Satisfaction and growth in my own work, but also contributing to those around me - my team, clients, the community (F).

This supports similar findings by Watts who noted that architects view altruism as a reward.²¹ However, while the female respondents empha-

19 Fowler and Wilson. "Women Architects and Their Discontents," 102.

20 Caven and Diop, "Architecture: A 'Rewarding' Career?."

21 Watts, "Allowed into a Man's World".

sised work life balance and client's wishes, male respondents emphasized an orientation towards public well being as a measure of success—which indicates a more traditional understanding of masculinities and femininities within the profession and around the private / public boundary. This is a notable difference, in particular when considering how to support women to explore normative understandings of success within the discipline. However, the results of this research suggest some caution regarding broad categorisations, as not everyone wishes to or is able to embody the ideals of hegemonic masculinity—or femininity.²² Critically, when considering these results, what Barad offers us is the ability to consider how people negotiate norms of gender to choose to perform them, or “mobilise the rules differently”.²³

Findings

Success is not neutral. Conventional markers and understandings of success in architecture are bound with “patriarchy and cultural hegemony.”²⁴ Being the director of a firm, winning awards, and publishing articles in journals are, “completely intertwined with such conventional understanding and, hence, cannot avoid displaying the traces of its patriarchal genealogy.”²⁵ However, this research has not unpacked conventional markers of success, but it has instead looked at how different cohorts define success and who still adheres to a conventional understandings. One of this research's clear findings is that success in practice is defined in multiple ways: For females and males, students and architects. Some advantage might be gained by insisting that norms of success are already pluralized within the discipline; this insight could then be used to question an understanding of success that is defined simplistically in terms of linear progression or through awards.

However, at the same time there is a very clear understanding, evident within all cohorts, but strongly evident among the academics surveyed, that success is seen in more historical terms. This

requires further consideration. The university, generally speaking, following Fiona Jenkins, is a “meritocratic system, one that organizes a certain version of what the ‘inputs’ and the ‘outputs’ of the system look like, and thus explains success and failure in ways that systemically produce and reproduce gendered positions.”²⁶ The university is a system that powerfully regulates through education and research. The university, of course, does not shape the profession alone. Popular media, architectural awards, architectural journals, etc. regulate and shape a particular understanding of success—in which success is still, for the most part, gendered. What might the media coverage of architecture look like if success was understood in more diverse terms? We might see more variety in the media: More different scales of work, different modes of practice and how different people operate within the profession. This variety embraces the liveness of creating architecture.

However, what also becomes clear is that the regulation and reiteration of norms in these findings is not a completely deterministic process. We are not just passive; there is potential for agential action. Barad allows us a way to consider how agency occurs through intra-action, which also enables us to understand how people outside of the dominant and constitutional limit of the ‘self’ are still able to negotiate notions such as success. If success, as is made clear in this research, is the ability to integrate different features from both work and life, one female architect's response seems pertinent:

It takes a firm approach—the more senior you seem to get in a practice the higher the expectation and (perceived?) [sic] need of your availability as-needed to the ever-expanding requirements of the job. It takes a clear commitment to keep the balance and insight that more hours don't necessarily equal better work. Athletes can't perform at their peak all the time, and if we don't get regular periods of rest and recovery, how can we?

22 Sang, Dainty, and Ison, “Gender in the UK architectural Profession,” 13.

23 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 532.


24 Heynen, “Genius, Gender and Architecture,” 343.

25 *Ibid.*

26 Jenkins, “Singing the Postdiscrimination Blues,” 98.

Agency is evident in this architect's ability to negotiate her working conditions as an interactive process rather than just passive acceptance. This is a story of success.

Conclusion

To conclude, it has been the intention of this paper to contemplate the understanding different groups within the architectural community have of historical notions of success. We cannot ignore the pressures of success and how they bind people as well as their displays, acts and outputs in a community, which operates to include some and exclude others. Awards, publishing in journals and becoming a director also figure prominently—these are primarily achieved by men, and they are indicators of how gender is normative, regulated and iterative. The utility of collectively analysing Butler and Barad allows us to focus on the smaller moments of negotiation and of agential action, which, despite the 'smallness' of these moments of personal resistance, are nonetheless meaningful challenges to the normative interpretations of success. It is clear in this research that there are differing ideas of success in the field of architecture. Architects and students speak of different ways to define success that do not adhere to a singular understanding. Instead of success being defined in opposition—winning awards vs. personal well-being, objective vs. subjective success and male vs. female—success was more often seen as an assemblage of different meanings that renders dualistic thinking meaningless. This is the positive dimension of these outcomes for which architecture can "draw energy from democratic and academic values of plurality and critical contestation."²⁷ 

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27 *Ibid.*, 101.