

Women in Lighting Design

ELIZABETH DONOFF EXAMINES THE ROLE OF WOMEN PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE



THE ROLE GENDER PLAYS IN THE DESIGN PROFESSION IS THE PROVERBIAL “800-POUND GORILLA” in the room. Everyone knows it is there, but it is easier to avoid it except when it rears its head. This happened in 2007 when the American Institute of Architects (AIA) bestowed one of its highest honors—the AIA Architecture Firm Award—to Boston-based Leers Weinzapfel Associates. The award “recognizes a practice that consistently has produced distinguished architecture for at least 10 years.” Leers Weinzapfel has been doing that since it started in 1982, but what it has done differently is that it is a women-owned firm. (The current firm structure includes four principals: Andrea Leers, Jane Weinzapfel, Joe Pryse, and Josiah Stevenson.) This was a point made by architect James Stewart Polshek in his recommendation letter: “It would be nice to be gender blind but our social construct is not yet reconfigured to allow that luxury. The fact is that for a woman-owned firm to succeed as spectacularly as Leers Weinzapfel has required persistence, diligence, and inventiveness.” On one hand, while the award to Leers Weinzapfel signifies some progress, at the same time one cannot help but wonder why it has taken until 2007 for a woman-owned firm to receive this recognition.

A YOUNG PROFESSION

As my own career focus has transferred from architecture to lighting, one

of the major differences that has struck me is the number of women who hold prominent positions of authority in lighting design and manufacturing. If I were asked to make a list of women practitioners in architecture, it would take a while to come up with a comprehensive list. If I were asked to make the same list for lighting designers, before I can blink I would have a list of more than 30 firm principals. What is it about the lighting profession that has helped women to succeed, while the architectural side of the equation is still unresolved?

It could be argued that in lighting, unlike architecture, women have played a greater role in shaping the profession. Lighting is a relatively young discipline; it really only emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, a time when women were becoming more liberated and fighting not just for greater opportunities, but equal ones. “It might be the simple fact that lighting is newer,” offers lighting designer Melanie Taylor, head of the lighting studio at Seattle-based architecture firm NBBJ. “The [lighting] profession was not so entrenched in a male-dominated era.”

Naomi Miller, principal of Naomi Miller Lighting Design in Troy, New York, concurs: “We are a young profession, and women have been there from the beginning.” In 2008, of the 764 members of the International Association of Lighting Designers (IALD), taking into consideration all cate-