Women in (green) architecture now

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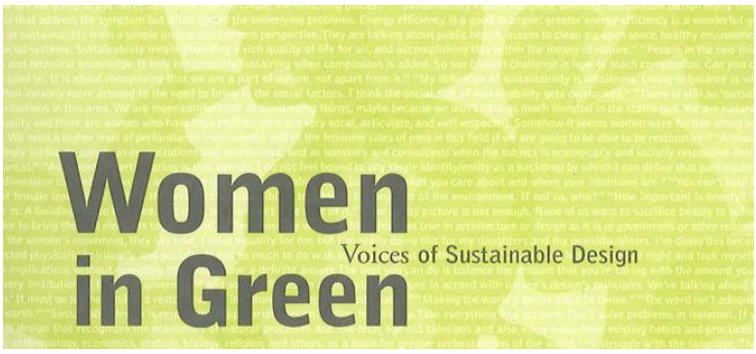

Snapshot of "Women in Green: Voices of Sustainable Design" by Kira Gould & Lance Hosey

This article was originally posted on Huffington Post.

This month's cover story of *Architectural Record,* "Women in Architecture Now," paints a sorry picture of the profession. While the number of women in architecture schools has doubled over the past two decades, and enrollment now is about evenly split between men and women, the industry has trouble retaining and rewarding women after they graduate. Among practicing architects, men still outnumber women four to one and earn nearly 30 percent more on average. According to Sarah Williams Goldhagen, the article's author, the disparities represent both lost opportunity for women and diminished talent in the profession. But she shies away from the most interesting topic: "Whether a woman *qua* woman brings anything special to architecture is a tricky, uncomfortable question. So let's leave it aside...." This sidesteps one of the greatest potential benefits to gender equity—by and large, women are greener.

As Kira Gould and I show in *Women in Green: Voices of Sustainable Design* (Ecotone, 2007), statistically women are much more likely than men to support environmental causes—through voting, volunteering, activism, advocacy, charity, recycling, consumer choices, lifestyle habits, business decisions, and investments. In fact, in the US the average carbon footprint of women is considerably lower than that of the men, who are more skeptical about climate change, although they understand the science less. By virtually every measure, women are smarter about and better for the environment.

How does this affect architecture? Buildings have a significant impact on the environment, accounting for about half the annual US energy and emissions and three quarters of its electricity. Given their apparently greater interest in sustainability, more women in architecture could mean more environmental progress. In 1993, for example, the first female president of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), Susan Maxman, also was the first in that position to champion sustainable design, making it the theme of the annual convention that year. "What is called for," Maxman announced, "is a profound shift in the way we regard this planet and everything on it."

That was 20 years ago. Since then, only one other woman has served as AIA president, an annual position elected by members, although the 2014 president-elect also is a woman. By contrast, in the past five years alone, the US Green Building Council has elected three women for the equivalent role, as chair of its Board of Directors. Similarly, according to the AIA, female membership in its Committee on the Environment is higher than in the general membership. The green building movement draws more women, who in turn have played a more active leadership role than in the larger industry.

But the leadership of women isn't just good for the planet—it's good for business. Recent studies reveal that companies with more women in senior management enjoy higher sales, return on investment, profit, and productivity. These facts will demand more opportunity for women in business, and the business of architecture will be no different. The recent recession hurt architecture more than any other profession, and young architects still have the highest unemployment rate among recent college graduates. Would the profession be struggling less if it leaned more on women? Any strategy proven to increase the bottom line will not be ignored. That's not affirmative action—it's simple economics.

At the Clinton Global Initiative in Chicago this month, Hillary Clinton called expanding opportunities for women "the great unfinished business of this century." It's also the great unfinished business of architecture.

Architect Lance Hosey is Chief Sustainability Officer with the global design leader

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