

**8 March 2013**

**PRESS RELEASE**

## **Designing a role for women in architecture by Carole-Anne Davies, chief executive of the Design Commission for Wales**

*On International Women's Day (8 March 2013), Carole-Anne Davies, chief executive of the Design Commission for Wales, takes a look at obstacles facing women carving out a top-end career in design.*

There are three reactions to career-stalling experiences be they under the glass ceiling or at the glass cliff face. 1. get angry and risk being perceived as neurotic 2. suppress the anger and suffer ulcers and insomnia 3. get a mentor.

This was some of the advice for professional women from Baroness Susan Greenfield, speaking yesterday (7 March) at one of Cardiff's Pierhead Sessions to mark International Women's Day hosted by the Presiding Officer, Rosemary Butler AM. The latter she says, allows you to channel the frustration into perspective, laughter and perhaps a little wine. According to Baroness Greenfield, we all need someone *'who believes in you more than you believe in yourself'*.

Greenfield was talking about women in science; about career paths, opportunities and experiences for brilliant women in any field. She galloped through neuroscience challenging notions of genetic dispensation in the way only a woman who ranks among a handful of uber-specialists worldwide can. With ease, expertise and eyelash extensions she reminded us of the woeful under representation of women in science, despite the numbers of qualifying women entering the profession.

I recalled reams of similar statistics on women in executive and leadership roles; in boardrooms; in history and, closer to my heart, in design. Wherever you look, the evidence is the same. The surveys and statistics point to equal or greater numbers of women in many fields qualifying at postgraduate or doctoral levels, while their numbers dwindle when it comes to career progression.

American research shows that women earn 57% of bachelors degrees and nearly half of first professional degrees awarded in the US. (Catalyst 2011b) They make up almost half the labour force (47.2% US Bureau Labour Statistics). At management level women occupy 51.5% and represent about 25% of chief executive roles.

But a different story plays out in elite leadership roles such as Fortune 500 companies among which women are at just 3%, holding only 15.7% of the board seats and 14.4% of executive officer positions. (Catalyst, 2011a, 2011c) In the US Congress, women occupy only 90 of the 535 seats, with women of colour at just 24 (Centre for American Women and Politics). At February 2013, the world average of women's representation on national legislatures or parliaments was 20.4%. The US ranks 77th of 190 countries, the UK 57th (International Parliamentary Union 2011). There's no room here for Lord Davies' report for Westminster Women on Boards or its 2012 progress report (<http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/business-law/docs/w/12-p135-women-on-boards-2012.pdf>) and I daren't even start on senior female military personnel.

This is the tip of the statistical iceberg and there are clouds full of research and evidence that women remain behind the curve in many careers. In a decade of the Design Commission's work, with an all-female executive team, we've had precious few female designers present to us as the lead on major development schemes. We are fortunate among our team, board and expert panel to have several women who are leaders in the design field such as Lynne Sullivan OBE, and to have worked with several more including the likes of Irena Bauman of Bauman Lyons and Tina Saaby, Copenhagen's city architect.

Yet it remains telling that despite the admirable work of the RIBA Architects for Change network, the Women in Architecture Awards, numerous campaigns and the work of two trail blazing female presidents of the Institute, not to mention last year's RSAW mentoring initiative with the Welsh School of Architecture, women still leave architecture and design for many of the same reasons they leave science, the visual arts, politics and business - low or unequal pay, inflexible family unfriendly working hours, contractual insecurity, absence of returner programmes, greater job satisfaction elsewhere and work life balance.

Baroness Greenfield acknowledged work being done by private and public sectors in addressing opportunities for women and pointed to many success stories, yet still we play catch up. Chastening us all not to pull up the ladder for others, Greenfield also set out some very simple ways we can help redress the balance. Career structures can be more flexible, returner schemes, child and family friendly policies can be better designed. Teachers can be inspirational, the arts and humanities can be better integrated with science for greater intellectual richness and stimulus in curricula. All of these apply to steps that could be taken in design education and the professions.

Greenfield studied Greek philosophy and history before science, being more taken with explorations of why we go to war, fall in love, traverse continents or shape our individual and cultural identities, than by the reproductive cycle of the amoeba. She argues powerfully for such

rich curricula integration in schools and the need to relate teaching science, maths, or design, to life experience, making them relevant to young students and demonstrating career potential.

Young designers, like young scientists, are easily deterred by the boring and irrelevant, by the sixth form design and technology project that mirrors all others in most schools, rather than those which test boundaries and stimulate creativity. If students encounter barriers to the relevance and possibilities of careers in design they are lost to the professions. The double whammy of failing to attract young talent with losing more mature talent to family breaks without returner opportunities, is the death knell for any profession. Young women must see themselves reflected to believe they too can become successful designers, scientists, politicians and professionals.

These pleas are not intended as detrimental to males or to overshadow wider matters of diversity. Greenfield is clear that despite widespread bias, gender is often trumped by the individual; by the astonishing capability, tenacity and ingenuity of the individual. And yet as she acknowledges such strengths in herself as a woman of mesmerising achievements, she comes back to perhaps the greatest barrier, that of confidence. She comes back to her lifelong mentors, Jane Mellanby and John Stein. These are the people who stem her anger, head off her insomnia and who believe in her more than she believes in herself. Perhaps more young designers would thrive with such anchors to call upon, and who might extend a ladder or two.

*Carole-Anne Davies is Chief Executive of Design Commission for Wales, a Trustee of Amgueddfa Cymru and a mentor, most recently, with the Sport Wales Women in Leadership Programme.*

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## **Notes to Editor**

Women design professionals in Wales and beyond, with whom we have had the pleasure of working include or have included:

Cindy Harris, Wendy Richards, Anne Marie Smale, Lynne Sullivan, Angela Williams, Eileen Adams, Gayna Jones, Cathy McClean, Rhian Thomas, Marga Munar Bauza, Maria Amparo Ansenjo, Mhairi McVicar, Lynne Bebb, Carolyn Davies, Irena Bauman, Alison Dutoit, Tina Saaby, Karen Anderson, Bernadette Kinsela, Vicki Hirst.

The Design Commission for Wales was established in 2002 by the Welsh Government and has four strategic aims:

- To champion high standards of design and architecture to the public and private sector in Wales by promoting wider understanding of design issues and the importance of good standards in enhancing the built environment across all sectors.
- To promote design practice that is compatible with the Welsh Government Sustainable Development Scheme, promoting best practice in energy efficiency, waste disposal and public transport.

- To promote design practice compatible with the highest standards in relation to equal opportunity and promoting social inclusion.
- Give due regard to promoting excellence in day to day developments, like housing estates and industrial units, as well as promoting excellence in prestige projects.

The Design Commission for Wales is limited company and wholly controlled subsidiary of the Welsh Government.

**Media enquiries to Carolyn Pugsley at Freshwater on 029 20 545387 or email  
carolyn.pugsley@freshwater-uk.com**