Husbands and Wives

Architecture is an essentially collaborative medium. Although buildings and projects are routinely attributed to specific designers, anyone with more than a superficial knowledge of the architectural process understands that design is a team effort, and realizes the fiction of the solitary practitioner. The widespread belief that we no longer live in an age of heroic figures seems to be particularly strong in architecture, and that is largely a function of changing perceptions. As recent studies of the early Modernists reveal, they did not work alone—and some of their most important collaborators were women.

The lack of educational opportunities for women persisted well into this century. Even in such progressive institutions as the Bauhaus, they were shunted away from architecture and toward the applied arts. Historically, female partners of male architects were accorded a much lower status. But renewed appreciation for the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh’s wife, Margaret Macdonald; Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s longtime companion, Lilly Reich; and Le Corbusier’s gifted assistant, Charlotte Perriand—only the best-known names—indicates that a major reassessment of male-female partnership in architecture is long overdue.

That impulse has led to British historian Pat Kirkham’s exemplary corrective
study, *Charles and Ray Eames: Designers of the Twentieth Century* (MIT Press, 1995), in which Ray Eames’s role in the partnership is upgraded from submissive helpmate to equal creator, departing from the accepted view that she confined herself to choosing colors and fabrics while he shouldered the major tasks. Later in the postwar decades, such noteworthy husband-and-wife teams as John and Sarah Harkness of The Architects Collaborative and Alison and Peter Smithson furthered the validity of married couples working together in a field then—and still—dominated by the notion that the construction of buildings is an inherently male pursuit.

Husband-and-wife partnerships do exist in other professions, but to a lesser degree than in architecture. The demanding working conditions of architecture, typified by long hours in confined spaces, combined with intense deadline pressure and a passionate commitment to perfection, seem especially prone to sparking romance. (This issue focuses on heterosexual relationships, although many of the issues involved pertain to any sexual orientation.)

The most prominent couple in American architecture today is Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi. Scott Brown joined Venturi’s office in 1967, the same year the couple were married; two years later she became a partner.

Recent husband-and-wife teams are a result of women’s increased enrollment in architecture schools.

Their only child, James Venturi, was born in 1971. As the firm’s fame grew, the principals’ renown increased disproportionately. Venturi, often the senior designer and a brilliant draftsman, became the international superstar; Scott Brown, who concentrated more on the programmatic and urban design aspects, was seen as a lesser contributor. Reviled by the East Coast avant-garde boys’ club, she was stigmatized as a strident claimant for undue equal billing.

The “love him, hate her” issue came to a head in 1991, when Venturi, but not Scott Brown, was awarded the Pritzker Prize. Using the flimsy excuse that the award is meant for individuals, not firms, the Pritzker committee dishonored itself by snubbing the world’s most distinguished woman architect, with no other female of her stature on the horizon. That scandal still rankles enough for Venturi to have informed the AIA that he will not accept its proffered Gold Medal unless his partner is included. “There is this old-fashioned idea that the architect is a 19th-century Romantic genius who works alone,” Venturi says, “but in fact, it is an intensely collaborative effort.”

For all the difficulties Scott Brown and Venturi have endured in staking out the legitimacy of husband-and-wife partnerships in the profession, they are regarded by many younger architects as the ultimate paradigm of how to work together. Architect Janet Simon, partner with her husband Ron McCoy of their own Phoenix firm, acknowledges the debt: “Ron worked with the Venturis, so they were an example for him. But they’ve also become one for me, because there are still very few women in architecture, married with children, whom you can look at as role models.”

Unquestionably, the recent rise in husband-and-wife partnerships is a direct result of women’s increased enrollment in architecture schools since the late 1960s, and of the changing relations between the sexes which began in that period. The first generation of that new wave is now firmly ensconced in mid-career, and a number have cherished the idea of male-female partnerships from the beginning. “One of our goals when we were students at Berkeley in the early ’70s,” recalls architect Betsey Dougherty of then-classmate, now-husband Brian Dougherty, with whom she works in Newport Beach, California, “was to have a practice together.”

Although many traditional roles have been set on their ear by that now middle-aged group, there is also the sense within marital teams that clear divisions of labor are still required. According to Andres Duany, whose Florida-based partnership with his wife, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, is among the best known of the post-Venturi-Scott-Brown generation, “Right from the beginning, Liz and I have had our firm rule: one or the other of us would be project captain—the boss—so that when there was a disagreement, we didn’t argue to the bitter end. Otherwise, if you’re married, where does it stop?” Betsey and Brian Dougherty have a similar strategy. “One is always in the lead, the other the collaborator,” she reports. “If there wasn’t one clearly designated partner-in-charge, things could still fall through the cracks—even when you see each other every day and night.”

An honest recognition of individual talents and a frank assessment of what each brings to a collaboration—basic requirements for any partnership, male or female, married or not—are cited by many husband-and-wife teams. “We act as each other’s best critics,” says Janet Simon. “It’s a synthesis. We’re convinced that the product is infinitely better than if
we did it on our own. And there's a lot of mutual respect.”

Yet even after a firm and its working methods are established, the professional equilibrium between partners is certain to change over the course of their careers. Julie Eizenberg, who practices in Santa Monica, California, with her husband, Hank Koning, points out, “At the beginning, Hank was much stronger than I was; he still is, technically. He could draw and add, but I was more willing to take risks. Then, at one point, I found I had achieved more power in the system. My style is interactive; his is more insular. But we always rely on the expertise the other has.”

Although many husband-and-wife teams first met in architecture school, there is a wide range of demographic variation, from same-age students, to older professors (invariably male) who become romantically involved with female students, to architects who marry only later in life after they’ve established their careers. Now that the novelty of husband-and-wife practice has worn off, not every architect couple sees partnership as a desirable option.

Two who prefer to work separately are Houston’s John Casbarian of Taft Architects and Nataleye Appel, principal of her eponymous office. “I got to know John as a professor and a friend a long time before he was a date,” recalls Appel, who took his courses at Rice University and later went to work for Taft, “but when we decided to get married, I immediately started looking for another job.” Seeking to avoid what might be termed the Yoko Ono Syndrome—a woman coming between the male members of a successful group—Appel “knew that John and his partners were a real team and that my getting into a relationship with him could ruin the tight partnership they have. I could have been a wife or an employee, but not both. But now there’s a good relationship between our offices—they call me a ‘partner-in-law.’”

Architect Linda Searl, head of her own firm in Chicago, is another woman who prefers to work independently of her husband, Joe Valerio, a partner of Valerio Dewalt Train Associates. “I and I met much later than most couples in architecture do,” she explains, “and we tend to overlap in our expertise. I learned that we’d save our marriage if we practiced separately. It’s allowed us to pursue our differences: Joe does mainly commercial work and is out there on the fringe; while in my residential work, I’m more interested in what clients want to live with for the rest of their lives.”

The age difference between Searl and Valerio—he’s 10 years older—was another factor in their decision. “If we worked together,” she believes, “I’d definitely have been in his shadow because of his greater experience. And there’s the feeling many younger women have, that ‘I don’t want to be partners with my spouse in order to make it.’” Yet Simon sees her decade age difference with McCoy as a distinct advantage in joint practice: “He’s been my mentor. I’ve had opportunities to learn faster than I would have had otherwise, and as a woman in architecture, that’s very important.”

For all the potential pitfalls, there are also considerable rewards reported by architectural couples, whether practicing together or alone. “There’s a deep understanding when one of us has to travel or stay late at the office,” says Andres Duany of potential sources of friction in other marriages. “Another thing I’ve noticed is that many husbands and wives run out of things to talk about. That’s inconceivable for Liz and myself, because we always have such a backlog.”

Not every architect couple sees partnership as a desirable option, preferring separate careers.

Other satisfactions can come from unanimity over travel plans. As Linda Searl sees it, “Vacations are perfect because you both always want to go see buildings.” The rewards can also be more generalized and profound. “We’re life partners in every sense, and that includes work as well as family,” says Betsey Dougherty. Natalye Appel finds the strength of separate career tracks in the fact that she and John Casbarian “are both individual and independent people, and that’s what keeps us together.” And for Julie Eizenberg, the marriage itself helps the office through the long haul: “What working together when you’re married adds is that it’s hard to walk away from problems. You have to sort things out.”

As for long-term effects of the post-'60s boom in husband-and-wife firms, Denise Scott Brown says, “It’s still too early to tell whether women bring ‘womanly’ character to architecture. We’ll need 30, perhaps 60, years to determine that. Whether men become more nurturing and women more assertive through working together remains to be seen, but even that is a kind of typecasting I am less than comfortable with. The possibility of joint creativity is very strong, however, and the tapping of ideas is as real as it is exciting.” —Martin Filler

Martin Filler contributes to many publications and is married to architectural historian Rosemarie Haag Bletter.
Architects are known to blur the distinction between their personal and professional lives. Live/work studios are not uncommon among this breed that hardly ever sleeps, and live/work partnerships are perhaps even more widespread. Collaborative couples are nothing new—think of Mies van der Rohe’s companion Lilly Reich, or Charles Eames’s long undercredited partner and wife, Ray Eames, to list just two. While it was once thought that women architects could only succeed by partnering with men, some 30 years after the introduction of women’s lib, pairing up is still a popular option. Rather than seeing this phenomenon as a vestige of old biases, the idea that married partners has gained new legitimacy among many architects as part of a broader, forward-looking sea change in the profession: a shift toward collaborative practice.

“I actually think it’s because architecture’s changing right now that [practitioner couples have] become so common,” says Jennifer Yoos, partner of husband Vincent James at Vincent James Associates Architects in Minneapolis. (Yoos says that she and partners James and Nathan Knutson are moving toward using the initials VJAA to reflect a plural ownership.) “I think people are beginning to see practice not as a singular kind of statement but as a collaboration,” she states, describing how this new approach works: “Many of these practices—and we’re similar—use a lot of research to generate designs together,” rather than the outmoded model of the single creative author placing pen on blank paper. “I think practice is becoming more interactive, and different disciplines are coming closer together,” she continues. “Look at the World Trade Center competition, and you see all of these interdisciplinary groups joining together. It seems like the ones that were more successful were some of the younger architects, who had already been doing that—and it seems that with the computer being used to generate drawings, it becomes less of a personal thing.”

Many architects concur, such as New York City–based Frances Halsband, of husband-and-wife firm R.M. Kliment & Frances Halsband Architects. “Everything we do these days is collaborative,” she states. “No one just sits and makes sketches and says, ‘Eureka, it’s here!’” The complex nature of today’s clients, she adds, plays a part in this: “We’re always working with committees, civic groups, and neighborhood groups. The number of people that we interact with is becoming more and more vast. And so the new model for creativity is being able to listen to other people and absorb good ideas from anywhere.”

THE GENDER QUESTION
Building on the question of collaboration, partners and parents Evelyn Tickle and Alexander Kitchin, of Charlottesville, Virginia–based TickleKitchin, bring the conversation back to the introduction of women into the field: “If you look at the practice of architecture,” states Tickle, “it was developed by a bunch of men. And therefore it’s a much more linear process that may or may not be interesting to women.” Adds Kitchin, finishing the thought, “I think in some ways, practicing as partners may make the profession a lot more interesting to women.”

Of course, you don’t have to be married to collaborate, but when you are juggling a family with your career, as Tickle and Kitchin are, there are added benefits to being a partner with your
spouse. Along with everything else that they do, the couple says, they share child-rearing responsibilities evenly.

DIVVYING UP THE WORK

While the approach of collaborative partnership seems to be successful in practice, the notion of shared authorship has yet to be fully recognized by the architectural establishment. The exclusion of Denise Scott Brown from the 1991 Pritzker Prize, which was bestowed on her partner and husband, Robert Venturi, deeply dismayed all of the couples interviewed for this article. Venturi laments that Scott Brown is still a victim of the biases of past generations, while younger women architects have broken free of such outdated preconceptions. Yet award-giving institutions such as the Pritzker and the AIA still cling to the ideal of the single author. "If you look at all the U.S. General Services Administration's Design Excellence Program requirements, they always ask who the lead designer is," says Halsband. "It kills us to see that—but we have to tell them that there is one lead designer, because you can't explain that there isn't."

There are some cases, however, where a division of labor can be lightly sketched. Traditionally, it seems that women in partnerships have tended to favor planning work—Halsband and Scott Brown, for example, take on more planning than do their partners—and men often concentrate on structures. While Tod Williams describes his collaboration with wife Billie Tsien as generally "pretty fluid," the pair concedes that Tsien gravitates toward the traditionally "female" areas of 2-D design, such as facade and color. In the case of Yoos and James, "He likes the craft of the detail," says Yoos, while she deals with more abstract overall concepts.

As for who handles the business end of the firm—a duty that none of the architects interviewed has a taste for—the role traditionally seems to fall either to the woman or to neither. Scott Brown once handled her office's contracts and managerial tasks, but the firm has since chosen to employ staff to share those tasks. "Bob doesn't have to think about this stuff—but he could," Scott Brown playfully admonishes. Halsband says that she and Kliment now have other partners who deal with business matters, but that in earlier days it was her domain. Tickle and Kitchin took a different approach: Both abhor business dealings so much that they enlisted a consultant—a "financial therapist," in their words—to set them on a schedule of shared managerial chores.

Whether they're acting as each other's best critics, divvying up tasks according to one another's particular strengths, or passing an idea back and forth in an organic and integrated design process, these collaborative couples insist that their projects are the results of equal contributions. Some prefer to work separately on certain projects—Diana Agrest, principal of New York City-based Agrest and Gandelsonas Architects, in fact, also has her own firm in which she does projects separately from partner and husband Mario Gandelsonas, and both publish texts independently of each other. Others claim their process is collaborative every step of the way. Tickle and Kitchin use the word "interchangeable" when referring to themselves. Attempting to determine whose idea is which, contends the couple, speaking in turns, "would be like trying to divide up who created certain characteristics in our children."

Anna Holtzman, who writes frequently on design, is currently producing a documentary about subway musicians.
Frens and Frens Restoration Architects

Trucked into the far southeastern corner of Pennsylvania, the Brandywine River Valley's historic landscape of 18th-century stone barns and Quaker meetinghouses provides a wealth of commissions for Dale and Susan Frens's five-person preservation practice. Frens and Frens Restoration Architects tackles the adaptive reuse and preservation of such landmark sites as Daniel Boone's Berks County homestead, Valley Forge National Historic Park, and William Penn's Bucks County family home.

The couple's small-town life is dramatically different than their early careers in New York City. Dale, who was raised in Michigan, worked for preservation architect Jan Hird Pokorny Architects after graduating from Columbia University's preservation program in 1980; Susan, who grew up in Chicago and studied architecture at the University of Michigan, worked in the offices of Perkins & Will and Haines Lundberg Waehler. In 1982, Dale joined John Milner Associates, a small preservation firm, and the pair moved to West Chester, Pennsylvania.

The Frenses opened their own practice in 1986 in a small row house near the center of the town of 17,000 residents. With no employees at first, they limited their practice to technical consulting on others' preservation projects. As they began taking on their own preservation jobs—and as their two children required more room—Dale and Susan quickly outgrew the town house. In 1988, the architects moved into a large Victorian house, which they began restoring. The building now functions as both the family's residence and the firm's office: the wallpapered dining room, for example, doubles as a conference room, and offices are housed in converted second-story bedrooms.

Working at home made it easier for Susan to balance her full-time professional commitments with raising two young children: a son, now 12, and a daughter, 15. "The kids took naps under our desks, which was fine because I could keep working," she recalls. Despite their live/work arrangement, the Frenses have established some degree of separation: While he writes preservation specs, technical briefs, and historic structure reports, she oversees architectural programming and space planning. Their staff works at drafting tables and CAD stations across the hall.

The firm's preservation philosophy is one of deference to existing structures. "We look to the building to guide us," explains Dale, "rather than applying our preconceptions of what buildings of a certain period should look like." Such preconceptions are exactly what led 1950s preservationists to inaccurately modify the Revolutionary War quarters of General Lafayette in Chadds Ford. Armed with a range of techniques—site archaeology, paint and mortar analysis, even dendrochronology—Frens and Frens set out to correct the mistakes. Such a methodical approach is as much a part of their preservation philosophy as their motto "The less intervention, the better." —Raul A. Barreneche
Historic Sugartown Restoration
Willistown Township,
Pennsylvania

A cluster of five stone buildings in rural Chester County marks the site of an 18th-century crossroads called Sugartown. The 11,000-square-foot complex includes three houses built between 1795 and 1850, an 1820 general store, and an 1879 house addition. Frens and Frens converted the buildings into two residential units, exhibition space, offices, and a public meeting room. The final phase of the project, the reconstruction of the general store's interior, will be completed this summer.

FACING PAGE: Principals Susan and Dale Frens.
TOP: Renovated buildings include apartments (left) and offices (right).
ELEVATION: Historic structures were woven into mixed-use complex.
PLAN: Lobby connects offices to store.
Chester County History Center  
West Chester, Pennsylvania

Only a few blocks from the Freens’ house in downtown West Chester, a new history center combines two of the town’s most prominent historic landmarks: Horticultural Hall, an 1848 Neoclassical shed designed by Thomas U. Walter, the architect of the Capitol dome in Washington, D.C.; and a 1908 Colonial Revival structure that previously housed West Chester’s YMCA.

The historical society decided to look for new headquarters after outgrowing its space in Horticultural Hall. Fortunately, the neighboring YMCA building, augmented in 1979 by a severe concrete-and-metal addition, had fallen out of use.

In 1988, the historical society purchased the run-down brick YMCA and hired Freens and Freens to study the feasibility of fusing the two buildings into a single headquarters for the historical society. The firm married a skillful preservation of the existing historic exteriors with a complete adaptive reuse of the interiors. Working from historic photographs, Freens and Freens reconstructed roof pediments and a large Palladian window in Horticultural Hall, as well as a majority of the YMCA’s brick exterior walls.

Very little historic fabric remained inside the old YMCA building, with the exception of some wood wainscoting and a pair of murals from the late 1940s. The architects therefore installed contemporary materials and reconfigured the interiors to accommodate a new library, administrative offices, and an auditorium. In the stone-clad Horticultural Hall, the team designed exhibition spaces for the historical society’s surprisingly rich collection of Colonial furniture, paintings, and decorative objects. A new second-story bridge connects the two buildings.