

# Workplaces

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# “The Guys Missed Out” — Design Professionals Weigh In On Gender Equality

WOMEN IN THE DESIGN INDUSTRY ARE CONTINUING TO RISE IN RANK AND NOT JUST FOR THE SAKE OF IMPROVING STATISTICS OR ONE-UPPING THE MEN, BUT BECAUSE THEY ARE PUSHING THEMSELVES TO BE BETTER, MORE CONFIDENT AND HEARD.

by Emily Clingman

*Clockwise from upper left: Pam Touschner - DLR Group, Mary Maydan - Maydan Architects, Patti Tritschler - Interior Image Group, Naomi Neilson - Native Trails*



**M**arch 8 marks International Women’s Day, a global day celebrating the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. The day also marks a call to action for accelerating gender parity. While there have been great improvements to celebrate over the years, gender inequality still persists across all communities and sectors across the globe — including the design industry.

According to the International Interior Design Association, males occupy most leadership positions in architecture and design firms. Even though 69% of the 87,000 practitioners in the interior design industry are women, only 25% of leadership positions are held by women. Also noteworthy — only 36% of newly licensed architects are women.

Better numbers are on the way though. Women in the design industry are continuing to rise in rank and not just for the sake of improving statistics or one-upping the men, but because they are pushing themselves to be better, more confident and heard.



*Pam hard at work*

“Say yes to any opportunity that comes your way, and if you don’t know how to do it, then find out how to do it,” said Pam Tuschner, DLR Group’s California region leader. “At one of my first jobs, when I came to California, there was a need for people to work on some of the new computers, and none of the males wanted to because they said it was just typing and that was girl’s work.”

She took on the task because the computers were new and seemed interesting.

“And look at where we are today with computers,” Tuschner said. “(The guys) missed out. I said yes to everything.”

Tuschner, whose architecture career was inspired at age 12 by Mike Brady on the 1970’s sitcom “The Brady Bunch,” didn’t face a lot of adversity while studying architecture at school. Her class had 13 students, only three women, but everyone was a little “nervous and awkward” there, she said,

and with that small of a group, everyone had to work together anyway. It was after graduation when she ran into challenges trying to enter the field as a professional.

“Show up, be present and use your voice,” Tuschner advises, adding a little bit of thick skin and confidence helped her move ahead in her career.

“I think as women, sometimes we can be emotional about things and take things very personal,” she said. “Males are generally taught that when they make a mistake, they fix it, they move on. We women over-analyze why we made a mistake. All those insecurities can become a challenge.”

Tuschner said she has two regrets. One is not learning to use a hammer or to actually build things.

"I had to learn that later in life," she said. "All those guys in school, they already knew how to draft. They made fences with their dads in the backyard or worked construction for a couple summers. You need to know these things or you can't answer the questions contractors have for you when you're out in the field."

The other regret Tuschner has is not playing team sports. She was on the cross country and swim team in school, but those sports are scored by individual performance, so that's not quite the same kind of experience she's referring to.

"There's a lot to be learned from team sports," she said. "There's very little you do yourself in this business. We design as a team, we work with people that think differently than us, etcetera. I think our schools are getting better at teaching students how to work in groups and as teams, but we didn't have that much when I was in college."

### **Talent doesn't stop at 5 p.m.**



*Mary's design work*

The International Women's Day 2020 campaign theme is drawn from a notion of collective individualism — we are all parts of a whole. Individual actions, conversations, behaviors and mindsets can have an impact on our larger society. Collectively, individuals can make change happen and can each help to create a gender equal world. Dubbed #EachforEqual, the 2020 campaign runs all year long.

Mary Maydan, Maydan Architects founder and principal, reflects on the differences of gender equality over the last 20 years.

"A lot of things are more difficult for today's generation," she said. "Getting

into a good college is exponentially harder. The pressures our kids are under are unparalleled. On the other hand, women are a lot more empowered than they were 20 years ago. Progress is slow but on the perception level there has definitely been a big change. People today recognize the injustices and have far less tolerance for discrimination and sexism."

Maydan also believes more female presence at the top drives change, too. She notes in the last decade, Harvard, Yale, the University of Michigan, Cornell, Princeton and Columbia appointed women as deans of their architecture schools.

"These phenomenal role models inspire young women starting out today to dream big," Maydan said.

One advantage for women in the design industry, particularly mothers, is the flexibility. Yes, there are site visits and meetings with consultants and clients where there's a need to be present at certain times, but a lot of work can be done at home, at night, after children go to sleep.

"Talent doesn't stop at 5 p.m.," Maydan said. "In this respect, architecture is an ideal profession for women. A neurosurgeon cannot set up the surgeries at 9 p.m. after the kids go to sleep. They don't have our flexibility."

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Maydan said everyone in her firm knows they can take hours off when needed.

“They know their workload, they know our commitments and what needs to be done, and they are their own bosses,” she said. “The one trait that is very dominant in our employees, besides their talent, is their work ethic. They care, and they are capable, and we always deliver on time.”

### **Mentorship is the key to confidence**



*Patti making things happen*

Patti Tritschler, president and CEO at Interior Image Group, has positioned herself as a leader and progressive thinker in the design industry, promoting the growth and success of young professionals. She had to do some growing on her own first.

Tritschler started her own design firm at the age of 42, in a 10-by-12-foot office with \$500 and a supportive husband. She was also the mother of three young sons. She realized right away she was going to have to learn how to navigate through all the elements of career while parenting, which she did, but she also learned something else.

Her firm received a lot of applicants fresh out of design school, and Tritschler realized a need for mentorship to this group.

“Over time I was starting to see a lack of confidence, and leadership skills weren’t there with the young women,” Tritschler said. “I took that very personally because I know the struggles we have as women in any industry that we’re in and the confidence needed to fulfill our careers accordingly.”

With 16 years of business under her belt, two offices — one in Florida and one in Indiana — and 33 employees, Tritschler has dialed in her approach to mentoring and setting career paths for young individuals. In an effort to help her emerging professionals gain more confidence, strengthen their weaknesses and be free to fail, Tritschler has developed a system to essentially force them to be better.

Since the nature of the business is to give a lot of presentations, Tritschler uses the studio as a rehearsal place, where she has one-on-one meetings with her mentees and walks through every aspect of their design presentation, providing critical review and helping them perfect the whole package, including things like diction, eye contact and volume.

“Practice in front of a mirror,” she said. “Get comfortable with yourself with who you are, because that’s going to give you the confidence you need.”

The company also has a system — implemented in both offices — called the Morning Scrum. This is a meeting where everyone shares what they are working on and the next steps they are taking. Sounds like a chill coffee and donuts sesh, right? Not at all. It’s official business time, and the team members are required to present their reports in a professional manner, again to develop those presentation skills. They also role play, which encourages camaraderie and support on a deeper level.

“The more exposure we apply to our staff to enhance their skills and expand their network of women in the industry, the more we build strength,” Tritschler said. “We really have to be pillars of support for each other.”

### **A nod to #EachforEqual**



*Naomi in Mexico*

While Naomi Neilson might be a role model for other women, she doesn't feel her own success running a female-led business is gender-related.

“I don't think I was held back by being a woman,” Neilson said. “I don't think my success relies on being a woman either. I didn't think of myself as a woman doing business. This is me, and this is what I want to do, and I'm going to do it.”

Neilson is the founder and CEO of Native Trails, a premier manufacturer of eco-friendly, artisan-crafted kitchen and bath products.

Inspired by trips to Mexico with her family, she started curating folk art from Mexican artisans and selling their products at art fairs and craft shows — in turn helping the artisans to expand their market and build their businesses. Over time, Neilson worked with the artists to combine their traditional techniques with more contemporary designs, moving from knickknacks to candle holders, trays vases, bowls and other décor items that are artistic and utilitarian. She also connected with a group of artisans in Central Mexico that had been working with copper for several generations. There was some interest in copper sinks and baths, and they eventually became very popular, growing Native Trails to a new level, a much bigger player in the design industry.

Neilson attributes her success to a series of personal interests and decisions, along with support from those around her, and there was never really a gender-specific undertone to any of it. The idea began with her interest in Mexican folk art. Then she studied social sciences in college, along with Spanish and business. And when she talked about her idea of helping Mexican artists build their businesses, her father, who was also an entrepreneur, simply and enthusiastically said, “Do it.”

So, she did.

“I do think it's always inspiring to see a woman who just goes for it,” Neilson said. “I always tell people to believe in yourself and be who you are. Don't feel like you have to conform to a masculine ideal of doing business or to any kind of ideal. Be who you are and trust and believe that you can do it. It's going to be challenging. But we can achieve so much more than we believe.”

“It's not always a matter of female versus male though,” she said. “Things are changing. It's not binary anymore. Gender fluidity is really important to think about and the conversation is changing a lot. It's more about being comfortable as who you truly are. We all have different balances of masculinity and femininity. It's important to embrace each other as human beings.” **WPM**