DESIGNING WOMEN
Minnesota’s women architects draw from varied experiences

ALMANAC/
Warning! It’s Tornado Awareness Week already

PAST LIVES/
A first haircut that was the kindest cut of all

MEN OF LEISURE/
Comfort, cost keys to clothes for casual guys

COOKING WITH THE CHEFS: Chicken Sara Bella from Francesca’s Bakery and Cafe
Few women architects found in upper ranks of area's major firms

His face was like a law of nature — a thing one could not question, alter or implore. ... He looked at the granite. ... These rocks, he thought, are here for me ... waiting for the shape my hands will give them.

In Ayn Rand's novel "The Fountainhead," Howard Roark is the epitome of the egotistical male architect caught up in his own design vision. Women architects in Minnesota — as well as many men architects — don't fit Roark's model. They might be professors, project managers, designers in their own firms or project architects in big firms. But although their professional lives take forms as varied as those of their male counterparts, they are less likely to be found in the upper echelons of larger firms.

The proportion of women rising in the profession hasn't kept pace with the proportion graduating from architecture school, said Dale Mulfinger, partner with two women in a small Minneapolis firm. "Nationally, we haven't seen women come to the surface in larger firms, but we have seen women in their own firms, in firms with their husbands or smaller firms or in the academic world."

A survey last fall by the American Institute of Architects found that 11 percent of registered architects are women, but only 2 percent of top partners are women.

Here is how several of the 100-plus women architects in Minnesota make their living — and what they think about being women architects.

When the University of Minnesota's Facilities Management Department was reorganized last fall, Linda McCracken-Hunt, 38, became its director of project development. That puts her in charge of more than $400 million worth of construction projects underway on the state's university campuses. After graduating from the university's architecture school, she worked in private firms for eight years, then in 1985 became the first woman project manager at the university.

Does being a woman make a difference? "In initial meetings with contractors and clients, they're probably a little wary," said McCracken-Hunt, "but if you know what you're doing and come across as competent and knowledgeable, people get over their concerns."

McCracken-Hunt is married to architect Thomas Hunt, a partner at the Studio 5 firm in Minneapolis; they have two sons, 7 and 9.

Sally Grans, 38, recently became the first woman architect hired by the Minnesota state architect's office, a 22-person department that monitors all state construction projects. The projects she is following include five community colleges, the Vietnam Memorial near the Capitol and the Wolf Center in Ely — projects in which her eight years' experience working in her own firm for nonprofit "social justice" clients is helpful. With a 3-year-old daughter and a newborn son, "I needed stability right now," she said. "It's hard to
Julia Robinson became director of graduate studies at the University of Minnesota architecture school last fall. She began in private practice at local firms, including InterDesign when it was designing the Minnesota Zoo. "At the same time, I was having a family (of four children) and appreciating the difficulties of having those responsibilities and staying up all night on a project."

She became interested in the social aspects of architecture, went back to school to study anthropology and got a job advising at the School of Architecture, where she has been teaching since 1980. Then she was the only woman among the full-time faculty. "For years, I ate lunch by myself," she said.

"I've seen progress since then. We're a profession that's open to change. The school has radically changed from an authoritative to a more democratic place. A lot of women questioned the traditional architectural values, which were subjective. But it's still difficult. Most of the men have difficulty with women who are not their prototypes. Discrimination among clients and firms is still an issue."

Rosemary McMonigal started her firm in Minneapolis nine years ago after working six years with Cenex, an agribusiness firm, where she designed everything from offices to grain-handling systems. Rosemary A. McMonigal Architects employs six people — four women and two men — and about two-thirds of its projects are residential. Other specialties are child-care centers and renovation projects for the sake of accessibility.

"I can truly say that I have never felt discriminated against — not on job sites or anywhere," said McMonigal, who is married and has no children. "When I was at Cenex, the local boards would invariably be a table of 12 men. There was always the shock factor when I walked into the room. But after the initial reaction, people were really open."

Sarah Susanka started a firm with Mullfinger specializing in residential design 10 years ago, when she was 24. Before that, she had worked for a larger firm, the Alliance, where she was pigeonholed not as a woman, but as a numbers-crunching energy efficiency expert. "I was doing big projects and got frustrated by the fact that there was little client contact," said Susanka, who is married to James Larson, an architect with Architectural Technologies Consultant; they have no children. "I moved into residential design where there is direct contact with one or two people. Depending on the personality of the architect, you tend to find a niche that allows you the aesthetic freedom that you want, as well as the personal gratification."

Although husband-wife teams are common in architecture, Gail Andersen wasn't planning to work with her husband, David, in a jointly owned firm. "We fought it for a long time," she said.

David started the Andersen Group Architects in Minneapolis in 1984. Gail joined in 1986 after working for about 10 years at other local firms. Since then, they have had two children. "I've got a boss who understands," she said, laughing.

As president of the Minneapolis chapter of the state Society of Architects this year, she has been asked to form a women's architects group. "But talking to people, I have yet to find issues that women need to rally around because we are different. I do get the sense from my friends in larger firms and concerns that there is a glass ceiling. On the positive side of being a woman is the ability to relate to women clients, of which there are more and more. Yes, there's starting to be an old girls network."

— Linda Mack