

Interior courtyard for international fashion group headquarters, Guangzhou, China. Due for completion late 2019. Designed by DH Liberty

Finding Form

Meet the women blazing a trail in architecture and design

WORDS **BEN OLSEN**

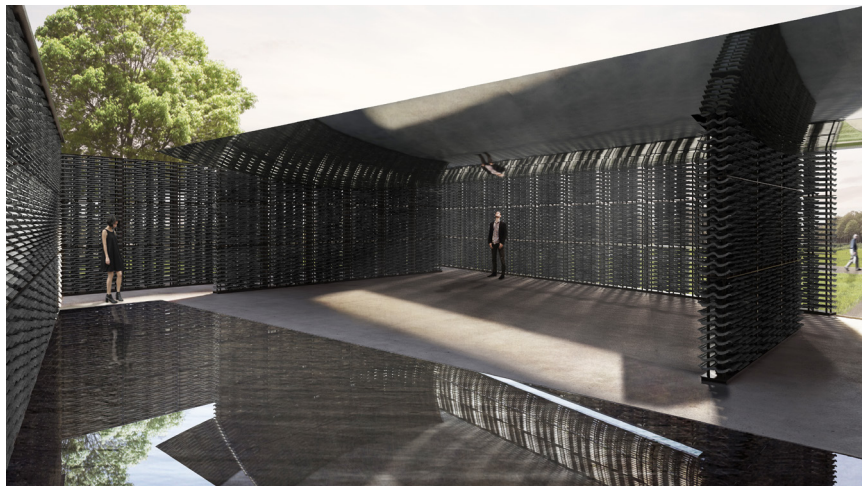
Architects and designers are some of our most visionary creators, masterminding enduring cultural expressions from city skylines to home interiors that can lift our mood, shape how we live, and change the way we see the world. And although historically the industry has been dominated by men – as glancing at any list of the so-called ‘starchitects’ will tell you – there’s a new wave of women redressing the balance by pushing boundaries and making a name for themselves, while providing inspiration to those who follow.

The announcement earlier this year that Mexican architect Frida Escobedo had been selected to design the 2018 Serpentine Pavilion signalled the latest in a series of high-profile projects helmed by a woman. Escobedo is the youngest architect ever awarded this prestigious commission and the first solo woman to take on the project since Zaha Hadid back in 2000. The latest project from a global portfolio that includes store interiors, Aztec-inspired installations and an art gallery in Cuernavaca, Mexico, Escobedo’s Serpentine design comprises an enclosed courtyard with lattice walls inspired by Mexican celosia – a traditional form that allows breezes to filter through a home – bringing a bold aesthetic to Hyde Park from June. “I hope visitors will find it to be a space in which

the passage of time feels a bit hazy – fun yet meditative, and hopefully engaging the senses in unexpected ways,” Escobedo says of the design. “On a more practical level, I envision it as a good space for conversation, for getting out of the sun, for splashing around in the water a little bit.”

Meanwhile, Amanda Leveté’s completion of a stunning porcelain-tiled façade, courtyard and subterranean gallery at the V&A last year further affirmed her status as one of the world’s most prominent architects. Leveté’s glittering career has seen her complete a string of statement-making projects that include Lisbon’s shimmering MAAT gallery on the banks of the Tagus River, Birmingham’s instantly recognisable Selfridges building and the central embassy in Bangkok, picking up RIBA’s Stirling Prize and a CBE along the way. Yet it hasn’t been easy for talented women such as Leveté to assert themselves in such a male-dominated industry.

Danish architect Dorte Mandrup warned last year that defining architects by gender has helped perpetuate the problem. “I am not a female architect. I am an architect,” she said in an open letter published on *Dezeen*. “Rarely are women known as female accountants, female lawyers,



This page
Top: Serpentine Pavilion, 2018, CGI.
Designed by Frida Escobedo

Middle: La Tallera, 2012, Cuernavaca,
Morelos, Mexico. Designed by Frida
Escobedo. Photo by Rafael Gamo

Bottom: Tite Street. Designed by
Studio Mackereth

Opposite page
The AllBright. Designed by No.12.
Photo by Tina Hillier



female taxi drivers or female journalists. But 'female architects' seems to be an unshakable phrase." She continued to outline her desire for a mind shift that would allow men and women to work and compete within the same parameters, "known simply as good architecture".

Yet based on the findings of the *Architect Journal's* recent "Women in Architecture" report, that vision still seems a little way off. Pointing to the persistence of a pay gap, a power imbalance and striking number of women experiencing sexual harassment or discrimination at work in the past year, the report shone a light on a saddening series of truths at the heart of architecture. With average pay – especially at a more senior level – significantly higher for male architects and evidence



of career progression being hindered by maternity, it's clear that women's success has come in spite of stark gender inequalities.

Chiming with this reality, currently felt across many sectors globally and strengthened by the #MeToo and #TimesUp debates, London welcomed the launch of a women-only members' club to coincide with International Women's Day in March. The AllBright in Bloomsbury is located in a five-storey Georgian townhouse that has been set up as a supportive space for professional women to socialise, network, debate and work out, with the aim to help change the economic landscape for women.

Katie Earl and Emma Rayner of interior architecture and design studio No.12 were behind its design. "It's amazing to see so many

people who are supportive of the idea," says Rayner of The AllBright's concept. "It couldn't be more relevant than right now." Their studio, which pairs Earl's interior architecture background with Rayner's furniture design experience, took on this project six months ago, with a brief to create an inspirational space for women in the capital.

According to Rayner, good interior design isn't about overcomplicating things. "With this project, we wanted to create something that was for women but definitely not girly – there's deliberately no pink and the look is sophisticated rather than overdressed." The No.12 team opted to decorate The AllBright with a blend of vintage and reconditioned furniture with bespoke pieces and elements of Scandinavian design. Codenamed 'Project Woolf'

(after the Bloomsbury Group's celebrated writer) for the duration of the build, the design for each floor directly relates to one of the women in the artistic collective, including painter Vanessa Bell, novelist Vita Sackville-West and, of course, Virginia Woolf, whose name graces the library.

With the recent completion of a series of luxury canalside flats in the Grade II-listed, cast-iron gasholders in King's Cross also under their belt, the No.12 team have had a busy year. And with the increased exposure that's sure to come from acing such high-profile projects, the studio's future looks exceptionally bright.

One London creative fully established on the architecture circuit is Sally Mackereth. Having studied at the hallowed Architectural



Association School of Architecture, which also birthed Richard Rogers and Zaha Hadid, Mackereth set up her award-winning architectural practice back in 1995. "I've always been a bit of a dreamer. I loved art at school but couldn't see myself as a two-dimensional painter," she says of her original motivation. "There's a pragmatic side to me and architecture is about providing solutions – it's the broadest and most challenging profession anyone can have."

Likening her role to that of a conjuror, Mackereth – whose inspirations include Irish design pioneer Eileen Gray and US modernist architect John Lautner – later set up architectural design team Studio Mackereth, focusing on luxury retail, commercial and high-end residential

projects. Consistently listed among London's leading architects, she sees a stark difference in the roles men and women have traditionally played in the industry. "In Italy it's perfectly normal for architects to do interiors too, but in the UK it's different. Culturally we regard interiors as the female domain and macho male architects often see something demeaning about colours and soft furnishings," she says, referring to her studio's integrated approach that also includes interiors, furniture and even jewellery commissions. "Handing over control to an interior designer means you lose the entire spirit of a project. The outside is one thing but the way you move through the space, the way it's lit and the whole drama and experience of a space is so important."

"With architecture, it's not just about the phallus on the horizon," she says, referencing Ayn Rand's architectural novel *Fountainhead*. "The interior is incredibly important – it's not just about the height of the building. When we do our projects, it's not about showing off." Case in point, the gallery space she's currently working on in Mayfair, which is set to complete next year. Referencing "old" Mayfair and inspired by Bridget Riley, the space has hydraulic doors and a striking origami-folded bronze roof that's hidden from the front, with Mackereth adding that "the hidden parts of London are often the most exciting".

Another London-based creative doing things her own way is Dara Huang. After stints working for architecture firms Herzog & De Meuron

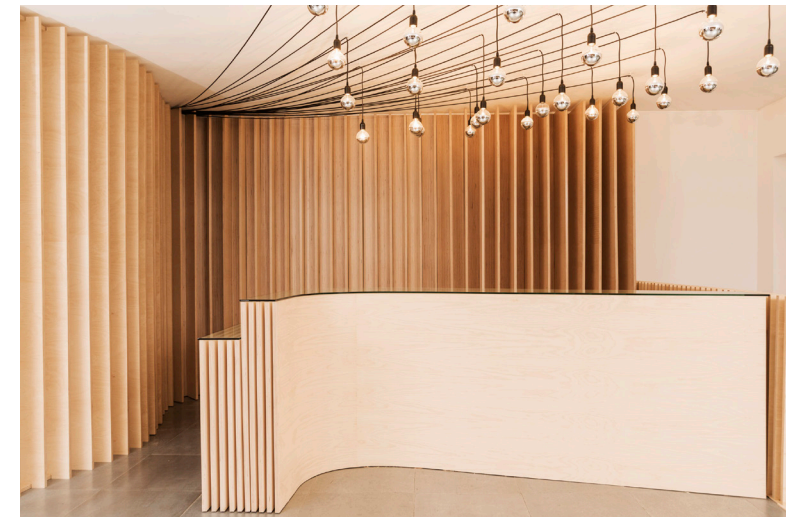
This page

Top: Mount Row Gallery, Mayfair, due to complete 2019, CGI. Designed by Studio Mackereth

Bottom: BETC HQ, 2017. Designed by DH Liberty. Photo by Jack Hobhouse

Opposite page

The AllBright. Designed by No.12. Photo by Tina Hillier



in Switzerland and Foster + Partners in London, she launched her own design studio, Design Haus Liberty, from her living room aged just 29. Things quickly gathered pace with a series of architecture and design projects earning her plenty of critical praise and allowing for rapid expansion. Yet Huang says success hasn't come easy.

"I didn't have any platform before starting out," she says, pointing to the wealthy backgrounds of many of the starchitects. "I was just an architect who was passionate about what they were doing and I always wanted to have my own business. I think it helped to be a bit young and naïve – I didn't really look at the competition or what the industry meant – I was just doing something I loved."

Five years on and Huang employs 30 staff and counting, specialising in what Huang calls out-of-the-box thinking. On the horizon are Cartier store launches, a huge fashion tech tower in China, experiential store fit-outs and an affordable housing scheme that promises to push boundaries. "We do things to make people think differently about the space they're in across all sectors: more interesting offices, homes, retail spaces. It's all about the interaction between human and environment."

Although Huang recognises vast gender divides within the industry, she's focused on making it work for her and her team. "My office is female-led, boutique, high design and international, so gender isn't an issue but within the industry there are stereotypes about

women," she says. "But if you project yourself a certain way it can be powerful to be a woman and it is great to stand out. As the industry is so male dominated, it's great that women are building a voice and being supportive and demonstrating how they can achieve things. It sets a good example to others who think, 'Can I achieve this?'"

The answer to which – thanks to pioneers such as Huang, Mackereth and others – is increasingly yes.