

Sarah Jacoby Architect

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“A Woman’s Work: Stories of Women creating their own paths through the field of Architecture”
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INFORMATION

A Woman’s Work PRESENT

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Sarah Jacoby, AIA, LEED AP
Principal, Sarah Jacoby Architect

Photo: Ty Cole

Sarah Jacoby, AIA

Sarah Jacoby was born and raised in Venice, California, but has always had family in the tri-state area so she was often in and around New York. She studied History and Science at Harvard as an undergraduate and later got her Master of Architecture degree from Harvard Graduate School of Design.

She had lived in Brooklyn for several years before graduate school and it seemed to be where many recent college graduates were landing, plus she knew very few people in Manhattan. When she graduated from the GSD, Sarah landed a job with David Adjaye. At the time, Adjaye was in the process of launching his New York studio, so Sarah took the opportunity and moved from Cambridge right back to Brooklyn. “Brooklyn always felt like the right fit. As much as I love the bustle of Manhattan, the (slightly) more low-key vibe of Brooklyn suits me better.”

Sarah says that starting her own business has certainly been a big highlight of her career. “One of my first projects was a new house in Bridgehampton, which I built from the ground up. Those types of opportunities can be hard to find in New York, so that was another big milestone. Each project, though, is its own highlight since each presents an opportunity to learn and work through new design challenges and that is really important for me.”

Although Sarah finds it difficult to pinpoint a specific moment in her own career, she thinks that in some ways the biggest challenge that women face in a male-dominated field is the impression that the opportunities for advancement are much more limited in some of the firms where she worked. “People tend to promote people who remind them of themselves and I have certainly worked places where it seemed like

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the hierarchy was a series of Russian dolls (but in this case, the dolls were white men in skinny suits). There seemed like there would be no pathway for me, or someone who looked like me. There are many, many minor moments, of course, beginning with endless phone conversations when I get told, “well, when you talk to the architect, he’ll tell you ‘X, Y, or Z’ and me having to respond: ‘I am he – I am that architect.’”

Overall, Sarah thinks that it’s a “great profession for women because it’s a field where you really can create your own practice and be the boss.” She also believes that there’s an advantage to not having to engage in the machismo on a project site; you can be completely honest about what you know and what you don’t know because there’s so much to learn. You can then go on to be “respected for that ability to learn and adapt to new information.” She thinks it’s important to surround yourself with people who will support you, challenge you, and help you grow, which is easier said than done but worth the effort. There are so many aspects of being an architect that are not covered in school, so it’s wise to be prepared for all sorts of unexpected challenges and opportunities and to problem solve along the journey.

Sarah focused her thesis on affordable housing because it’s something that she is very passionate about and she would love to continue this work in a professional setting. “Oftentimes people think of ‘affordability’ and ‘design’ as incompatible, but affordable housing is such an urgent challenge and architects have so much to bring to that conversation. Architects can assist in making housing better, healthier, more sustainable, and more affordable.” She also feels that it is

humbling to remember that each of these projects represents the environment where people will spend so much of their time over the course of many years, even multiple generations. “Ultimately, I want my clients to be pleased and feel like the spaces are very much theirs, to know that our design process created the type of space that will allow them to live in the way they want to live.”

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Sarah had a long, evolving list as to what she wanted to be when she grew up: a ballerina, movie director, Supreme Court Justice, geneticist, the list goes on. But she feels very fortunate that she landed in architecture and can’t actually think of a better fit. There’s a real variety to what is demanded of me that I really value. She’s also had the opportunity to work with many amazing women and see how they made it work for themselves by designing beautiful and successful spaces while simultaneously managing teams and handling coordination at any scale of architecture.

When asked if she feels that women still face adversity in the field,

Sarah definitively answered: “Yes! Women still make up a fraction of licensed architects and at the larger firms they make up a fraction of the partners (if any at all).” She believes that there are still “persistent and systemic challenges that women face in the field of architecture. Schools seem to have caught up with gender balance, but the way in which many firms build teams and promote employees can disadvantage women. This creates a shortage of mentors and role models, which is such an important part of building women leaders.” Of course she envisions a better future for women – “one where no women will have to say ‘I am he; I am the architect.’ A future where everyone will already know that women are architects and a women will never have to tell people that she is in fact the architect.”

For more information on Sarah Jacoby Architect, visit sarahjacobyarchitect.com