

The Business of Furniture | March 22, 2023

# BOF



**Emily Clingman:** Own Who You Are and What You Deserve – Women Leaders in Design Weigh in On Rising to the Top and Empowering Others to Do the Same



# Own Who You Are and What You Deserve — Women Leaders in Design Weigh in On Rising to the Top and Empowering Others to Do the Same

MORE THAN 60% OF DESIGNERS ARE WOMEN.

YET ONLY AROUND 10% OF DESIGNERS ARE FEMALES IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS.

by Emily Clingman

In honor of Women’s History Month this March, Bellow Press reached out to female leaders in the design and manufacturing industries to weigh in on the challenges women face and the inspiration they find to bridge the gap of gender disparity. We asked the following questions:

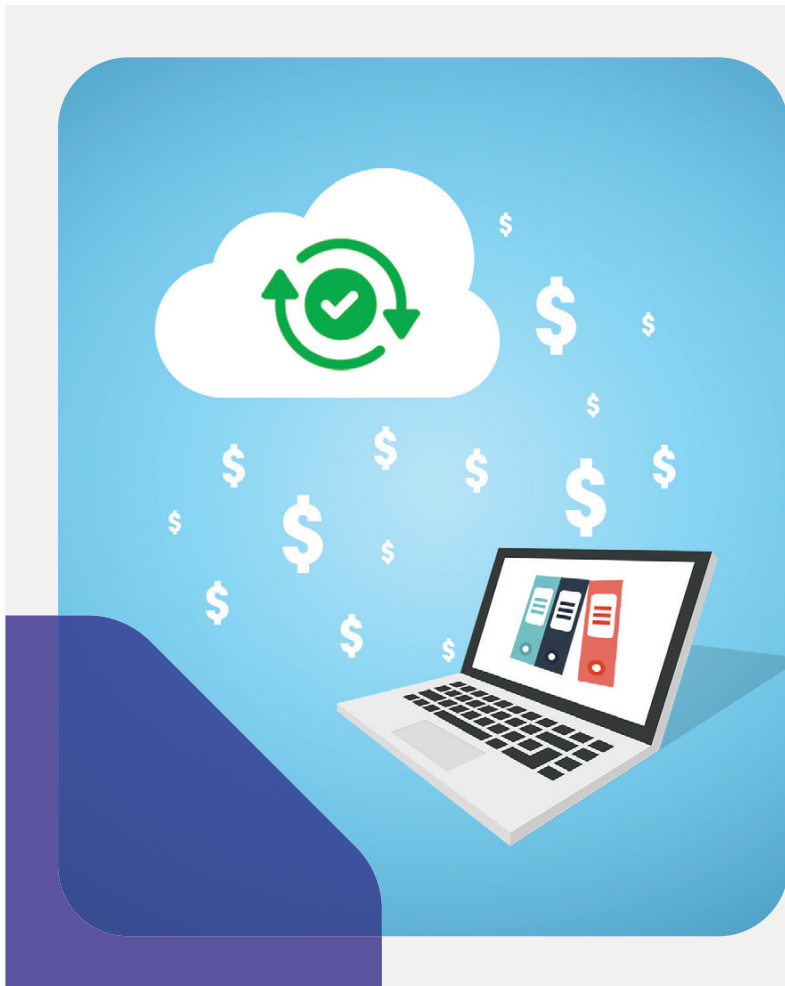
- *How has your experience as a woman shaped your career?*

- *What is the importance of moving beyond bias? How can we do this in the workplace?*
- *How have you been inspired, within the architecture and design industry, to support gender equality?*
- *How have you been inspired, within the architecture and design industry, to support gender equality?*

- *Do the challenges vary within different sectors of design — workplace versus hospitality for instance, or contract furniture manufacturing versus textile design?*
- *What advice would you give to younger professionals entering the field?*

**Mary Holt, Chief Design Strategist,  
Carnegie Fabrics**

As a product designer with over 30 years of experience, Mary Holt is passionate about solution-driven design and ethical and sustainable product development. Bringing a unique design perspective to the leadership team at Carnegie, Holt has helped guide product strategy at the firm with a



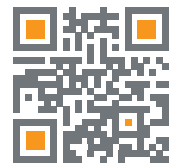
WEBINAR

## Mastering pricing for your designers

With the launch of our 2020 Cloud Pricing tool, you — the manufacturer — can supply up-to-date pricing to your dealers seamlessly through 2020 Worksheet

**What you'll learn:**

- The benefits of 2020 Cloud Pricing
- How it increases revenue by eliminating inaccuracy
- Why you should keep your pricing updated and accurate
- How to easily access it in 2020 Worksheet's new Pricing Center



**Register now**

commitment to continuous innovation and meet evolving market needs. Since 1999, Holt has enjoyed collaborating with designers worldwide, working on hospitality, healthcare, and corporate interiors. She's received several recognitions, including Best of NeoCon, MetropolisLikes, and Interior Design's HiP awards.

"I have been very lucky and have very rarely felt like I was limited by my gender. I know this is often not the case for many women," Holt said. "This of course has to do with the great companies and the wonderful people I have worked for and with. I have also been very lucky to have strong mentors who inspired me to push harder and work smarter."

Holt has been fortunate throughout her career to create a path for growth and advancement.

"It's a studied evolutionary theory that women are genetically more teamwork oriented because teamwork and cooperation is needed for childrearing. Teamwork is very important to me; I have been lucky to be surrounded by many talented collaborators. We check our egos at the door and dig in to find the best solutions for our clients."

Holt notes the pandemic has fast tracked a lot of the tools necessary to help move beyond gender bias, in particular the flexible work week. Prior to the pandemic, this was one of the biggest impediments for women. Often early in a woman's career, a choice is made between family and work. The possibility of a flexible work week brings a more humanistic approach and allows for more choice. It recognizes that non-work influences greatly impact

creativity and that the best solutions often percolate when engaged in those activities. It recognizes that work is only one component of a full life and celebrates this, not only for women, but for all.

"I have been inspired by the environmental and socially conscious work of women-led architecture firms like New York-based Diana Kellogg and Sharon Davis Design," she said. "The work their teams are producing are not only incredible aesthetically, but they are environmental and have meaningful impacts on the community."

Construction is historically a male dominated industry, and Holt believes the overall culture and harmful stereotypes fuel this.

"I am sure it goes even further back, but even as far back as the Bauhaus movement of the early 1900s, weaving and textile design were deemed 'suitable' for women. Perhaps because textile design is still seen as the 'softer side' of the business, there are less challenges for women to rise into the higher positions," she said. "I believe in architecture and construction there are still a lot of struggles for women to have a seat at the table."

**Advice:** *"Check your ego at the door and surround yourself with as many good people as you can, learning from the best," Holt said. "Find something that you love to do and find a place that you really like to do it in."*

**Kait Paradowski, Design Director,**  
[Artaic](#)

As Design Director, Kait Paradowski serves as the leader and visionary of the

brand's Design Department, overseeing the conception of in-house collections and the design proposal process for new clients. In addition to her work with interior designers and architects for custom design projects, Paradowski also oversees the conceptualization of in-house collections, expanding the brand's existing award-winning offerings, as well as delivering on the custom capabilities for which Artaic is best known.

Paradowski believes moving beyond bias will make sure the best ideas will be heard and adopted and allows for employees to create impact. It also helps with engagement and retention.

"I've been lucky to have had many female role models and leaders throughout my



**MAVERICK**  
OFFICE SOLUTIONS MADE IN THE U.S.A.

All Maverick, Everything.



maverickdesk.com

career,” she said. “Many of my professors at FIT were women, and I’ve been supported by female leadership within both my textile design and tile design experiences. I feel privileged to be in the interior design industry, where many leadership roles are held by women. Being trained and mentored by other women has provided me with a great sense of comfort in the workplace.”

**Advice:** *“Be curious,” she said. “Try out different opportunities, read articles and books, and visit museums. Write down what brings you excitement throughout your day. This is a great way to self-assess and figure out what path makes the most sense for you. The ultimate goal is to find work that energizes you.”*

### **Suzanne Tick, Creative Director, Luum Textiles**

When approaching the creative process and finding inspiration, Suzanne Tick taps into meditative processes to de-excite the nervous system. This allows for the unbounded world to provide countless creative influences. Through this practice, Suzanne and the Luum team drive the creative process to develop unique textile collections.

Tick also hosts daily group Vedic meditation practice with Tick Studio and the A&D community to galvanize connections and release unwanted negative energy. Deeply rooted in the meditation lifestyle has helped the studio embrace fully the world of unbounded color, texture and pattern choices.

“Growing up in the 1960s, I was very lucky



to be surrounded by really strong female role models. Early on in my career, I was also fortunate to have female mentors,” Tick said. “Moments after my initial interview at Boris Kroll — when I was first trying to enter the industry — the design director at that time chose to mentor and guide me into being the brand’s next design director. Our relationship has positively impacted my role and strengthened my capabilities as a mentor to others.”

There is always one stabilizing truth in any relationship, Tick says, business decisions included: One must never ignore the truth in any given situation.

“This is where ignorance plays a part in the polarities of bias. It is our job as designers to bring out what is relevant and needed at any given time, and to speak to this truth,” she said.

One of the most obvious divisions Tick sees in the architecture and design world is the lack of collaboration

between architecture and interior design departments.

“This is a subject I feel inspired to bring up in every presentation, regarding the best methods of communication and project building. I believe that seeds of collaboration make for the most outstanding projects,” Tick said. “Luckily, we are seeing many more women choosing to become architects, which will strengthen the diversity of materials, palettes, and textures selected at the beginning of the building cycle.”

Tick believes more women are needed in the boardroom with decision-making leadership roles.

“The entire industry is male-dominated —

architecture, design, furniture, carpet, glass and textile manufacturing, construction — meaning only a handful of women are in leadership roles,” she said. “We simply need more women in leading roles because of the varying challenges we face today requiring solutions from more than one gendered voice. Our current process is fracturing a very delicate ecosystem and I would personally like to see a shift in leadership. Mother Nature is doing a pretty good job of surviving and will certainly survive us all, so why not give women the lead?”

**Advice:** “*Find the career path that makes you feel happy and apply yourself to the fullest,*” she said. “*Never fear the unknown or feel you are lacking if you are the only woman in the room — keep your voice strong.*”

*If you are interested in acquiring or selling a manufacturing firm, dealership or brand, now is the time, and we can help.*

## VISCUSI ADVISORS

Viscusi Advisors is a consulting company to private equity as well as to manufacturing companies interested in acquiring businesses in the interiors space. The Viscusi Group, our parent company, has unique long-term relationships that we are willing to share with investors seeking to acquire specific brands, or to sell existing brands that they own.

Viscusi Advisors is not a business broker, or an investment banker, simply an advisory service.

We are excited about sharing our relationships and influence with company owners and Industrial Opportunity Partners. Also, we can provide insight into the personalities that you will be negotiating with, which may help you be more successful in your acquisition.

You can reach Stephen Viscusi at 212-979-5700 x101 to start this process.

## Naomi Neilson, Founder and CEO, Native Trails

Naomi Neilson's entrepreneurial spirit, along with her pursuit of innovative designs, artistry, and sustainable practices, propelled Native Trails while she attended college at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, California, where the company is also headquartered. Enamored by the talent of artisans she met during her early travels to Mexico and Morocco, Neilson enjoyed bringing home art from exotic locales so others could also experience it. She researched and traveled extensively, visiting remote villages where artisans practiced ancient craft traditions. As an advocate for indigenous peoples and fair practices, Neilson began providing craftspeople with design and operational guidance, helping initiate a reliable revenue stream for their local economies and also introducing the artisans' handiwork into homes throughout the world.

"I started a very adventurous endeavor at just 21 years old, so I believe my youth had the biggest impact on my career," Neilson said. "I honestly never thought about my gender as a factor in my success or failure. Looking back, however, I learned a lot by asking questions and listening; by openly exposing my naivete as I searched for knowledge. If I were a man, would I have felt an expectation to have all the answers from the start? And could that have hindered my learning process and ultimate success? Possibly. Regardless, I can't understate the importance of NOT focusing on the limitations of one's gender. Anything we see as a limitation will become just that."

Neilson notes it's likely that being a young



woman with an open mind inspired others to share their knowledge with her and help her when in uncharted territory.

"So, if being a woman was part of the equation that led to my success, great," she said. "In retrospect, I would say that everyone should use what assets they have and be proud and confident in who they are — and in what they do and don't know."

Neilson thinks it's perfectly okay to acknowledge that there are common inherent genetic differences between men and women built into our DNA over millions of years. What's not okay, she says, is to assume any given person fits a preconceived stereotype.



“Bias is inevitable to some degree — it has been a human survival trait for millennia,” she said. “We like to think we have evolved. However, in modern life we must acknowledge and move beyond bias, so it doesn’t hold us back and prevent the very progress we seek. Understanding a natural tendency for bias but looking deeper to appreciate others for who they truly are, and even more importantly who they may grow to be, is the way to bring out the best in all of us.”

Native Trails is a very diverse workplace.

“We look for unique perspectives, creativity, passion, and a drive to excel,” Neilson said. “Gender balance in leadership is a natural result of this. Our target market trends more female than male, so it is

critical that we have both perspectives influencing decisions.”

There is a predominance of male product designers, where Neilson believes more gender balance would be a positive. A balance of genders as decision-making leaders will better produce products that fill the needs of the female consumer and buyer.

**Advice:** *“Anything can be an opportunity with the right mindset,” Neilson said. “Always focus on the possibilities rather than the challenges, and don’t give up. Charge forward and do what you are passionate about. Believe in yourself, your value — and expect to work hard and make sacrifices, but ultimately receive what you are worth.”*



read our trend report, **Lumen**

**IDQ**  
idadesign.com

**Beatrice Ramnarine, East Coast Commercial Manager, [Välinge](#)**

With ten years of experience in the commercial industry, Beatrice Ramnarine’s love for interior design drives her to create innovative sales strategies across the Välinge portfolio. She works cross-functionally with product design, product marketing, revenue partnerships, and key stakeholders to produce successful campaigns. As a passionate sales leader, Ramnarine drives sales growth by developing strategic campaigns for territory expansion and reinforcing existing relationships across a wide variety of clientele.

“Pursuing a purpose in what we choose to do always has incredible challenges,” Ramnarine said. “I’d like to say my challenges have defined who I am, how I approach others in this field, and how accomplished I feel at the end of the day. Building relationships, and on the flip



side knowing when to let go and move on to the next has been and continues to be insightful. This insight has kept me focused on my goals, knowing where to build revenue, and where to devote time and effort on new paths for success.”

Ramnarine believes everyone needs to be seen, heard, and understood without bias and be given the opportunity to express oneself with, of course, conscious respect for the situation and other people involved.

“The human factor regarding bias occurs outside one’s control, but we can move past this challenge with consistent transparency, fair communication, and building meaningful connections with others,” she said.

Seeing how far women have come in the construction industry as leaders as they continue to dismantle the stigma that it is a predominantly male-oriented industry inspires Ramnarine.

“This is a breakthrough,” she said. “Offering generations of females the knowledge that it can be done.”

Beautification of a project or a space can undoubtedly be understood as a “feminine” thing and construction as a “male” thing, Ramnarine notes – “But these lines are wonderfully blurred, with both female and male leaders switching roles and changing this dynamic.”

Ramnarine notes an interesting cycle between sectors of design and manufacturing – the designer has to meet the budget approved by the owner and simultaneously the needs of the end user. For example, end users are more

in tune with sustainability and ongoing attention to the impact of climate change. Manufacturers are always shifting production with research and development, to be in tune with important trends or needs that develop in each sector of design, and create a product or a material solution to fit those needs.

**Advice:** *“Education is the key to your success,” Ramnarine said. “Accepting the ups and most importantly the downs with grace will keep you moving ahead and seeing further opportunities down the road.”*

**Mel Saenz, Vice President of Relationship Management, Juniper**

Mel Saenz has been a member of the New York architectural community for

more than 17 years and has focused her career around developing strategic sales and marketing initiatives while fostering long-term relationships with architects, designers, contractors and specifiers.

A native of Fort Worth, Texas, Saenz moved to New York City in 2006 and has since honed a holistic approach to client management, which emphasizes a personalized, brand-centric approach to architectural sales. Saenz joined Juniper in 2016 as Director of Sales and Business Development, leading global sales initiatives. She has served as the company’s Vice President of Relationship Management since 2019, continuing her focus on promoting a hands-on approach to client relationships, which departs from



Traverse Nesting Chair  
RGS-302BK



Quinn Stack Chair  
RGS-305BE

**RGS**  
FURNITURE

Training • Gaming • Breakroom • Education • Office

Additional 10% off when you reference the code **BUYNOW** on your purchase order\*

EMAIL: [customerservice@regencyof.com](mailto:customerservice@regencyof.com)

PHONE: 330-848-3700

[rgsfurniture.com](http://rgsfurniture.com)



Kula Tablet Arm Loveseat with Storage  
RGS-502JVSD



Kula Tablet Arm Lounge Chair with Storage  
RGS-501JVSD



Poppy Swivel Chair  
RGS-105BK



\*Offer only available for ISG dealers. Dealer Freight terms apply. Offer ends 12/31/2022.



traditional models to organically integrate the sales process into early concept development phases.

Saenz also serves as brand ambassador, leading initiatives to promote Juniper’s identity as it has grown from a burgeoning pioneer of the Brooklyn lighting scene to full-fledged American architectural lighting manufacturer, with its headquarters and factory now based in Southington, Connecticut.

“As a woman, I’ve experienced pay inequality, as a Mexican American woman I’ve experienced racism, and as a woman in manufacturing, I’ve experienced thinly disguised misogyny,” Saenz said. “These combined experiences as a woman have given me a deeper perspective and empathy that I carry both at work and in my personal life. In my career, I have also had an

incredible amount of support from other women in leadership roles that allowed me to be my full self in any situation. I aim to pay it forward by offering that same support and guidance to others.”

Bias is cultural, Saenz notes, and she believes female leaders must put measures in place to make sure women are employing an environment of equity.

“Start by evaluating pay scales to ensure sure that your employees of different genders and backgrounds are getting paid equally for the job that they are doing, while also rewarding people based on individual performance,” she said. “In the workplace, the challenge is to avoid situations where everyone is paid the same. Measure based on value performance metrics and experience to make sure you aren’t inadvertently judging based on race, gender, and background.”

Saenz is continually inspired by women-run forums like WILD (Women in Lighting Design), Lightinas (Latin Women in Lighting Design), and WIA (Women in Architecture) which have all had a role in leading the charge when speaking about gender equity in the A&D community.

“These forums allow for a safe place to discuss, connect and collaborate in an often male-dominated industry,” she said.

Saenz finds gender disparity begins early in high school and college institutions where women aren’t challenged to take on “male” roles or classes in mathematics, science, building, or construction.

“We are inadvertently led to believe that certain areas of study are for men or

women,” she said. “It’s like growing up and being told you throw like a girl, and then you think for a second, what’s wrong with that? I AM a girl.”

Anything in the manufacturing sect is riddled with gender inequality, Saenz observes.

“The challenge is to break the barrier of ‘men make things with their hands’ or are good with their hands,” she said. “No one talks about the female welder or metal worker, unfortunately, because those ‘maker jobs’ have been processed as male-dominant. Rewarding, uplifting, and celebrating women makers is crucial to curbing the stereotype.”

**Advice:** *“I would advise young women to seek out, support, and befriend like-minded women in all areas of the A&D community, not just in your particular field,” Saenz said. “I’ve had the best female mentors and friends in this industry across different roles. These genuine types of relationships can last all through your career and beyond.”*

**Susan Lizan-Immerman, CEO, [mDesign](#)**

As Chief Executive Officer and Co-Founder of mDesign, Susan Lizan-Immerman is a creative leader and visionary with over 40 years of experience. After launching her career at Saks Fifth Avenue, Lizan-Immerman quickly rose through the ranks in various managerial positions. Exhibiting an entrepreneurial spirit, she sought new challenges and founded her own business, Susan Lizan Inc. and the Against Gravity brand. After spearheading her business as CEO for over



two decades, Lizan-Immerman served as Creative Design Director at DKNY Kids, followed by VP of Design & Merchandising at Kids Headquarters/Global Brands Group, before co-founding mDesign. Previously serving as mDesign’s head of design, Lizan-Immerman has grown the private e-commerce business to be a \$300m+ company and top-ranked Amazon seller. Most recently, Lizan-Immerman oversaw mDesign’s commitment to bring its plastic manufacturing back to the United States, creating jobs for Ohio workers amid the pandemic and supply chain impacts. With a unique design background, Lizan-Immerman is known to take an innovative, hands-on leadership approach and is passionate about inspiring other women leaders, including the professional organizer community through mDesign’s Pro Insider Program.

“As a female CEO in the design industry, my experience as a woman has played a significant role in shaping my career,” Lizan-Immerman said. “I have faced various challenges, including gender biases and stereotypes, which have inspired me to be more resilient and determined. My ability to multitask, communicate effectively, and empathize with others has been strengthened due to my gender, which has helped me build strong relationships with stakeholders and employees.”

Moving beyond bias is crucial in the workplace, she believes, particularly in the design/merchandising industry, which has historically been male dominated regarding ownership and senior management. Gender biases can limit opportunities for women and create an unfair playing field.

“To move beyond bias, we need to implement policies and practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion,” she said. “This can include offering equal pay, providing equal opportunities for advancement, and creating a safe and supportive workplace culture that values all employees.”

Within the design industry, Lizan-Immerman has been inspired to support gender equality by working with and promoting female designers and artists.

“I have also been involved in various initiatives that aim to empower women in the design industry, such as mentorship programs and networking events,” she said.

Lizan-Immerman notes one of the significant challenges regarding gender equity in the design industry is the lack

of representation of women in leadership positions.

“Women are underrepresented in executive and senior-level roles, which can limit their career growth and opportunities,” she said. “There is also a need for more flexible work arrangements, particularly for working mothers, and to address issues related to gender pay gaps and discrimination.”

Challenges vary within different sectors of design, Lizan-Immerman notes. For instance, the hospitality industry may present different challenges for women designers, such as a lack of diversity in hotel ownership and management, compared to the workplace sector. Textile design may present different challenges in terms of balancing creativity with practicality and cost-effectiveness.

**Advice:** *“My advice to younger professionals entering the field would be to be persistent, confident, and never let gender biases or stereotypes limit your opportunities,” Lizan-Immerman said. “Seek out mentorship and networking opportunities and build a supportive network of peers and colleagues. Lastly, be willing to take risks and try new things, as this can lead to new opportunities and growth.”*

### **Erin McDannald, CEO, Environments and Lighting Environments**

Erin McDannald, CEO and co-owner of Lighting Environments and its sister company, Environments, has guided clients throughout the entire lighting design and construction process for over two

decades. Trained as an interior designer, McDannald joined Baltimore's New Design Light firm in the sales department in 2003 before becoming co-owner in 2009. Under her leadership, the company rebranded to Lighting Environments to reflect the company's expansion into lighting technology offerings for all built environments. Now a leader in IoT (Internet of Things) integration and building and workplace management, McDannald is guiding today's workforce through powerful digital transformation with the Elevated Environments™ app.

“Throughout my entire career, I have learned to read my challenges as opportunities. Many of these challenges have been things I've encountered as a woman,” she said. “As women in this industry, most of us have unfortunately had to confront doubt, discrimination, disrespect, and abuse. The hurdles that my peers and I faced have only further motivated me to build an environment where all people are elevated and respected. I want women to trust their opinions and skills, finding strength in their natural abilities. I am passionate about fostering leadership and creating better spaces. It is so important to me that my companies and our business practices contribute to a world where all are safe, well, and welcome.”

Becoming aware of and then removing biases in the workplace is holistically important for business, she says.

“Foremost, identifying your biases allows you to check your practices and ensure that you're operating equitably, responsibly, and with compassion for all people,” McDannald



said. “Investing in a healthy, safe, and trustworthy workplace culture is vital; it's an investment in your employees.”

McDannald notes inclusive cultures help employees feel welcome, seen, respected, and most importantly valued.

“Removing biases ensures and reinforces that your people matter, and I believe this is a key responsibility for all leaders,” she said.

McDannald finds true inspiration through the incredible women and minorities around her.

“My peers in the architecture and design world are incredible creatives, leaders, thinkers, experts, and beyond. Our connections and our support of one another really make each one of us a better professional,” she said. “As I see more women enter and rise in this industry, I am inspired to create even more equal opportunities. The women in this industry continue to prove what’s possible if we operate both our businesses and lives with more compassion. In my own companies, I am dedicated to creating equal opportunities for everyone to share their voices and strengths. I love seeing women pave the way in this industry, and I want to always lead by example while creating more opportunities to lift others.”

She believes there needs to be more room for female leadership.

“We deserve the same opportunities, and we need to feel seen and respected as we lead,” she said. “Women have a natural ability to approach things with compassion and empathy at the forefront. I often imagine what our businesses, technologies, algorithms, and interfaces would look like if more women were given the space to lead the designs of our future. If more of our world was designed through compassionate and fair principles, I think we would all enjoy both physical and digital environments that were better designed for the human experience.”

Speaking only to the hurdles and challenges encountered where McDannald’s been involved over her career, she thinks a lot of current inequality issues and concerns go beyond sector lines.

“Our world is in need of compassionate, intuitive, and human-forward design, and that reaches all industries and sectors,” McDannald said. “We need software that makes life and work easier, buildings that can protect our health and remain habitable through any condition, business practices that minimize environmental harm, policies that ensure inclusion, and beyond.”

McDannald believes creating fair and equitable organizational structures where all can work and lead will bring better solutions and a better world — any and every industry could benefit from better access and more open minds.

**Advice:** *“I would encourage women entering the field to unravel the social norms we’ve been told to follow,” McDannald said. “As we rewrite the narratives that ask us to be sorry, own who you are and what you deserve. Trust your gut and have confidence in what you bring to the table — and you do, in fact, deserve a spot at every table. Women bring a natural sense of compassion to our work, and with that, we have the power to transform our industry and our world.”*

**Bethanne Mikkelsen, Managing Principal, Interiors, [Ankrom Moisan](#)**

“Being the only woman at a job site with construction managers, contractors, engineers, and other professionals who are all male requires confidence and self-assurance. It has instilled courage and confidence by necessity,” she said. “I also have been very fortunate to have strong female mentors throughout my career. Seeing their successful approach to working



in a male-dominated field has helped inspire me.”

Mikkelsen believes moving beyond bias encourages a strong and diverse company culture, which enhances the creativity of a team.

“We can achieve this through open dialogue and a mutual respect that creates a safe environment for the expression of ideas by team members,” she said. “The key is to train firm leadership and employees with an emphasis on open dialogue and awareness of the rights and value of others, form inclusive hiring teams, and set goals for diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. A firm cannot simply talk the talk. Instead, decision-makers must set realistic goals and be held accountable.”

One way that Ankrom Moisan has focused on gender equality is through the JUST program. JUST measures the corporate social justice of a firm and provides metrics to help a firm improve social equality and employee engagement. Among other things, firms participating in the program perform comprehensive reviews of salaries to screen for and eliminate gender inequality.

“I have seen several companies recently promoting that they have received a JUST label from the International Living Future Institute (ILFI). I have even started to see companies internally post salary ranges for each position,” Mikkelsen said.

Additionally, Ankrom Moisan has embraced a more hybrid work model that incorporates flexible in-person and remote work.

“This is especially important for people



who have caretaker responsibilities to be able to flex their schedule while still working a full work week. All of these steps contribute to help supporting gender equality,” Mikkelsen said.

She notes women have faced significant challenges in the A&D industry because of their gender. The industry has historically failed to accommodate women as they seek to advance their careers while juggling their family needs. However, this is changing. For example, more firms have provided access to childcare, flexible works schedules, lactation rooms, and recognize the importance of maternity and paternity leave. Additionally, women in the A&D industry are often perceived as knowing less than their male counterparts.

“This bias may exist not only within a firm, but within the broader industry including

brokers, developers, and property owners,” Mikkelsen said. “Indeed, the bias outside of a firm may be more entrenched and difficult to overcome. That said, I have seen a positive shift in the industry over the last several years toward women and equality in the profession, and companies can foster this inclusion in a variety of ways. It is important, not only for women to stand up and speak out, but for everyone at firms to acknowledge and support equal respect for women, minorities, and the LGBTQ community. We are only going to change the industry if we do it together.”

From Mikkelsen’s perspective, challenges are present in all sectors of design. More broadly, it is not specific to the A&D industry but includes the engineering and construction industries.

“That said, I am encouraged by the number of companies that are taking a strong stance in support of gender equality and equity,” she said.

**Advice:** *“Confidence and humility are not mutually exclusive, and it is important to be curious and ask questions. Also, work to become self-sufficient,” Mikkelsen said. “For example, before asking for assistance, research the building codes or relevant industry standards. When approaching managers with problems, have proposed solutions and be ready to discuss your proposals. Too often, I see young professionals identify problems but offer no solution. Also, remember that the lessons that you learn in school are only the beginning. Additionally, there will be certain parts of the job that are not glamorous — stay humble. It is important to show that you are*

*a team player and build rapport with your colleagues. Doing this will help you to gain their confidence and will present more career opportunities in the future.”*

**Libby Patrick, Founder & CEO, [Sims Patrick Studio](#)**

Being an athlete at a young age, competing with the boys in my neighborhood, not only gave Libby Patrick an early understanding of collaboration and healthy competition, but was also when she gained her first respect as a woman in a man’s world.

“That experience has been instrumental as I’ve often found myself as the only



woman in the room throughout my career, especially when I was working for larger architecture firms,” Patrick said. “During this time, I learned about how stereotyping affects how women are perceived in the workplace, and how I could change this when I ultimately started my own firm.”

In Patrick’s opinion, bias comes down to an error in decision making.

“We all have bias, it’s part of who we are as humans,” she said. “In the workplace, it’s important to foster an environment where we take the time to understand and get to know one another as individuals to avoid making decisions based on stereotyping.”

It is exciting to Patrick to see so many new female professionals enter the field.

“It is our job to support these women in the fight towards pay equity and to make sure they are being equally valued in the workplace,” she said. “Not only that, but it’s also important that this recognition is translated on the client side, and that they are continuing to seek out female partners for their projects.”

In Patrick’s experience, sometimes women are unfairly assessed based on their gender as opposed to their specific qualifications.

“At Sims Patrick Studio, we make a concentrated effort to make decisions based on merit and candidate talents, ensuring that our workplace is as equitable as possible while still foregrounding important diversity efforts as a WBE,” she said.

Patrick thinks challenges for women are overarching throughout the architecture and design industry as a whole.

“That being said, the hospitality industry

certainly comes with its own set of complications,” she said. “As a field that combines all sectors of interior design — workplace, residential, retail, healthcare, etcetera — we have to work to collaborate effectively and be taken seriously across all of these disciplines.”

**Advice:** *“Be a sponge and work hard,” Patrick said. “Knowing what you want to achieve and being able to communicate that — both verbally and through writing — is key. When it comes to design, always challenge people to develop a narrative that can be transformed into something three-dimensional and dynamic. And finally, your job is always to understand what is expected of you from your client, so work on honing those skills.”*

**Taylor Starr, RCID, IIDA, Partner, Interior Designer, [Bockus Payne](#)**

Taylor Starr’s experience as a woman has shaped her career in countless ways. Even the choice to become an interior designer can be attributed to her instinct to be a caretaker and provide comfort.

“I strive to design interior environments that promote autonomy and well-being,” Starr said. “My experience as a woman has also led me to be more understanding of the adversity experienced by others. The Americans with Disability Act is pivotal to the design of commercial spaces, but I’m constantly asking myself: In what ways can I make the spaces I design more considerate and accommodating of the end-user, beyond what is required?”

Starr believes bias quickly replaces critical thinking because it feels natural.



“We don’t have to spend time considering different perspectives and can make quick decisions based on bias. But our biases only serve ourselves and don’t consider the needs of others,” Starr said. “To move beyond this, I believe we first need to learn how to recognize bias and how to disrupt the continuation of old habits. We need to move beyond ‘this is how we’ve always done it, so why change?’ Continuing Education courses on well-being would be a starting point for self-reflection.”

When thinking about areas to support gender equality, restrooms are the first thing to come to Starr’s mind, as they are a very important space for any user.

“It needs to feel clean, welcoming, and safe,” she said. “A very literal way of supporting gender equality in restrooms is with signage. Instead of applying gender

normative icons of an able-bodied man in pants and a woman in a skirt, why not use icons of the type of fixture inside: toilet, urinal, etcetera? A simple change of signage can affect the visual language used throughout a space.”

The cost of doing more seems to be a significant challenge in designing for gender equality, notes Starr.

“Every project, particularly in recent years, must contend with budget constraints,” she said. “Square footage can literally be tied to a dollar amount, so when square footage is being allocated to a lactation room or a wellness suite — spaces that don’t directly generate profit — it can be a hard sell.”

**Advice:** “*Question everything,*” Starr said. “*Why does a certain standard exist? Who benefits? Who does it harm? The first step to revolutionizing the industry is understanding the problem.*”

**Cara Sutton, ASID, Junior Interior Designer, Bockus Payne**

Growing up, Cara Sutton felt she had to work twice as hard to be seen as equal.

“That mindset pushed me to have a strong work ethic and determination, and to challenge myself in all that I do,” she said. “This aspect of my personality is definitely well-suited to my role. Working in the architecture and design industry, I am constantly faced with design challenges that need proper solutions to better the end user’s experience in the built environment.”

Sutton believes moving beyond bias is critical not only in the workplace, but in day-to-day life.

“Bias — whether intentional or unintentional — can have consequences including inaccurate beliefs about an individual or group of individuals,” she said. “These preconceived notions result in unfair treatment of others as well as a lack of inclusion. In the workplace, this can make or break the dynamic of the team and disrupt the comfortability and security that one feels in a work setting. It is important to be aware of these thought patterns and put yourself in the shoes of others to acknowledge the bias you may have in order to eliminate and prevent it.”

One way Sutton is inspired to support gender equality is through the people in the industry.

“It is inspiring to meet and collaborate with so many other individuals in various roles who are constantly breaking barriers and striving to eliminate gender bias,” she said. “Working alongside women and men who acknowledge the work of other genders is not only inspiring but motivating. This in turn pushes me to design for equality not only with regards to gender differences, but physical and mental differences as well.”

Sutton notes significant strongholds and challenges regarding gender equality in the A&D industry can be seen in the built environment.

“At times, it is necessary for spaces to be equitable, not equal,” she said. “Lactation rooms are an example. Until the design is geared toward the biological difference between individuals, then the design solution has not been met.”

She believes challenges vary within



different sectors of design. Some of these challenges are seen within the programming process.

“The function of a space varies based on not only the sector of design, but also on the needs of the end user and their equity needs,” she said.

**Advice:** *“I often think of this question as I reflect on my younger-self from time to time,” Sutton said. “Advice I would give to younger professionals would be: Don’t let anything hold you back, especially the fear of not fitting in or not being good enough for a role simply due to your gender, ethnicity, or any other bias someone may hold against you. It takes people of different backgrounds, genders, cultures, etcetera. with different world experiences to truly make a positive impact on the architecture and design industry.”* **BoF**