



# Women in Architecture



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Q&A

# 'In most meetings I am the only woman'

*Rob Wilson talks to Dow Jones Architects co-founder Biba Dow, shortlisted in the Architect of the Year category for her work on the Garden Museum in the 2018 Women in Architecture Awards. Photography by Anthony Coleman*

## What made you choose architecture as a career?

**Biba Dow** I started studying architecture because I loved drawing and was interested in how people live, and interested in places and buildings, without knowing very much about architecture at all. It was more an instinct, and my parents and art teacher encouraged me. Since starting, I've always had the sense that there is too much more to learn to stop.

## What made you start your own practice?

I always wanted the creative freedom of my own practice. That is the heart of it. But in the context of this award, with research showing that many women leave architectural practice because it can be hard to combine with parenthood, I think it's important to say that setting up my own practice was also partly an idea about how to have a creative life that involved bringing up a family. When I was a student, I remember seeing photographs of architects who ran practices and had children – photos of Ted Cullinan's own house with his children in them, for example, or the Rogers, or others, like the Bechers or Robin and Lucienne Day – which were very powerful and made me feel I could do the things I wanted. And I certainly think having the autonomy has been very helpful.

## Why did you make your base in London?

### What are the challenges of working in London, and in the UK more generally?

We always wanted to live in London. I am a Londoner and I love the sense of being part of a mass – that anything is possible. I love the openness of it. One of my daughters says one of her favourite smells is the smell of

the Northern Line, and I know just what she means. We have always felt that there is a lot of opportunity for architects in London. On the other hand, I think smaller cities and towns can have a more collegiate atmosphere for architects, which must be nice to be part of.

### How has being an architect changed since you started? Do you feel that the role of architect has become marginalised on projects?

I think we've been lucky in that, in the sort of work we do – designing cultural and heritage projects and houses for individuals – our clients are the buildings' users, so our projects are driven much more by design than by economics. We haven't experienced the move towards design and build, which isolates the architect.

### What were your ambitions for the practice?

I wanted to do interesting things and be fulfilled. Alun and I wanted to work together and find an architectural language together.

### Is it what you would have hoped for and expected?

Definitely. It's hugely satisfying. Of course, there are times when we are anxious, but that is just part of it.

### How much has the practice grown since it began? How big were you when you started out?

We started out as just Alun and me, for a few years. Then for several years we had one assistant, and then we slowly grew to around 10, which is where we have been for a while.









### How do you get most of your work?

Mostly through invited competitions and personal recommendations.

### What influences do you acknowledge in your work?

We are very influenced by other creative practices. We find art very inspiring, and its capacity to make bigger observations about how we live. Of course, architecture always has a functional purpose at its core, but being able to think about it on another level at the same time is what we find really interesting. I am also very influenced by poetry. I enjoy reading certain poets and I like reductivist language which draws attention to the innate character of things. I especially enjoy reading Seamus Heaney and Alice Oswald, who talk about time and place. I find it a helpful way of thinking about what's important in architecture.

### Do you see a difference in the way people in the broader industry treat you compared with your partners at the practice? Is it more difficult being a woman in architecture?

There are certain situations where I am aware of prejudice, where I encounter a particular kind of patronising rebuttal from older men. When I was younger, it used to really knock my confidence and it felt impenetrable. Now, I find it exasperating and annoying, but not intimidating. I am certainly conscious of always having been in a minority, not only among architects but more generally in design teams and in the world of construction. In most meetings, I look around the table and I am the only woman. It has taken me time to feel strong.

### What have been the challenges of your career so far?

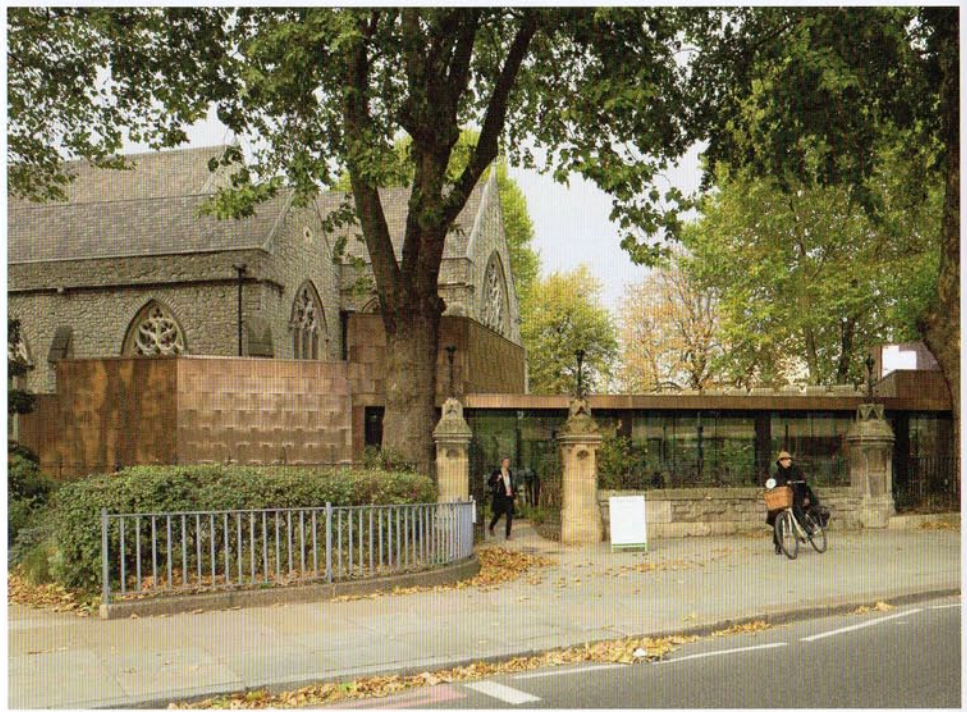
I think the biggest challenges were the two competitions for the Garden Museum. The first, in 2007, was a tiny project (£300,000) but a big moment for us because it was our first public project. Winning that competition was transformative. Then in 2013 they ran a second competition for a much bigger project (£4.3 million); we felt we had a huge amount invested in the museum and the competition process was gruelling. Winning that and designing and building the project has been hugely rewarding. It feels as though the development of our practice has been entwined with the development of the museum.

### What are you looking forward to?

Our project at St Mary Magdalene (see *building study*, page 24) will finish in the autumn, and our building in Cardiff for Maggie's, with whom we've worked for years, will be built. Both are incredibly exciting.

### Are things improving for women in architecture?

I really hope so. There are more practices being driven by women – Grafton Architects,



Garden Museum main entrance (above) and (opposite) the cloister garden

Mary Duggan, Amanda Levete – and women's collaborations like VeloCity. These are powerful voices.

### How might more women be encouraged into architecture?

I think countering a sense of isolation is important, so supporting younger women through mentoring would help.

### What is the best advice you have been given?

A wise client once said to me that it takes time to change people's minds; be prepared to move slowly to gain consensus.

### What is your advice for a woman starting out in architecture now?

Find a way of working that you enjoy.

### Your work has focused on residential and cultural projects. Are there any typologies in which you particularly want to develop?

We have always tried to not become pigeon-holed, but to engage in as wide a debate as possible, and to be driven by looking and designing. But new projects are always exciting. We are working on some educational projects at the moment – a nursery and a school – which are very rewarding. We are very interested in the relationship between building and landscape, and would love to have the opportunity to explore that more.

**Much of your work has been marked by a pared-down and strong, but muted, palette of materials and use of colour. With the recent metallic cladding of the Garden Museum extension and proposed glazed tiles on the St Mary Magdalene**

### project, is your use and attitude to materials changing?

What we love is to find a way of building that is particular to each project. Usually, finding the material is the key to that. We try to make material qualities more present by a process of stripping-back, so that we achieve a certain baldness. At the Garden Museum, the bronze cladding shingles are pulled apart so that you see the scale of each piece and in order to expose it to more patination and variegation. At St Mary Magdalene, the use of faience stems from an idea about making visible the more decorative material qualities of the church interior. Our Cardiff Maggie's, which is an interim centre, is being made out of corrugated Cor-ten sheet, which is a reference to the colour of the local bracken and the provisional nature of vernacular building in Wales.

### What is the importance of research in your work, both in terms of approaching individual projects but also in terms of your wider practice?

We are really concerned with making an architectural response that is particular to the place and the project, so spending time to try to understand sites and buildings more closely is always important. Teaching has also been really important, both in terms of trying to sharpen our thinking and also because it brings the opportunity to explore ideas and themes outside those in the office. And then some projects we have done in the office have been much more consciously about research, from writing heritage statements to, for instance, the work we have done for the Greater London Authority on urban waste treatment.



