

The Centenary Wing for The Women's College within University of Queensland – A Reflection Considering 'Gender Contiguity'

'The design is sensitive and responsive to the existing scale, materials and architectural language of the college; a campus of north facing mid-century brick buildings arranged around lush courtyards, the central social spaces of each wing linked in a 'community spine' by meandering covered garden walks. The new scheme continues this arrangement, yielding many great social spaces both inside and out. Natural cross ventilation and generous views to landscape confer a pleasant amenity to every space. The attractive double height, semi-external garden rooms within the secure curtilage of the building, courtyards, gathering circles, and indeed shared bathroom zones, are the very important 'social glue' binding this community of women.'

Adjunct Professor Libby Watson-Brown | Architectus

Six highly intelligent and creative women share a lunch at Jamie Oliver's Restaurant in Brisbane and reflect amongst other things on the very successful delivery of The Centenary Wing for the Women's College. The Centenary Wing opened to correlate with the Centenary celebration's for The Women's College and was to provide a home for another fifty young women plus a residence for the Head of College and CEO in a modest but elegant building which was to reference the existing college and the unique site across the lake at UQ. The project had a budget of \$6.6 million dollars and needed to be delivered within an 18 month period.

How do we define success? The client Adjunct Professor Lyla Davies shares,

'The Centenary Wing is a stunning contemporary building, finished on time and on budget. What client could ask for more?'

Much of the success of the project was attributed to the true collaborative nature of the project leadership team. Lyla notes that the College felt listened to and the consultant team were genuinely interested in the views of the College. She further adds

'All negotiations and problem solving went smoothly and I believe that the collaboration and cooperation between all involved influenced the final result.'

Caroline Stalker of Architectus notes that similarly the architects felt listened to. Importantly the College had a clear brief which engendered the understanding that this project was about 'place making' for people and the site, not about flashy object design.

An interesting and rare observation is that the project leadership team consisted entirely of women including the client, users, project director, architects, quantity surveyor and construction lawyer. There was also female representation within the engineering and construction team. Caroline Allard then of DCWC commented that '

'It was a unique experience for me to be on an all women team – first time in my working life so far!'

And the whole team concurs with this profound statement. Dr Sallyanne Atkinson, President of the College, commented at the opening, that although one could say serendipitous particularly for this project, all of the professionals were selected on merit. It just so happened in this instance the best for the project were women.

So, was the fact that the leadership team were all women, influential in the success of the project?

Iyla notes that

'consistently, with all the female professionals, the interests of the project were the primary consideration rather than individual ambitions or egos'.

Caroline notes that

'Once we were all on board it became clear that it would be easy to establish a good collaborative working culture – this was in part due to the personalities of the client and project leadership but may have also had something to do with 'gender contingency'. There wasn't much posturing, just a desire by everyone to do a good job.'

Munju Takalkar also then of Architectus shared that

'The project team were working towards a common goal and supporting each other to get there.'

Of note Libby comments that

'Proudly and appropriately, this is a project delivered by a team largely comprised of women'

On my part I concur with the above. It was a first for me also to work with an all female team in a time where the construction industry remains predominantly male. I felt a sense of nurturing rather than conflict. I felt a sense of true collaboration rather than just communication. I felt a sense of focus rather than process. It must be emphasised that the project experience was enhanced by the individuals involved, not just a gender issue. It is timely to acknowledge the males that also contributed to the project particularly John Martin the College Bursar and Jeff Sipek the College Properties and Facilities Manager.

The project reached final completion in March 2016. We will reflect on this project with a sense of celebration, and a point of reference that hopefully may be repeated in the future.

Authored by Megan Traynor-Boyland

Those at Lunch: Adjunct Professor Iyla Davies Head of College and Chief Executive | Adjunct Professor Elizabeth Watson-Brown, Adjunct Professor Caroline Stalker and Munju Takalkar of Architectus - Architect | Caroline Allard then of DCWC - Quantity Surveyor | Megan Traynor-Boyland then of Peddle Thorp – Project Director