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OPEN DESIGN OFFICE (1972-1978)

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- Influenced by the women’s liberation movement in the late 1960s, the Boston and Cambridge area was a major center for feminist activism in the 1960s and 70s and home to several women’s organizations, including Woman Architects, Landscape Architects, Planners (WALAP).

- In 1972, WALAP published an article “The Case for Flexible Schedules” in Architectural Forum. The authors argued that for women to succeed in architecture, offices needed to change the culture that equated long work hours to commitment. As women were the primary care givers to children, flexibility was needed to keep women in the profession. More, flexible schedules would help both male and female employees searching for a better balance between work and life. And projects would benefit from architects having more time for outside pursue and a broader perspective.

- In the same year, several participants from WALAP met to discuss the possibility of opening their own office with a more supportive working environment. They were interested in answering to the questions:

- “How would an office of women professionals differ from the traditional (men’s) office? What would it be like to work in architecture and planning as a member of the majority rather than the minority? What would the priorities of such an office be?”

- Instead of advocating for professional equality that was to be accepted in the profession as it was, the Open Design Office tried to change how architecture was practiced. It aimed to serve as a critique of traditional practice as well as a model for alternative office organization. Thus, in Open Design Office, everything was up for reinvention, from relationships within the office, how to work with the clients to the means of communicating with the contractors. The Open Design Office established 3 principles:

EQUAL PAY

- The first principle stated that all profits would remain within the firm. In contrary to corporate model of traditional offices where senior partners were motivated by profits to exploit the employees, the Open Design Office strived to treat all their employees equally and fairly. In Open Design Office, all members would be paid for time work.

FLEXIBLE SCHEDULES

- Secondly, working hours would be completely flexible as long as deadlines were met and members kept each other informed of their schedules. Hence, in Open Design Office, each woman could determine her own schedule. Regular meetings would be held to discuss projects and management issues.

NON-HIERARCHY

- The last principle was the elimination of an office hierarchy. Each member was expected to take full responsibility of her projects and the office would only accept projects that everyone agreed on. They rejected the single leader model and gave every member equal say in decision making through a consensus process which can take hours. But by doing so, the Open Design Office responded to an office culture that glorify the myth of the individual creator over the reality that most project actually required a team of people. The members compared it to women preparing a meal together: “No one defines who is in charge.”

- Despite the aspiration of establishing a non-hierarchical office structure, the Open Design Office could not avoid to have a more dominant character in the office. After the first year, four members left the office as it did not live up to the promise of non-hierarchy and others soon realized that they preferred the security of working as employees. By 1976, the economic downturn threatened the livelihood of the office as no profit surplus was reserved to support through a recession. Several members left to seek employment elsewhere and the office was closed in 1978.

- The type of client and how they work with them were very important. They aspired to work for underserved population such as women and children. And they wanted their clients to be full participants in the design process.

- Roxbury rehabilitation for Harvard University: opportunity to redesign the process where tenants were involved from the beginning

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Andrea Merrett, Feminism in Action: the Open Design Office, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KBqWUnCd5Dg&t=1911s