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THE WOMEN'S MAKING



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**PAD**

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info@padjournal.net – editors@padjournal.net

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# ABOUT CURRENT PRACTICES

# How do Women Industrial Designers Succeed in the Workplace? Getting In and Getting On

**Cathy Lockhart**

University of Technology Sydney

## **Keywords**

Industrial Design, Gender, Career, Career Development Planning, Success.

## **Abstract**

In Australia, despite comprising half of the design student population, women remain under-represented in the design world and rarely hold senior leadership roles or win high profile design awards. This qualitative research, focussing on the workplace experience of nineteen female industrial designers, explores how these women achieve success and the facilitators and barriers. Overall, success was defined as happiness, work-life balance and enjoyment and engagement with the design process; impact was also important, with one defining success as seeing a stranger using a product she had designed. Most found the industry to be male dominated and struggled to secure their first job, explaining the challenge of learning specific software programs and then developing the confidence and courage to actively contribute design ideas. A variety of different strategies was utilised to secure their first job, contacts, mentors and role models later empowering over half to develop their own design start-ups. The decision to become an entrepreneur was a conscious choice, enabling these women to follow their design passion with more flexible, parenting-friendly hours. This qualitative research provides some nuanced insights into how these women navigated entrenched gender stereotypes and traditionally masculine workplace norms. The findings suggest the need for more radical approaches to facilitating women's recruitment, retention, and progression.

## 1. Introduction

Despite comprising half of the design student population at university, women remain under-represented in the design world and rarely hold senior leadership roles or win high profile local, state or national design awards (Anthony, 2001; Fowler & Wilson, 2012; Roan & Stead, 2012). This gender inequality in career progression and visibility is illustrated very clearly in the architecture professional accreditation process: women comprise almost half (44%) of architecture students in Australia, yet only one per cent are directors at architectural firms and less than a fifth (ranging from 16-25% in each state) are actually registered architects (Matthewson, 2012). In the last decade, despite an approximately equal gender distribution among graduates from design disciplines, there remains an under-representation of women actually working in the field. This disparity raises an obvious question, specifically addressed by this research: what happens to these bright young women when they leave university and try to enter the design workforce? Where are they in the workforce and why they not represented, especially at the higher echelons of the profession? This qualitative research explores these questions, focussing on the experience of female industrial designers in Australia.

### 1.1. Women in Design

To date, little empirical research has investigated women's experience in either design education or the workforce, although significant anecdotal reporting suggests that women are under-represented in senior leadership roles and at high profile design awards (Anthony, 2001; Fowler & Wilson, 2004;

Fowler & Wilson, 2012; McMahon & Kiernan, 2017). As there is no published research relating directly to the focus area of this research, women in industrial/product design, looking to other design discipline areas (where women are also in the minority) provides some initial insight into the potential issues and barriers for female industrial designers.

A handful of studies have begun to look at the engagement of women in the architecture profession, which is renowned for supporting a highly male-dominated work environment and gendered professional culture. This small body of emergent research identifies the aggressive, competitive and masculine work environment as alienating women from the practice of architecture, explaining how most universities report that more women than men have graduated in architecture, yet these graduates are not present in the profession (Department of Labor, 2008; Roan & Stead, 2012; Sanchez de Madariaga, 2010; Whitman, 2005).

In the first comparative cross-national study of architects in three European countries (the UK, Spain and France), Caven, Navarro-Astor and Diop (2012) interviewed 66 women architects. Overall, there was a sense of “resigned accommodation” amongst these female architects, who described how they had little knowledge or understanding of the masculine work environment prior to entering it. University education left them ill equipped for site-based work, and they developed strategies such as the use of humour and emphasising their “otherness” to build their professional standing and highlight the value of their different skills (specifically, better com-



munication, complaining less and creating fewer problems). There was a sense that these positive attributes hindered their advancement as they “just get on with the job”.

## 1.2. Women in Creative Arts

As design is positioned across two very different fields (engineering and creative arts), it is important to explore if and how gender might impact the experience of women in creative arts careers, such as performance, design, creative writing, music, film, choreography and art, as well as in STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics). Although only a handful of studies have explored gender inequality issues for women in creative arts, the findings have generally been very similar to those investigating the experience of women in STEM fields. Women are under-represented in both production and decision-making roles, with existing cultural frameworks about art and gender disadvantaging women in both direct and indirect ways (Schmutz & Faupel, 2010).

Creative arts careers differ markedly from STEM careers in that they challenge dominant cultural standards of career success, typically offering a lifetime of career instability, competition and low pay (Brooks & Daniluk, 1998). Thus, it is interesting to note that the limited research on women in creative arts careers often identifies two unique factors not often detected within the STEM literature: (1) a strong, all-encompassing passion to pursue their (artistic) career and (2) significant opposition from family and friends for embarking on an artistically-inclined career path that is (typically) difficult to succeed in, unpredictable and poorly paid.

In their recent research exploring the experience of 21 female creatives (art directors, copywriters, and creative directors) working in advertising, Windels and Wei-Na found that the industry was still very much a deeply rooted boys' club "built around male norms, with systems in place to privilege male perspectives" (2012, p. 510) and where women's "voices, perspectives, and work were devalued" (2012, p. 511). Essentially, the participants felt it was easier for men to get to the top, as the creative department had a strong masculine paradigm that restricted women's ability to grow their careers. At a social level, these American women saw junior-level men socialise and form relationships with senior-level males; they felt they could not form the same bond, partly due to gender differences and partly because friendships between younger women and senior men can be seen as inappropriate. At a professional level, these female creatives also described being disadvantaged by gender-stereotypes and being pigeon-holed into working on less prestigious "female" assignments throughout their careers; one explained how they never worked on projects about beer but always on ones about tampons, and these projects were seldom "buzz-worthy" or represented in national awards (Windels & Wei-Na, 2012).

### **1.3. Women and the Industrial Design Profession in Australia**

Given the limited research exploring the experiences of female designers, this study focuses specifically on how female industrial designers fare in the workplace. Industrial design often operates in a parallel way to the creative industries where there are networked clusters of small-to-medium enterprises, sole-traders and micro-businesses (Ashton, 2015;

R. Bridgstock, 2011) where the work is often freelance or short-term contracts due to the fluidity and movement within these types of businesses. The Design Institute of Australia (DIA) regularly carries out a salary survey across the design sector, reporting that the self-employed designer's salary dropped in 2013 with a significant drop being experienced by industrial designers (Robertson & Design Institute of Australia, 2014). The transition into industry could be seen to involve three interlinked stages: preparation, actual transition and outcomes in the labour market. It is not necessarily a linear path, as qualifications alone do not guarantee immediate entry into the workforce (Haukka, 2011; Haukka, Industries, Innovation, Council, & Technology, 2009). To date, there has been no published research investigating the experience of female industrial designers in the workplace. This research, an in-depth qualitative case study of 19 Australian female industrial designers, explicitly addresses this knowledge gap and focuses on their workplace experience.

## 2. Research Method

Given the very small body of literature exploring the experiences of women in design, an exploratory qualitative research approach was utilised due to its appropriateness for investigating unstudied populations and issues. To better understand the unique individual “lived experiences” of women in industrial design, we adopted a phenomenological approach where the researcher identifies the essence of human experience (Creswell, 2009; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2009).

## 2.1. Participants

This interview study was conducted with women who had graduated from an industrial design course at one Australian university, and at the time of interview in 2011 they ranged in age from 21 to 37 years and had graduated between one and sixteen years ago. The majority (74%) were currently practising industrial designers, and reported working in a number of industries, from in-house design work at a major appliance company through to designing, producing and bringing to market their own products. Table 1 outlines the specific socio-demographic information, including current employment, position title and year of graduation.

Code	Year of graduation	Current type of employment	Position title used
6	1995	self employed	Designer
10	2002	self employed	Designer
19	2002	self employed	Designer
13	2002	self employed - stay at home Mum currently	stay at home Mum
1	2003	self employed	Industrial Designer
4	2003	on going contract	Industrial designer + graphic designer
16	2004	contract + own projects	Designer
18	2004	full time	Footwear Designer
5	2005	full time	Industrial Design + Account services
12	2005	full time	Account Manager
17	2005	full time	Ergonomist
2	2006	self employed	Design director
9	2006	full time contract	Exhibition Designer
8	2007	full time	Industrial Designer
14	2007	full time	Project Manager
3	2008	full time	Events officer
7	2009	part time	Designer
11	2010	internship	Junior Designer
15	2010	full time - on maternity leave	Industrial Designer

**Table 1.** Participants' socio-demographic profile.

## 2.2. Procedure

All participants responded to a broadcast email to female graduates of the course inviting them to participate in the research. Data collection in the form of in-depth interviews was conducted by the author (an experienced female Industrial Designer and academic) in a central convenient location. The Bruce and Lewis (1990) three-hurdle model was used to explain the factors that influence career advancement of women in design: getting the qualification (hurdle 1); getting the first job (hurdle 2); and becoming a success (hurdle 3) guided interview question development. The digitally recorded interviews were transcribed into text for analysis. The data was then read and re-read to identify key words articulated by the participants, first individually and then as a group to establish patterns of meaning (Creswell, 2003; Liamputtong, 2009).

## 3. Results

Focussing specifically on women industrial designers' experience in the workforce, the thematic analysis identified four key themes, which will be discussed in turn: breaking into the industry; once in the door; gender hurdles; and the move to entrepreneur.

### 3.1. Theme 1: Breaking In – “I Went to a Lot of Interviews, Lots and Lots of Interviews”

As the quotes in Table 2 illustrate, successfully breaking into the discipline after graduation required a number of different strategies and the conscious adoption of proactive career management behaviours, specifically: networks and networking; traditional and non-traditional pathways; and design

competitions and internships. Networks and networking were critical, with over half of the participants (63%) recalling that they actively engaged in networking to gain their first design job and that university academics and their final year self-directed major project enabled them to get that first job.

Networks & Networking	Design Strategies - competitions & internships	Non-traditional path - sidestepping
I had spoken to her in one of my industrial design assignments. I called up all these people and I remember speaking to her. I called her up and said, 'Hi I interviewed you a few years ago and I'm really interested and would love to come and work for you'. It started off as work experience for a bit and it ended up being a position which was good and she was tough as, but it was really, really great and once you are on her great side she is the most invaluable mentor you could ever have she's fantastic. (#18)	My plan had been in third year to tee up some work experience, because the biggest obstacle to getting a job is work experience. The irony being if you don't have any, they won't hire you. So it's like okay, even if I have to volunteer that's fine, if that's going to get me what I need. And I figured for me the best way to do that was to enter a whole bunch of design competitions – and I was fortunate in doing furniture, there was quite a lot going on that year – and exhibit, anything I could. (#15)	So I got this receptionist position at a Furniture retailer. At least it is something design-related and got into something 9 to 5. As long as you are in the industry, it's like an ear to the ground, there's no point having a job that is not in the industry and just looking. (#14)
A friend of mine who was doing Industrial Design at another university and his Dad owned the company, he needed somebody to just do graphics and CAD stuff, I got the job designing backpacks and I more or less did that the whole way through the degree part-time. (#17)	No but if you put the work in ... get your foot in the door basically as I started off doing an internship with a guy doing furniture and he knew the people at another company and then when you start it seems like quite a small circle when you have some names it's easier to get other jobs and but that first little pluggin away was really hard and it's not easy to get a job, no. (#16)	First proper job was in production management in a point of sale company. So I sort of managed their factory sales, their product sales and then a lot optional manufacturing, China, Hong Kong. So not designing as such but more problem solving and troubleshooting, that sort of stuff. (#02)
I think you probably forwarded an email and I applied for that, or did they contact me? I can't remember. They were just starting up, they didn't have an office or anything ... and the interview was downstairs at uni, outside the workshop. But that was the first job. (#09)	The design director had done a lecture during our course. That was the consultancy that I wanted to work for. Then when we won this work experience, it all fell into place. During uni I had been working at a jewellery and accessories company and I quit my job there to do this six-week work experience. (#10)	I wanted to start earning money straight away so then I just applied for the easiest related thing that I could go for, which was the graphic artist position. Having the art background as well helped, so that was the first job. (#04)

**Table 2.** Breaking in – strategies for securing their first design job.



Approximately a third of the participants (37%) reported following a more traditional path to find their first job, describing using employment websites but needing to be proactive in following up and cold calling. A minority reported consciously utilising non-traditional pathways as stepping-stones to their preferred career. For example, one took a job as a receptionist in a retail design-based company, which allowed her to remain connected to the industry and to build her network. A fifth (21%) described consciously engaging in career planning activities designed to facilitate their ability to get a job, such as internships and entering design-related competitions to build their portfolio and industry standing.

### **3.2. Theme 2: In the Door – “Basically, Just Understanding the Workforce”**

Key challenges for these women in the first years in the workplace centred around the development of a professional career identity, with over half describing how they wanted validation of their career choice and years of study, and strongly desired the label designer on their business card. As the industrial design course offered a broad scope of experience, like most recent graduates, these design graduates described needing to build both their confidence and product-industry specific skills. Two key sub-themes emerged: developing self-confidence as a designer (specifically learning the discipline and language of the work); and embracing travel.

First, as the quotes in Table 3 illustrate, having secured their first jobs, these women then described an ongoing process of building confidence in their own design skills and growing

their understanding of the whole process of getting a piece of design to market in practice, from design to production and marketing. Industrial designers recalled the challenge of “learning the discipline of work” (#13) and unique workplace protocols – as one explained, it was about “trying to fit in and learn at the same time as doing your job” (#14). Second, travel features prominently in the career of a designer, as the place of manufacture in Australia has moved from being ‘down the road’ to predominantly in Asia. A critical part of a designer’s work is communicating with manufacturers, checking methods and materials and production techniques; this is often best achieved face to face, especially when establishing new relationships. These women recalled how, in the early stages of their career traveling, they were usually in a junior role and supported by a senior colleague. As women travelling to China and Korea, they experienced differing levels of respect for their position as a designer:

I know in one place we went to, they made the women go out of the room while the men did the business and then the women could come back in, It was just ... so degrading, [but] that’s the way they do it (#02).

Communication was often a significant challenge, with many of these women describing how they would utilise their design skills of drawing to facilitate understanding. Another, who was travelling alone a lot, described how she learned Mandarin to build up her confidence and found these language skills also helped in “getting good relationships, getting good pricing and stuff” (#02).



Learning the business	Building confidence
I learnt a lot of skills that helped me more in having a business of design, which is good; seeing how a whole company operates from human resources to accounts and also being exposed constantly to a full product cycle and dealing with suppliers and things like that. (#19)	I guess having the confidence and the courage to speak up and contribute your ideas in amongst a team of established professional designers. Believing enough in yourself that your thoughts are equally valid and worthwhile to all those other people who've been there however many years. (#15)
My key challenges were, well, getting a job in the first place and then I think learning to work, I think was a bit of a challenge, because I had spent so long in my 20s studying that I didn't have a lot of work experience. (#13)	I think getting up to speed with a lot of that industry specific knowledge. So whether that's project specific terminology, competence in whatever programs they're using. (#15)
Learning not to step on toes, really. Trying to fit in and learn at the same time as doing your job. Because I ask a lot of questions but with a small company, there is not always time for the questions to be answered. (#14)	Another challenge is when you work on a project ... trying to do those projects in a time frame, for the client. So you've got all these jobs - all these different jobs that you have to do and you have to manage your time and get five different projects' concepts out. You want three or four concepts for all the different jobs and you've by the end of the week to get all that done. (#05)

**Table 3.** Developing self-confidence as a designer – learning and growing in confidence.

### 3.3. Theme 3: Gender Hurdles – “Guys Will Never Get That”

Just over half of these designers (52%) described experiencing gender based issues and stereotypes in their workplaces, specifically: gendered behaviours, including sexism; male gate-keeping, where different standards are applied to women; and stereotypical perceptions of their skills and abilities. As one explained, the glass ceiling was there.

It sounds like you are kind of complaining about it or but it does exist. It's a bit of a glass ceiling and it is quite low in industrial design. I think, also, women have a different approach to design. (#07)

Only a handful of women described overt ongoing sexism, with one recalling a workplace where the owner and most of the staff were male. The few women designers employed were in accounts and finance, and had to actively flirt with the owner to do some design-related activity. She recalled how her own opportunities were significantly limited, as she was the only one who didn't flirt with him:

He liked the girls to banter to him and I didn't. So he didn't like me. He thought I was weird ... They played the game, they flirted with him and they got on well. You know, flirtation is harmless but not when it has to be a part of your job (#13).

More commonly, these women recalled male gate-keeping, driven by the underlying assumption that women are less able to make and produce the models required by these three dimensional, traditionally masculine design disciplines. Women felt they had to "try harder" and outperform their male colleagues, with women of child-bearing age subjected to scrutiny regarding their plan for having children. In contrast, a number also described using their gender and "otherness" to their advantage, charming suppliers and manufacturers:

I think also in some ways it's been beneficial for us being women because like, with suppliers and things, they find that quite refreshing. They are generally male dominated and they see these two friendly, youngish girls coming in and they are like, 'Oh, we will make a sample for you for free'. So I think in some ways we have played that card to our advantage a bit. (#19)

Finally, in terms of stereotypes, a number of women described how they perceived men to be more confident in their work, more willing to take more risks in both the workshop environment or product development and in promotion of themselves, and stereotypically more suited to this three-dimensional manufacturing based profession. These women described developing strategies to overcome this, becoming strong:

I think you have got to be quite strong because I found it's a massive boys' club. When I was starting, with the suppliers especially, if they saw any kind of weakness and they saw that you are a girl, they sort of they try and walk all over you' (#12).

This confidence, or ego, in men was further seen to be a reason for the difference in pay, with their male colleagues perceived to be more experienced at negotiation and willing to push for it. In contrast, they felt if a woman is assertive she is seen as “pushy” or “full of herself” (#04).

### **3.4. Theme 4: The Entrepreneurs “... If I Don't Do It Myself, I Will Never Do It”**

Just under half of this group (42%) decided to back their own abilities and embrace their entrepreneurial spirit, creating their own businesses where they design, manufacture and supply their own products. Products produced by this group range from eyewear, jewellery and accessories, headphones and footwear to furniture and lighting. All these entrepreneurs described a passion to create something of their own, expressing delight and satisfaction when they received posi-

tive feedback from a user or saw their product in use. As one noted, “I have to give it another go otherwise this voice won’t go away” (#01). Rarely did they step directly from university into their own enterprise, with almost all describing an initial experience working for others in order to develop their knowledge, skill base, contacts and confidence. Further, the majority identified the importance of a mentor or role model, often an employer or family member who assisted in aspects of their new business:

Somebody that did help me a lot was one of my friend’s dads who does have a lot of products made in China. He was great in terms of negotiating the price and telling me all about shipping information and what all the terms were, customs and getting through all that. (#01)

As one noted, she had known from her second year at university that she wants to start her own business (a design consultancy) but knew that she first needed “some solid work experience before then, both to learn on the job, make contacts, network, all that kind of thing” (#15). The major motivations for entrepreneurship stemmed from dissatisfaction, either with the types of work, levels of creativity and work life balance.

#### **4. Discussion**

This study has provided insight into the experience of Australian female industrial designers in the workplace, identifying the perceived key facilitators and barriers to succeeding in their chosen careers. First, consistent with a large body of research, these women designers described how the transi-

tion from university to workplace is often a time of change and uncertainty for an individual, with the defining of career goals, finding a job and understanding what is expected proving to be challenges (De Vos, De Clippeleer, & Dewilde, 2009). Proactively planning for this transition and networking, specifically developing and maintaining relationships with relevant others who may be able to provide career advice or employment advocacy or opportunity at this early stage, was critical for “getting that first start” and early career success (Bridgstock, 2013; Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003).

Second, transition to workplace culture seemed to be one of the largest hurdles; this is particularly acute if they have not engaged in any type of work experience during their education as it can provide context for their learning and understanding of graduate positions (Butcher, 2009; Perrone & Vickers, 2003; Walters, 2018). Graduates often perceive a tension between the skills they have developed while under academic guidance and those expected by potential employers. The university aims for broad transferable skills that will allow graduates to be flexible and adaptable to changing work environments whereas employers often focus on specific skills and abilities for their specific conditions (Ball, 2002; Davis, Savage, & Miller, 2009; Haukka, 2011; Perrone & Vickers, 2003; Smith, Clegg, Lawrence, & Todd, 2007).

Third, understanding the globalised, networked world of 21<sup>st</sup> century creative work is a valuable capability and may further lead to exposure to jobs in non-traditional sectors (Bridgstock, Goldsmith, Rodgers, & Hearn, 2015; R. S. Bridgstock,

2011). For these women, travel, predominantly to Asia, highlights the shift in the work of the industrial designer and how many companies involve designers more closely in all the activities of design-to-market. The ability to communicate in foreign languages along with international views are additional attributes that assist with new graduate employability (Yang, You, & Chen, 2005).

Fourth, the study illuminates the historical development of this discipline, being similar to that of engineering in that they both have an image of being dirty or technical and to do with machines, and are both industries that have been established with masculine patterns and values (Bruce, 1985; Bruce & Lewis, 1990; McMahon & Kiernan, 2017; Powell, Bagilhole, & Dainty, 2006). Although there has been an increase in the number of women making their way into the industry through successful education (Lockhart & Miller, 2015a), there are still significant gendered hurdles that the women face. Nonetheless, to achieve success and acceptance in this space, women often modify their behaviours by adopting male attributed traits such as toughness and competitiveness, or alternatively utilise deference, a more acceptable feminine characteristic. Often the types of work that are available to women in this space offer little creativity and responsibility, resulting in reduced opportunity for advancement (Windels & Mallia, 2015; Windels & Wei-Na, 2012). The women in this study who have been frustrated by these constraints and barriers have stepped away from the convention and developed their own entrepreneurial working environment producing their own products, taking control of the whole product to market process and

how they work. “So our studio is not open on Fridays, so that is part of our lifestyle choice” (#10). The move to self-employment most notably occurs at a time when they have developed confidence in their business skills and knowledge (Hanage, Scott, & Davies, 2016; Heilman & Chen, 2003; Henry, 2009; Langowitz & Minniti, 2007).

## 5. Conclusion

There has been an increase in the number of women studying design at university, specifically industrial design. In this paper we have considered some of the issues that challenge women when pursuing their careers after graduation from university. These findings are based on the experiences of 19 female industrial design course graduates interviewed. Some experiences and challenges appeared consistently across the interviewees even though their time in the workplace and type of work experiences differed. A number of the challenges or hurdles that were identified may hinder them in achieving their desired success. The understanding of these hurdles is important as they can be seen to push the women out of the mainstream industry to self-employment. This move often does provide a space for women to follow their passion and to tailor their work environment, although it removes women’s voices and sensibilities from the centre of the field.

This discipline-specific research, when read alongside that of other disciplines such as architecture, advertising and the creative industries, begins to suggest that there are common problems for women working in these creative fields (Adeokun & Opoko, 2015; R. S. Bridgstock, 2011; Caven &

Diop, 2012; Windels & Wei-Na, 2012). In particular, it highlights that there is still gender discrimination, a “boys club” where women are held to different standards – made to prove themselves, often offered the less creative jobs and thereby less remuneration, and there is little flexibility in place and hours of work making management of family and children difficult.

Future research should examine the experience of men also moving into this field to provide further understanding of how the industry embraces and treats all new graduates. Similarly, such research could investigate whether there is attitudinal change occurring: if younger men who studied alongside these women and who have not experienced any discrimination during their study (Lockhart & Miller, 2015b), have embraced the diversity and skills set women may bring to this creative environment.



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V

**BIOGRAPHIES**

### Ana Julia Melo Almeida

Ph.D. Student in Design at Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo, Universidade de São Paulo (FAU-USP), Brazil (research supported by Fapesp). Currently, she is attached to École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Ehess-Paris) for a doctoral internship. Her current research is concerned with: women's history, gender history, design history, textile artifacts, Brazilian modern design.

[ajuliamelo@usp.br](mailto:ajuliamelo@usp.br)

### Shujun Ban

Shujun Ban is a lecturer of Department of Product Design at School of Arts and Design in Qingdao University of Technology. She is an experienced and welcomed teacher in industrial design for 16 years, with continuous enthusiasm in innovation and follow-up interactive guidance of teaching. She has taught more than 50 subjects, averaging 360 in-class hours annually. She keeps on exploring interdisciplinary in design and arts, focusing on traditional handicrafts research. She is good at planing, designing and promoting cultural brands. She has self-created a media brand, "Second Air". She is an expert judge of industrial design competition in Shandong Province and an excellent instructor in design competitions and workshops. She graduated from Nanjing Forestry University with a master's degree of Mechanical Design and Theory with specialization in Industrial Design in 2004. She will be a visiting researcher at Politecnico di Milano.

[banshujun@126.com](mailto:banshujun@126.com)

### Roberto de Paolis

Graduated *cum laude* in architecture at the Politecnico di Milano in 1983, and gained a Ph.D. in Industrial Design in 1996. Assistant Professor at the School of Design since 2001, conducts research in Department of Design, focusing on furniture design, textile design, interior design, and history of design. He has published essays and reviews in magazines, book contributions and international conference papers, and has participated in national and international research programs.

[roberto.depaolis@polimi.it](mailto:roberto.depaolis@polimi.it)

### Umberto de Paolis

After completing his classical studies at the "A. Volta" High School in Como, he took composition at the "G. Verdi" Conservatory in Como, studying the cello and the piano. At the same time he undertook historical, archival and documentary research studies on authors and performers of Italian artistic, musical and performance culture between the late nineteenth and twentieth century, rediscovering and enhancing figures representative of an eclecticism often neglected by official historiographic critics. Since 2012 he has carried out independent research and historical-critical in-depth study for the purposes related to the progress of current research, coming into contact with academic figures of reference in the scientific-disciplinary fields of relevance, conducting research in archives and cultural institutions such as the State Archives in Rome, Bibliothèque National de France in Paris, Patrimoine de la SBM and Archives du Palais Princier in Monaco, Archive of the Teatro Regio in Turin, and The National Archives in London.

[umbertodepaolis@libero.it](mailto:umbertodepaolis@libero.it)

### Marinella Ferrara

PhD, associate professor of product design in the School of Design of the Politecnico di Milano. Since 2014 she has been the head of MADEC, the Research Centre of Material Design Culture in the Department of Design. Her researches are mainly focused on design-driven innovation, design for materials (advanced and smart materials), news technologies integration in product and interior design, Future Design Scenarios. With her research, she has made a significant contribution to methodologies of Design for Materials and historiographical work. Moreover, she deals other research topic like the design in Mediterranean countries, gender issues in design and Design History. Co-founder of *PAD. Pages on Arts & Design* journal, since 2011 she has been the PAD editor in chief. Since 2015 to 2017 she has been a member of ADI's executive board, and currently coordinates the technical-scientific committee for long-life professional training of design professionals. Since 2019 she has been a member of the executive committee of *AIS/Design. Storia e Ricerche* scientific journal. Authors of more than 140 scientific publications, she is a member of scientific committee in international conferences, reviewer for international scientific journals, and research evaluator for academic research application in NL and PT.

[marinella.ferrara@polimi.it](mailto:marinella.ferrara@polimi.it)

**Debora Giorgi**

PhD, Architect, she is Researcher in Design at the Dipartimento di Architettura of the University of Florence (DIDA-UNIFI). Since 1991 she works on the issues related to Sustainable Local Development and the social implications of the project starting from the Cultural Heritage. For over 20 years she worked in projects in Ethiopia, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Yemen, Jordan, Haiti, with the most important national and international donors WHC - UNESCO, UNCCD, World Bank, European Commission, WMF, AICS... Since 2011 she has been collaborating with the DIDA UNIFI especially in projects around Maghreb countries and in the social field promoting Social Design projects and workshops using co-design methodologies. She is professor of Service Design at DIDA UNIFI, professor of Design for Cultural Heritage in the License Course in DesignS at Ecole Euro-Méditerranéenne d'Architecture Design et Urbanisme de l'Université Euro-Méditerranéenne de Fès EMADU – UEMF in Morocco and visiting professor in some universities in Mediterranean countries.

[debora.giorgi@unifi.it](mailto:debora.giorgi@unifi.it)

**Melanie Levick-Parkin**

Dr. Melanie Levick-Parkin's research is focused on visual communication and design & making practices in relation to intangible cultural heritage, heritage and archaeology, framed by Design Anthropological approaches. Most of her work is about the agency of visual and material language and informed by a feminist lens. She is particularly interested in how gender manifests in/ affects how meaning is made within the public sphere, both materially and visually and how power circumscribes who is able to make meaning and give form in different spheres. She is currently the MFA Design Programme leader at the Sheffield Institute of Arts, Sheffield Hallam University, and also supervises doctoral candidates across Art & Design and for the Research England funded, Lab4living 100 Year Life Project.

[m.levick-parkin@shu.ac.uk](mailto:m.levick-parkin@shu.ac.uk)

**Vittorio Linfante**

Art Director and Professor of Fashion Design, Branding, Communication Design, Curation at the Politecnico di Milano, University of Bologna, Poli.design and Milan Fashion Institute. Curator –with Paola Bertola – of the exhibition *// Nuovo Vocabolario della Moda italiana*, Triennale di Milano (November 2015–March 2016).

[vittorio.linfante@polimi.it](mailto:vittorio.linfante@polimi.it)

**Cathy Lockhart**

Cathy has a PhD in Design and a Graduate Certificate in Higher Education. She has undertaken course and program leadership roles within the Faculty of Design, Architecture & Building at the University of Technology Sydney, Australia, including Industrial Design, Interdisciplinary Studies and Product Design. She has overseen program reaccreditations and renewals to address the global readiness of graduates. Her role as senior lecturer concentrates on introducing design process and methods for first year students; and facilitating industry projects to assist senior students in the transition from education to practice. Cathy worked for many years as a professional designer including her own consultancy business and she is a Member of the Design Institute of Australia. Her research explores the gender mix of the student population in industrial/product design education. In particular, she is interested in the educational experience for students and their transition into the profession.

[cathy.lockhart@uts.edu.au](mailto:cathy.lockhart@uts.edu.au)

**Maria Cecilia Loschiavo dos Santos**

Philosopher and Full Professor of Design at Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo da Universidade de São Paulo (FAU-USP), Brazil. She coordinates the Workshop of Social Design at the Institute of Advanced Studies (IEA-USP). Her work encompasses Brazilian design, discarded products, design, homelessness and recyclable material collectors.

[clschia@usp.br](mailto:clschia@usp.br)

**Virginia Marano**

Virginia Marano obtained a Master's degree in Contemporary Art History at the University of Siena. She is currently in her second year of her PhD at the University of Zurich under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Tristan Weddigen. Her studies are funded by the Swiss Government Excellence Scholarship (ESKAS). Her dissertation topic is on Alberto Giacometti and the

Post-war sculpture in New York. She did a four-month internship at Mumok (2017, Vienna) and a three-month internship at Artipelag (2018, Stockholm) and is a committee member of the Fondazione Centro Giacometti in Stampa.

[maranovirginia@gmail.com](mailto:maranovirginia@gmail.com)

### **Anna Mazzanti**

Assistant Professor in History of Contemporary Art, at Politecnico di Milano –Department of Design. PhD (Venice) and research fellow (Siena, 2000-2011) her specific fields of research circulate around the XIX to XXI centuries artistic culture, as well exhibitions and relationship between art and design. She has curated various exhibitions including: *Mondi a Milano. Culture ed esposizioni 1874-1950* (Milano, 2015) when she worked about the “thread designers” (Papini, 1923) between the two wars. She studied and wrote about Anita Pittoni, Rosa Menni Giolli, Marcello Nizzoli. She is responsible since 2017 for the group of research D.E.SY (Designing Enhancement Strategies and Exhibit SYstems for the Italian House Museums and Studios) at the Politecnico di Milano.

[anna.mazzanti@polimi.it](mailto:anna.mazzanti@polimi.it)

### **Marianne McAra**

Dr Marianne McAra (PhD, MDES, BA, PG Cert) is the Creative Engagement Research Fellow at the Innovation School at The Glasgow School of Art and works in the areas of youth engagement and creative education. Her research practice is underpinned by human-centred and Participatory Design approaches, with an interest in experimental methods and an expertise working in ethically sensitive research contexts. Marianne teaches and supervises on the Master of Research and Doctoral programmes at GSA.

[m.mcara@gsa.ac.uk](mailto:m.mcara@gsa.ac.uk)

### **Lynn-Sayers McHattie**

Professor Lynn-Sayers McHattie (PhD, MBA, BA, PG Cert, FRSA) is Programme Director for Research at the Innovation School at The Glasgow School of Art. Lynn's research foregrounds questions around “crafting futures” in the creative economy. Her research explores craft and textile practices that connect to the indigenous landscape and culture of island communities and the role innovation can play in socio-cultural. She works extensively in the Highlands & Islands of Scotland and S.E. Asia. Lynn is involved in supervising doctoral and M.Res. students whose interdisciplinary inquiries blur the boundaries between addressing contextually located social and cultural challenges and design innovation practice.

[l.mchattie@gsa.ac.uk](mailto:l.mchattie@gsa.ac.uk)

### **Tiziana Menegazzo**

Artist and teacher. She lives and works in Turin. She trained in Florence where she graduated in painting at the Academy of Fine Arts followed by a master's degree in Modern Literature, with a thesis in visual anthropology on photography as a mode of self construction. She is currently completing a master's degree in Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology. Always interested in the contamination between different artistic languages, she alternates projects of participatory art, with a particular attention to the female condition, investigated through photography, narration and performance, to a research with an intimate and dreamlike character. She develops her artistic research in the field of gender studies and visual anthropology.

[tizianamenegazzo.65@gmail.com](mailto:tizianamenegazzo.65@gmail.com)

### **Alfonso Morone**

Associate Professor in Industrial Design, at the University of Naples “Federico II” Department of Architecture. Scholarship visiting student at Ecole Nationale Supérieure de Création Industrielle “Les Ateliers” of Paris. He was selected for the 20th “Compasso d'Oro” award, for the section Theoretical Researches and Design Studies, and he gained the Eco\_Luoghi 2013 Contest launched by the Italian Environmental Ministry. His research, supported by many essays and writings, is especially concerned with Nature Based Solutions for devices able to face air pollution using natural systems through a combination of plants, phytoremediation mechanisms and bio-filters containing bio-absorbent nanomaterials and in the historical relationship between local manufacturing systems and industrial design. He is leading, as Principal Investigator, the AURA: industrial research and experimental development project for designing a new generation of green & smart



urban furniture supported by the Italian Ministry of Economic Development (2019-2022). In 2017 he wrote *La Fabbrica dell'Innovazione. Gli arredi del Palazzo delle Poste di Napoli 1936*, published by LetteraVentidue, Siracusa.

[alfonso.morone@unina.it](mailto:alfonso.morone@unina.it)

### **Susanna Parlato**

Architect and PhD student in design at Sapienza University of Rome. Received the bachelor's degree in Architecture at the Federico II University of Naples (2013) and the master's degree in Architecture for sustainable project at Politecnico di Torino (2016). Since 2017 she has been active within the Architecture Department of Federico II University of Naples being design teaching assistant, exam and degree committee member. She has been a research fellow at the CESMA of the Federico II University (2018-2019). From 2018 she started a collaboration with the Fondazione San Gennaro, an organization that promote social innovation, as a member of the ReMade lab research team whose purpose is to experiment innovative technology to recycle urban waste (plastic and metal) on a local scale. Her main research interests are in the areas of design for social innovation, design for territories, design for sustainability.

[susanna.parlato@uniroma1.it](mailto:susanna.parlato@uniroma1.it)

### **Vera Renau**

PhD Student in the programme Society and Culture: History, Anthropology, Arts and Heritage at University of Barcelona (Spain). Her doctoral research analyses the process of recognition of a selection of Catalan visual artists of the early twentieth century (1900 – 1930), and thus the operation of Spanish and Catalan modern art system. She focuses on clarify how art value is constructed by the interaction of different intermediaries in the visual arts field: the mechanism of building their reputations, identify phases, protagonists and dynamics that form part of the process, from an interdisciplinary approach. Member of the Gracmon Research Unit – History of Art & Contemporary Design Research Grup at UB, she holds a master's degree in Art History from the University of Barcelona. Her main research lines are art history, sociology of arts and culture and design studies. She has collaborated with cultural institutions as Direcció General de Patrimoni (Generalitat de Catalunya), Modern Art Department at Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya or Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna di Roma.

[verarenau@ub.edu](mailto:verarenau@ub.edu)

### **Antonio Stefanelli**

Architect, PhD student in Philosophy of Interior Architecture at Università degli Studi di Napoli "Federico II". He takes a degree in Architecture at the Department of Architecture of Università degli Studi di Napoli "Federico II" in 2017. He is part of several research group in the same University and he collaborated in the production of scientific publications and published essays and articles in trade magazines.

[antonio.stefanelli@unina.it](mailto:antonio.stefanelli@unina.it)

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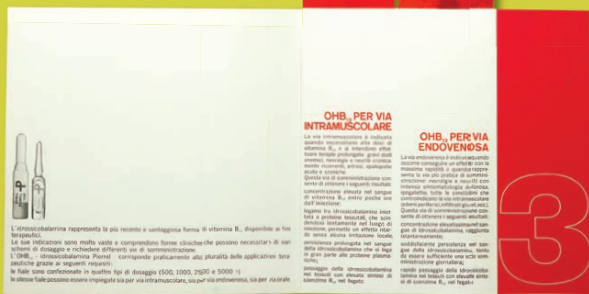
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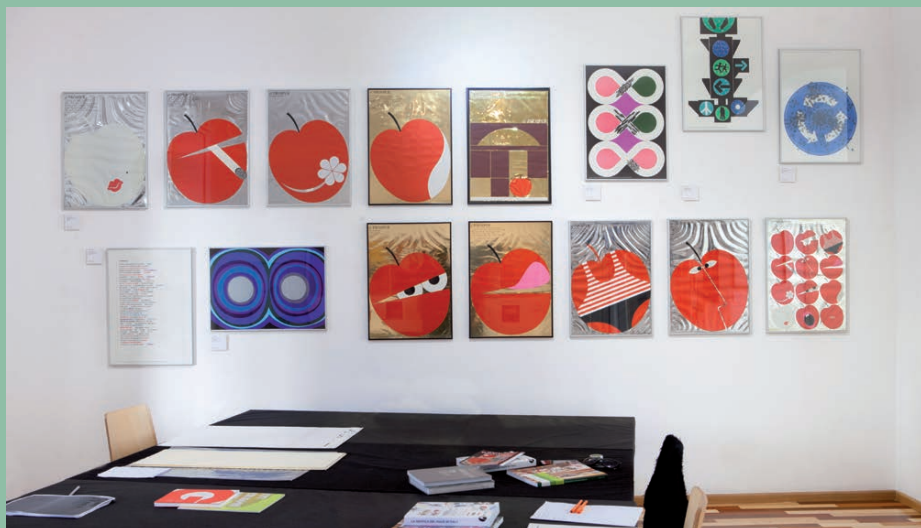


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Aiap CDPG, the Graphic Design Documentation Centre. Working to collect, catalogue, archive, enhance and promote any documents related to graphic design and visual communication. These documents (originals as well layouts of projects, books, posters, prints, catalogues, correspondence, photographs) help reconstruct the history of graphic design in Italy and support research and educational activities, as it is the CDGP's intention to make these documents widely available.



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via A. Ponchielli, 3, Milano  
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