



Move over, Mike Brady: Now Barbie's an architect too

Mattel's latest career doll takes on a field where men dominate 5 to 1



Mattel
Architect Barbie, the latest incarnation of the working girl doll, hits store shelves in August.

By Cheryl Wischhover

TODAY.com contributor

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Over the years Barbie has had more than 125 jobs, from teenage fashion model (her first) to four runs as a presidential candidate.

The latest career on this icon's impressive resume? Well, she can design your next Dream House — Barbie's a newly minted architect. And Architect Barbie owes her existence to the efforts of two persistent women.

In 2007, Despina Stratigakos, an historian and professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo, curated an exhibition at the University of Michigan where she asked faculty and students to create their own architect Barbies as a way of exploring

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gender and race issues within the profession. When Stratigakos later moved on to the University at Buffalo and met another architect, Kelly Hayes McAlonie, Barbie was still very much on her mind. Together, they lobbied Mattel to produce Architect Barbie. The company agreed, and took on the pair as advisers.

It couldn't come at a better time. "The field of architecture is an area where women are underrepresented," said a Mattel spokesperson. The number of practicing female architects hovers at about 20%, according to Stratigakos. What's particularly discouraging about this number is that women actually account for about 40% of students in architecture programs. While female student numbers have increased over the past decades, Stratigakos explained, "The number of women actually entering the profession and remaining there remains pretty flat."

Story: Life-size Barbie gets real women talking

Possible reasons? The grueling hours, for one. "There's this image that architecture is an either/or profession — that you have to choose between being a good parent or a good architect," said Stratigakos. Hayes McAlonie agreed and said, "Because it's an accumulative profession, it's really hard to get back into [it]. If you lose three years for child care reasons it's really hard to come back and pick up where you left off."

Add to that a lengthy training process — the journey from schooling to licensure generally takes about 10 years or more.

Hayes McAlonie hopes that the industry will self-correct, and that women in other fields

will be the drivers. She said, "There are a lot of women who are clients now and they have an expectation that on a project team there will be a woman. A lot of firms are realizing that it's to their advantage, in a business sense, to have women who are in leadership roles."

Story: Ken woos — and wins back — his ex, Barbie

Like true architects, Stratigakos and Hayes McAlonie took a hands-on, detail-oriented approach to advising Mattel on Barbie's overall look. The pair sent over a list of about 25 accessories that an architect would tote around with her, and even sent pictures from an editorial spread that Vogue did last summer which featured clothing with architectural shapes and monochromatic colors.

The result: Architecture Barbie wears an A-line strapless dress that features a cityscape print; she carries a document tube, a white hard hat and a pair of black-rimmed glasses.

But even the outfit proved controversial.

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“Putting a dress together with a hard hat is actually a really interesting and provocative thing to do,” said Stratigakos. But after some discussion, they decided it was important for Barbie to be professional and feminine at the same time. And showing that Barbie has some creativity was important to the women.

“First and foremost she is a designer,” said Hayes McAlonie. “She needs a very individual look, but at the same time she needs to walk into a business meeting and work on a construction site.”

And the heeled booties? Well, both acknowledged that Barbie should probably change into work boots at a construction site.

Story: Ken doll gets new look — and mentor in manhood

Mattel will officially introduce Architect Barbie to her colleagues on May 12 at the American Institute of Architects (AIA) convention in New Orleans. (She'll hit stores this August.)

For the event (only 17% of the AIA's membership is female), 400 local New Orleans girls, ages 7-9, were recruited through schools and Girl Scout troops. They will visit the convention hall to shadow female architects and to get a taste of the profession. They'll also get to do a basic design exercise, all with the support of Barbie's sunny, confident demeanor behind them.

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