Chapter 3

What I Learned from Architect Barbie

In February 2011, Architect Barbie made her industry debut at the Toy Industry Association's Toy Fair in New York City; three months later, she made her professional entrance at the AIA convention in New Orleans. But Architect Barbie's real beginnings were political. In 2006, while I was a research fellow at the University of Michigan, the passage of Proposal 2, a ballot initiative, ended affirmative action in that state. Debates before and after the law's passage tore into friendships and collegial relationships, and the atmosphere on campus was tense as the school's colleges, including architecture, struggled to determine what the new law would mean for diversity among students and faculty and, ultimately, why that diversity mattered.

The question was a pressing one for architecture, even if the profession had done its best to ignore it. Certainly there had been past instances of vocal and public confrontation with architecture's exclusions, such as at the 1973 AIA convention, when female members protested their marginalization. By the mid-2000s, there was also a substantial literature on architecture's gender issues. But the cumulative impact of these many decades of effort remained surprisingly limited. One could not speak, in 2006, of a broad consciousness within the profession or among the public of how or why architecture continued to drive out women.

As a feminist scholar, I am interested in analyzing the ideological fences that architecture has built around the profession—the barriers that determine outsiders and insiders. One starting point is the idealized image of the architect that has been nurtured within the profession and reinforced in popular culture. Here we find a pervasive insistence on the incompatibility of the

architectural and the feminine—seen not only in early twentieth-century writings on modern architecture by Otto Bartning, Karl Scheffler, and others, but also in Hollywood films, such as One Fine Day (1996), in which Michelle Pfeiffer, playing an architect compelled to bring her young child to work, trips over her own handbag and crushes the design model she is carrying, including its phallic high-rise. This scene also points to another deeply embedded conflict in the image of the architect: the irreconcilability of production and reproduction. They require different and opposing abilities, we are told, and being a good architect necessarily means being a bad parent, as Adam Sandler’s character discovered in Click (2006).³

Hoping to encourage discussion about these beliefs and attitudes, but wary of preaching to the converted, I looked for an unusual angle from which to address issues of diversity in my
fellowship exhibition at Michigan, held in the spring of 2007. I had long admired feminist artists, such as the Guerrilla Girls, who use humor to political ends. Given the tensions and resentments stirring on campus in the wake of Prop 2, it seemed more important than ever to harness the disarming power of humor. It was at that point that I remembered Architect Barbie. In 2002, Mattel had staged a public vote to allow people to determine the next career in its new professional series, “Barbie I Can Be . . . .” The choices—architect, librarian, and police woman—unleashed an epic online battle, which Architect Barbie won. But, to the disappointment of her supporters, Mattel would not commit to producing the doll. Julia Jensen, then Mattel spokesperson, explained that a little girl did not think in complex professional terms when she imagined her mother at work. From a child’s perspective, “she drinks coffee,” Jensen said, “she is on the phone all day.” Being an architect “is not in their lexicon.”

Eager to see Architect Barbie materialize, I asked Michigan architecture students and faculty to develop their own prototypes. I was particularly interested in how a younger generation, just learning to become architects and absorbing the professional culture, would imagine her. The results, exhibited in the architecture school, were an eye-opener. I had expected Barbie to show up in a black power suit and Corbusier eyeglasses. In other words, architecture would come first, Barbie second. Instead, some students reversed the order. Their dolls explored architecture on Barbie’s own terms, from an über-feminine angle that celebrated fashion, hairstyles, and makeup. In these dolls I was confronted by the “femmenism” or “girl (grrrl) power” of a younger generation that seeks empowerment by playing up femininity in contexts that prohibit it. Inside architecture’s hallowed halls, Barbie’s “girlie” attributes were a mark not of oppression but of resistance. These dolls looked you right in the eye and asked, “Why can’t architects wear pink?”

My assumptions would be challenged again a few years later, when Architect Barbie finally entered the realm of trademarked toys. In February 2010, Mattel invited the public to vote on
Barbie’s 125th career, its first such election since the miscarriage of 2002. Having once shunned “complex” careers in the “Barbie I Can Be...” line, Mattel was now focusing on professions in which women were underrepresented. (Even a corporation can evolve.) This time, Architect Barbie’s rivals included Surgeon Barbie and Computer Engineer Barbie; the latter emerged victorious. At this point—still reluctant to concede defeat—I joined forces with architect Kelly Hayes McAlonie, a colleague at the University at Buffalo, in a last-ditch effort to save Architect Barbie, and we approached Mattel directly to advocate for the doll. To our delighted surprise, Kelly and I were asked to advise on her design.

Over the next six months, as Mattel explored the world of architecture, Kelly and I were inducted into the mysteries of toy manufacturing. One of our first lessons was that creating Barbie in
the image of a professional was not about miniaturizing the adult world but rather about translating it into a child's terms. Yes, we know architects like to wear black (we like it ourselves). But to a five-year-old girl, a doll dressed in black says "villain" or "mortician," not "architect." In working with Amy Lee, Mattel's designer, on Architect Barbie's outfit, we focused on simple volumes, clean lines, and basic colors. Because Barbie's molded feet made flats impossible, we gave her black ankle boots with a chunky heel.

With architecture undergoing rapid changes, not least in its technologies, accessorizing Barbie involved difficult choices. We sent a list of twenty-five possible accessories to our Mattel collaborators, who selected three with iconic power and instant recognizability: a pink drawing tube, white hard hat, and black glasses.

Negotiating the transition from office to construction site also posed a sartorial challenge. What outfit would work for both? After considering slacks, we ultimately agreed with Mattel that Architect Barbie would wear a dress. A century ago, men campaigned to ban women from construction sites because their dresses (standing in for female bodies) were seen as nuisances. Given that women then were also forbidden to wear pants, this dress code effectively excluded them from the building trades. Our decision to combine a hard hat with a dress—symbols of building and femininity—channeled the spirit of girl power, flaunting that which has been prohibited.

Little did we realize what we were about to unleash. In February, the doll's unveiling at the Toy Fair produced the first of what would grow to be nearly three hundred media stories, including twenty television segments, by mid-autumn, resulting in 175 million media impressions. In December, the Guardian, Building Design, and USA Network included her in their top architectural stories or lists of 2011, and she made the Wall Street Journal's holiday "hot stuff" survey. The Architects' Journal in the United Kingdom put her on the cover of its first-ever issue devoted to women in architecture. She was featured in Elle Decor and even earned a mention in Vogue. Kelly and I watched all of this unfold, amazed.
For some, Architect Barbie was cause for celebration. Readers of Jezebel, a self-styled part feminist, part celebrity and fashion news blog, embraced her when the news broke in February. “Not since Mike Brady was supposed to be an architect of suburban houses that all looked like gas stations,” wrote asp in the comments section, “has my chosen profession seemed so flirty and glam.” Another self-identified architect, hottotrot, admitted, “I would pay big money for a hot pink drawing tube.” A covetous Anita Drink posted, “God help me, I really love Barbie’s outfit, and I want it for myself!” Barbie’s girlie disregard for architectural conventions was not lost on Jezebel’s audience. “Not so much inspired by Howard Roark, I see,” wrote bettylyons.11

Others greeted Architect Barbie with scorn. An announcement about the doll on the website of Australian-based InDesign magazine elicited mostly negative responses in the comments section. “Everyone knows that real architects only wear black,” objected Dinah. “The hard hat is useless,” wrote Skye, “as they’ll never let her on site in those heels!” Mat said, “She looks like a first year student of architecture that will fail and become a nail designer after crying all over her blueprints for 3 months first.” A poster called real architect responded, “Looks more like an interior designer/decorator than an architect.” Brightbeam added, “Architect Barbie, displaying the d**b blond look.”12

Some of the criticism directed against the doll clearly targeted the profession’s own gender problems. Sarah, an architect commenting on Nancy Levinson’s Design Observer blog post, wrote: “Architect Barbie couldn’t wear such a skimpy outfit to the office, which is inevitably full of old men or to the construction site which is full of construction workers. She would wear faded black pants and a shirt that is wrinkled from sleeping under her desk. Her teeth would be bad because she won’t have dental insurance and her stomach would be pouchy from a bad diet hurriedly scarfed down at her desk. Her accessories should include a paycheck that is 30% less than the men’s, antidepressants, and IBS medication.”13
Barbie’s grown-up brand of femininity, which distinguished her from traditional baby dolls when she was launched in 1959, has been fiercely debated by scholars for decades. Her champions point to Barbie’s rebellious side and her preference for independence and a career over marriage. Although some of her employment choices have been stereotypical, others have been daring (NASCAR Barbie) as well as lucrative, allowing her to own a house, a Ferrari, and a Porsche. She also enjoys adventure and travel and has been known to hop on her Hot Stylin’ Motorcycle and head for the open road. Her critics, by contrast, argue that the doll’s lifestyle equates happiness with materialism and teaches girls to consume, while her “prehistoric physique” encourages eating disorders.\textsuperscript{14} Peggy Orenstein and others have also criticized the gendering of color choices and the dominance of pink merchandise for girls.\textsuperscript{15}

The oft-made critiques on design blogs about Architect Barbie’s being too blond (the African American model attracted little attention), wearing clothing with too much color—especially pink—as well as too much makeup, and being prone to assaults or accidents due to her dress and ankle boots provoked angry responses regarding assumptions about what an architect looks like and what earns respect on the job. Some welcomed Barbie’s “audacious” challenge to stereotypes and suggested that architecture clung to the old tropes because it had lost a sense of its own identity.\textsuperscript{16} Others commented on the lack of role models and wondered whether Architect Barbie or LEGO blocks could better inspire girls to become builders.\textsuperscript{17}

As the discourse about Architect Barbie unfolded, it became clear that a good deal of the tension was not between men and women but rather between women of different ages. In her power as a cultural icon and the feelings of love or hate she evokes, Barbie had exposed, in a way not previously seen, a generational divide between women in architecture that went far beyond the merits of a doll. This was clearly visible in the long and heated discussion thread “Fetish in Pink” initiated by Inda in March 2011 on the AIA LinkedIn forum. Inda wrote:
Women of a certain age, i.e. my generation, know what the feminist revolution was really all about and what Barbie symbolizes. Barbie is a sexist symbol. Our colleagues must be very, very careful with this issue. Promoting architecture in a sexist way with a sexist venue is not good for any of us, male or female.

Many of us who grew up and marched in the streets in the turbulent times of the 60s and 70s never gave our children Barbie dolls . . . and that was on principle. You must realize that the Barbie doll is a vestigial symbol of the time when women were not accepted in the field of architecture. Across our society we are currently suffering a swing of the pendulum back to the time before feminism. Do you all really romanticize the “Mad Men” era?

Adriana, who identified herself as thirty-five, responded: “Lighten up! They are dolls, not realistic representations of women. I had lots of Barbies growing up and played with them until I was 12. I didn’t think I was supposed to look like a cabbage patch kid any more than a Barbie.” Leslie shared her exasperation: “WTF to those negative, bitter people against Barbie. I dressed them up and created houses and neighborhoods with the cases they came in. I didn’t view them as ‘sexist’ objects and still don’t, but rather as toys that helped me explore my creative side. It’s unfortunate that some ‘naïve’ people just don’t get it.” Laura responded: “I am glad that there are young women architects who find nothing offensive in this Barbie. However, this discussion is not only about a doll. I wish I could see Barbie as beautiful. She is NOT. She is a gross misrepresentation of what women look like. There are NO real women who have her dimensions. Of course, for boys, Ken and GI Joe are both disturbingly missing an important member!” (A male poster asked if they were missing their beer guts.) Inda added: “Many of the younger architects don’t really get it about Barbie’s image. So be it. Continues to prove that progress is elusive.”

A similar generational crevasse appeared in the comments section of Levinson’s Design Observer blog post. Tracey, who opened her own architecture firm in the mid-1980s, called
Architect Barbie’s image “regressive.” Patricia, of the same generation and also founder of a firm, expressed dismay at the doll’s “degrading outmoded message, ‘Women need to be sexy to get ahead.’” These comments elicited a sharp response from Ellie, who clearly felt talked down to by the older posters. She wrote, “I think Architect Barbie is absolutely fantastic!!! Get off your high horses all you old women who think this is regressive; why should young female architects have to subscribe to masculine traits and pseudo-intellectual dress codes in order to be taken seriously? I have no problem wearing short skirts and stockings; indeed, when I do turn up to the site in such attire, I find the contractors pay attention to my every word . . . rock on Barbie!”

Internet forums are not always the place for subtle discussions. Still, I found these exchanges troubling because there seemed to be so little middle ground. Moreover, they hinted at deeper fissures of mistrust between generations of women architects. Older posters claimed that a younger generation of female architects did not understand what was truly at stake, thus putting the “real” feminist revolution at risk. Younger posters defining their professional identities and strategies, in turn, treated older women as irrelevant at best and oppressive at worst.

I suspect that even if Barbie were not in the picture, Inda would not see eye to eye with Ellie. One could argue that this is not a problem. Generations typically chafe against and provoke one another, don’t they? I certainly learned a great deal from my “shocking” students at the University of Michigan and their grrrl politics. Yet healthy progress depends on finding a way forward that does not empower one generation at the expense of another. As the 2013 Denise Scott Brown Pritzker Prize petition, discussed in chapter 4, has demonstrated, there can be great unity across generations, with the second and third waves of feminists supporting one another’s agendas. At the same time, and as I learned from Architect Barbie, that solidarity cannot be assumed but must also be built.

That process of cross-generational coalition making was on view at the “Ladies (and Gents) Who Lunch with Architect
Barbie" event organized in October 2011 by the AIA San Francisco Chapter to discuss women's status in architecture, the impact of Architect Barbie on professional stereotypes, and what it takes to succeed in the profession. At the sold-out symposium, a panel of women architects in various professional roles and at different stages of their careers shared their views of the doll. Here, too, opinion was divided along generational lines, but the lively conversation ultimately helped to forge new alliances. The popularity of the event led the following year to the Missing 32% Symposium, which focused on retaining and promoting women in architecture and which, in turn, launched Equity by Design, the project that has now taken a leading role in studying and discussing the future of women in the profession.

Lisa Boquiren, a lead organizer of the "Ladies (and Gents)" event, called Architect Barbie "the lightning rod" for longstanding tensions about gender that had never been adequately addressed within the profession. "How better to start a conversation about the problem of women's low participation in the very male-dominated profession of architecture than through a globally-influential American icon?," she asked. Yet as much as Kelly and I rejoiced over the breaking of the silence—which had felt so much more intolerable than any raucous debate—ultimately we had another audience in mind for whom we hoped to harness Barbie's electrifying power.

After all of the fuss over clothes and hairstyles and accessories, what mattered most to girls about Architect Barbie was her Dasein—her being in and of their everyday world. And this, Architect Barbie's last and most enduring lesson, became fully clear to me only at the official launch of the doll, at the AIA convention in New Orleans. Working with Mattel and the AIA, Kelly and I developed workshops for four hundred girls recruited from local schools and girls' clubs. The workshops, led by women architects, had three components: an introduction to what architects do, a discussion of the work of past and present women architects, and an exercise to redesign Barbie's Dreamhouse. The exercise focused on teaching the girls basic skills for drawing floor plans.
and encouraging them to explore their ideal domestic environment. (The workshop materials were later posted on the AIA website, and Architect Barbie workshops have since been held in locations as diverse as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s Crown Hall on the Illinois Institute of Technology’s campus in Chicago and the Navajo Nation Museum in Window Rock, Arizona.24)

At the Morial Convention Center in New Orleans, the Mattel booth combined workshop and exhibition space. The latter included dolls from Barbie’s previous careers in male-dominated professions spanning nearly fifty years, from Miss Astronaut Barbie (1965) to Computer Engineer Barbie (2010), and, of course, the newcomer, Architect Barbie. The A-frame Barbie Dreamhouse from 1979 was also on display alongside the contemporary townhouse model. The workshop area featured long white picnic tables with space for about thirty girls in total. Above the whole hung an enormous Barbie sign, like a hot-pink beacon. It is an understatement to say that in the cavernous expo hall, an overwhelmingly masculine landscape of companies selling everything from drain pipes to the latest building technologies, the Barbie booth and its young occupants stood out. We quickly became an expo attraction.

The girls, however, were oblivious to the attention. With a focus that surprised even us and that never wavered, the girls displayed an intense desire to learn how to shape and control their own spaces. Some of the girls admitted that before the workshop, they had not known women could be architects; with Barbie herself giving the go-ahead, they got to work with a vengeance. One of my favorite floor plans, created by a seven-year-old, included a room for monsters; acknowledging their presence and giving them their own space would allow the rest of the house to remain monster-free—a design solution to an eternal childhood problem that would have put Freud out of business. At the end of the workshop, each girl left with a gift bag that included drawing tools and her own Architect Barbie.

At no point during the workshops did I hear any girl question her spatial skills or the appropriateness of architecture
for women. And that, precisely, is where Barbie’s power lies. The fact is that Barbie appeals to little girls like no other toy. They are proprietary about her—they know the doll is just for them. And whatever Barbie does, she brings it into the sphere of women. She has the power to make things seem natural to little girls. Admittedly, Architect Barbie can’t do all the heavy lifting. Deeply held attitudes about women must shift before architecture becomes a profession that truly embraces diversity. Open discussions about how to encourage and keep women in practice need to happen in architecture schools, around the water cooler, in boardrooms. If Architect Barbie gets us talking, then more power to her. But ultimately she is for kids, not adults, and it is the politics of the sandbox that I hope to influence. I look forward to the day when little girls claim hard hats and construction sites as just another part of their everyday world.