Speech by Amanda Levete
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100 years ago, we didn't have the vote and when Jane Drew graduated in the '30's she couldn't find work in an architect's office because they "didn't take women".

But there's never been a better time to be a woman than now. We have to seize this moment. Years of legislation have failed us but the power of the MeToo movement to change a culture is unstoppable. I suspect MIPIM, which I went to once and vowed never to go to again, will be a quite different affair this year. Formula 1 has set the bar high going from Grid Girls to Grid Kids almost overnight. Let's see what MIPIM do.

These are very exciting times which makes receiving this award even more poignant.

Because this honour is about a lifetime achievement I thought I'd share some of my reflections on a life in architecture.

My experience of being a woman in architecture is a very positive one but mine hasn't been the most predictable of careers.

I left school at 16, went to art school and through reading about art history I discovered architecture. And through architecture I came across the AA.

The AA in the 1970s under Alvin Boyarsky was like a glorified art school.

It came out of a period of social change and was very much a product of that bohemian era, there were no barriers to achievement. Concept was king and like most people at the AA then I'd use any excuse not to design a building.

My dream when I finished was to work for Richard Rogers. For me, Centre Pompidou is one of the most important buildings of the twentieth century. But despite 3 interviews I didn't get the job. So, I went to YRM, got dropped in the deep end and effectively had a 2-year crash course learning how to build and run a job. Then I got a call from Richard's office.

I worked there for 4½ years. Richard became my mentor and then a friend. His intellectual approach, his knowledge of history, his ability to inspire and gather talented people around him, his perception and his humanity have been a big influence on me.

I left in 1989 and joined Jan Kaplicky in Future Systems. We had absolutely no work prospects but I had convinced him to give up teaching so we could start a proper office. I am a great believer in making your own luck.

It was a slow trajectory and it was just the two of us for a long time. We never went out for lunch in case someone important called, we had very little money, almost never took holidays – but those early years were very happy. We felt that we were in charge of our own destiny.

One of our first commissions was a champagne bucket then three facades for Comme des Garçons

and in 1995 we were shortlisted for the Media Centre at Lords' Cricket Ground – certainly the wild card.

I wrote the report for our competition entry in hospital the day after our son was born. And two weeks later we had to present our design. We arrived at Lord's in the pouring rain, roll of drawings in hand. A steward came out and asked if we had come to sell something. I said well, in a manner of speaking, yes. He said we'd have to wait outside because Jan wasn't wearing a tie and I was a woman and women weren't allowed inside the Pavilion. Astonishing! But to their credit, that bastion of the English establishment, the MCC, took on a foreigner and a woman who had built very little with a scheme that was radical both conceptually and technically.

When the building opened in 1999 we were almost bankrupt. Our focus on the Media Centre had been so intense that we had forgotten to look for other work.

Out of the blue came a call from Vittorio Radice, the CEO of Selfridges. He said he passed the Media Centre each day on the bus - he admired the building and wanted to talk to us about a project in Birmingham.

Selfridges hadn't run an architectural competition before and he asked my advice. Knowing we couldn't hold out for much longer, let alone pay for a model, I said the best competitions were only 2 weeks long because they force you to think quickly and intuitively, and I suggested the presentation be restricted to 2 A1 boards. That became the basis of the competition brief.

The Media Centre was shortlisted for the Stirling Prize but we couldn't afford the airfare to Glasgow for the Awards Ceremony. Someone who probably knew more than we did said not showing up would be inelegant and make us look like bad losers. We borrowed the money and went.

Winning was a wonderful moment, it paid off our overdraft. A week later I had a call from Vittorio saying we'd won Selfridges Birmingham. We were on our way.

But the pressures of working and living together proved too much. Jan and I separated personally but we kept the office going with an invisible Berlin Wall down the middle. Jan was a huge talent and I'm very conscious that I would not be doing what I am doing now were it not for my time with him. But the situation was unworkable and borderline dysfunctional – it is a huge tribute to my team at the time that we managed to produce the work we did or indeed any work at all.

In 2008 we started conversations about splitting the office.

One of my biggest jobs at the time was the design of News International's HQ in Wapping. After a presentation in the office, I asked my client James Murdoch if he'd come for a walk around the block. I told him of the impending split. He said, "It's just changing the name on a slide – as long as I have the commitment of you and your team, I'm fine." He was an extremely supportive and visionary client who I would work with for the next 6 years at News International and then Sky.

Of course, starting AL_A was nothing like as simple as changing the name on a slide. And to do so in the shadow of Jan's unexpected death was personally traumatic. I had hugely underestimated the significance of the move. Many people

doubted me and I felt I had to prove I was not going to fail. It took some years to do that and to understand who we were becoming as an office.

We're now four directors from three continents: Ho-Yin Ng, Maximiliano Arrocet and Alice Dietsch. The office has never been more creative and productive and I have never enjoyed working more. The 4 of us have a very strong bond, they are much younger than me and we are all very different but we share a strong belief in the value of collaboration – collaboration not just between ourselves and the AL_A team but collaboration with clients and engineers and makers and contractors and people from other disciplines. Collaboration doesn't necessarily mean sharing views but it does mean sharing a common sense of purpose.

We have a rule that everyone takes off their shoes, even our clients. For me the mess of the shoes is emblematic of the sense that we're all in it together.

That sense of common endeavour is the backbone of the culture of our office. It takes time to establish a culture but, in my experience, once you have that everything else flows.

The team at AL_A are extraordinarily talented, committed and loyal, and will never take no for an answer. They come from thirteen different countries, each bringing different references and experiences and our work is all the richer for that. We share a desire to be technically and conceptually inventive, which makes our buildings special and allows us to be audacious. We love to explore the history, context, circumstance and conceptual potential of each project and to research technical possibilities in materials, structures and production.

We always start with a conversation rather than a sketch and from those conversations, a narrative starts to emerge. Narrative is very important to me because it helps us to make sense of things.

A year into AL_A in 2010 we were shortlisted for a competition at the Louvre. Looking back, I realise now that we used that project to test out our new way of thinking. The brief was to improve the visitor experience by addressing the congestion at the point of entry – IM Pei's Pyramid was designed to deal with only a fraction of the number of people who visit the Museum today.

We instinctively understood that the solution did not lie in the Pyramid but at the threshold of entering the museum. We took a radically backwards step and argued that you should enter through the 4 original palace entrances on the courtyard and in doing so liberate Pei's beautiful Pyramid.

However, this understanding lost us the competition. In the client's eyes, we were not playing the game. We had gone way too far by doing what we believed the Louvre needed rather than what they asked for.

But we rescued success from failure. For me it was an extremely important piece of conceptual thinking that we have gone on to develop in other projects.

It fed directly into our work for the V&A and MAAT.

In both London and Lisbon, we conceived of the museum as not only a cultural project but also an urban one. It is vital that our institutions engage in contemporary life to ensure they stay relevant and we wanted to find a way to make that visible.

Today's cultural buildings are judged as much on the success of their public spaces as by the artworks they contain. We've been fortunate to have two visionary clients who encouraged us to design places for people to gather, putting the public back as the focus.

Remember Libeskind's project for the same site as ours? For me the demise of that scheme marked the end of the era of building as icon - I was determined that we create something that speaks of the iconography of public space.

The V&A's courtyard is a place for London – an outdoor room of the Museum, a destination in its own right. The Museum is of the street and the street now belongs to the Museum and the gallery is below ground.

To achieve this was a huge structural challenge. It required extensive excavation and the underpinning of a wing of the V&A.

Cambridge University, who work closely with Arup, were so taken with the challenges of the project that they installed fibre optic cables in the 50m long tension piles because they believe the movements that will be recorded may disprove aspects of the elastic theory – and if that is the case we will have advanced knowledge in ways we could not have imagined at the start.

The weight of history is carried on these beams and columns.

In Lisbon, we extended the ambition of the client and designed the roof of the low-slung MAAT as a new public square in the city – a place to meet and exchange ideas.

MAAT has put Lisbon on the map as a destination for both contemporary art and architecture. It has captured the public's imagination and shifted expectations in the eyes of a city.

On its opening day in October 2016, over 80,000 people – 15% of the population of Lisbon – visited MAAT and it is now the most visited museum in Portugal.

It's a testament to the power of new public spaces and MAAT's place in the consciousness of Lisbon.

We've also had the privilege to work with some extraordinary makers and craftsmen. We demand a lot from our partners and it is rare to find people who are as committed as we are in exploring and testing materials to their limits.

In Tichelaar, the oldest company in the Netherlands, we found such a partner. They brought an artistic sensibility to the V&A project to produce the tiles for what is the first porcelain courtyard in the world.

The courtyard makes visible the mission of the V&A to celebrate the marriage of arts and crafts with design and industry and it was inspired by the rich tradition of ceramics at the Museum.

This kind of research requires faith and commitment from a client and we had the V&A's unequivocal support, almost unthinkable in commercial contexts and rare in a public institution.

We're fortunate to be working with other great clients including Galeries Lafayette in Paris - Maggie's in Southampton and Wadham College in Oxford.

However, as architects we are becoming more and more marginalised. We are obliged to drive down fees to unfair levels in order to win work. And the increasing demands made of us in competitions is out of hand. If this is hard for us as an office, it must be very much harder for those of you who are starting out.

How can we respond to all this in a way that is positive for the discipline of architecture? I believe we should be more entrepreneurial, more self-sufficient, generate our own projects, identify unmet needs, find the site, write the brief, put together the funding…If we do this, we can start to move outside of a system that is eroding respect.

In recent years, we've invested in a few self-generated projects. Pitch/Pitch is a series of stackable 5-a-side football pitches to address the chronic lack of space for sport in inner-cities.

We started an after-school "Architects Club" for the primary school opposite our office.

And our obsession with porcelain and ceramics at the V&A and MAAT led to the Ceramic Table – probably one of the most ambitious pieces of research that we've ever undertaken, yet it's one of our smallest projects.

And in September 2014, we opened Tincan, a pop-up restaurant in Soho serving only tinned fish.

We had lost one competition too many so decided to invest in ourselves rather than enter another one. And I had become obsessed with the idea of a restaurant without a kitchen.

Despite having never run a restaurant before, we did everything, from designing the space and the furniture, to creating and sourcing the menu and managing the place. We turned the humble tin into an object of desire. And we designed a light to showcase the new wafer-thin OLED technology which we assembled ourselves.

A lot of our team are Spanish and they used their networks to help track down the best sardines, the best anchovies and the best tuna.

A week after the opening we started receiving hate mail about bluefin tuna. Despite having gone to great lengths to source the only sustainable and certified source of Atlantic bluefin tuna, fished using Phoenician methods first developed 3000 years ago, we decided to take it off the menu on the grounds that bluefin tuna wasn't really central to our core business as architects and it might become something of a distraction!

Shortly afterwards a friend called to tell me Tincan was the lead story in The Guardian. Imagine my fear as I conjured up headlines – “Reckless architects destroying our planet” – but actually it was a great review with fabulous pictures!

Tincan worked, it generated massive publicity – ironically more than any building we’d ever done – it said something about who we are and we had fun.

I want to end by coming back to Jane Drew in whose name I have been honoured. She was fearless and she took risks.

In 2008, the idea of risk as a positive force was undermined, a casualty of the subprime mortgage crisis and the demise of Lehman Brothers. I think it is now well understood that it was a predominantly alpha male culture that created the hubris that caused that crash.

Clients often see risk as something to be feared rather than admired and yet they demand the unique and the bespoke – so as an architect you are almost obliged to take risks. But for me, risk is exciting because it’s about progress and exploration.

I know that women often take enormous personal risks in order to pursue careers in risk-averse architecture firms who work for risk-averse clients. There are so many stories of women architects postponing having a family in order to move up the corporate ladder, only to find their path blocked.

It’s time to reclaim and celebrate risk in architecture as a positive force. I think we can do this by taking on less predictable risks, working in less predictable ways, finding different ways to collaborate and exploring fresh ideas in the field.

Women, in my experience are natural risk takers but also pragmatists – the perfect combination for leadership.

Now is our time - but let’s make sure we do it our way.