

AJ



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Walking on ice

Hugh Broughton hands over the Halley VI Antarctic station
PLUS The Hydro, Foster + Partners' Scottish arena

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Stonewall: profession does not support gay equality in workplace

Built environment companies have again failed to feature on Stonewall's Workplace Equality Index, leading the campaign to warn of stifled output

EQUAL RIGHTS Architecture does less to promote sexual diversity and tackle homophobia than banking and the armed forces, a leading gay rights campaign group has warned.

Stonewall said lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) employees' productivity could be at risk as it singled out architecture and the construction industry for failing to keep pace in the drive to support sexual diversity.

The criticism came after architecture and built environment companies once again failed to feature in its annual Workplace Equality Index of 100 leading firms.

Top 10-ranked companies included heavyweight consultancy Accenture, closely followed by the Home Office and computing giant IBM.

The league table started in 2005 and is based on a ranking of companies efforts to improve

sexual orientation equality. Transgender rights are not covered by Stonewall's remit.

Chris Edwards, who joined the charity as client manager in 2010 after six years at CABE says: 'When I was working at CABE I found it depressing that there were so few built environment-related organisations working with Stonewall.'

'There are no planning firms, no architecture or landscape architecture firms. Many of the other sectors are so well represented and it just seems there's an obvious gap.'

In addition, only four built environment companies are participating in Stonewall's Diversity Champions Programme, representing just 0.6 per cent of the 627 participating organisations. Edwards argues this is disproportionate when 12 per cent of the UK's workforce is employed in the construction

and property sector, suggesting it highlights a wider reluctance in the construction industry to address sexual orientation equality issues.

This could be having an adverse effect on productivity. Stonewall research has shown that lesbian, gay and bisexual employees are more productive when they feel they can be open about their sexual orientation in the workplace. 'There's a lack of appetite to tackle [inequality] and for whatever reason, compared with other sectors, [practices] just haven't yet cottoned onto the business benefit of tackling sexual orientation equality,' says Edwards.

'It's not just a nice thing to do that will make your gay staff happier, but it should be seen as something that affects the entire business, irrespective of sexuality.'

Without industry-wide statistics it is hard to judge the impact of homophobia on gay and lesbian architects. However, in this edition of AJ Dieter Gockmann, director at EPR architects, has revealed the impact it had on his early career (*see interview, page 22*).

Calls for greater recognition and support for LGB architects were heard at last month's Out in Architecture conference, organised by Architects for Change at the RIBA. One stumbling block identified by architects comfortably 'out' in the profession was homophobia in the wider construction industry.

Feix and Merlin director Julia Feix explained she had never been disadvantaged by being openly gay in practice, but said: 'Working in architecture, which is so closely linked with the construction industry, means that you are inevitably exposed to varying amounts of casual homophobia and sexism you would sadly naturally associate with the varying building trades.'

'Sexism is in my opinion the more obvious problem if you're a woman in a senior architectural role; homophobia is more likely to be a problem for gay men.'

She added: 'London is a very easy place to be gay but I have sat in client-contractor meetings where jokes about a transgender employee were openly shared across the table, no one batting an eyelid at the clearly very offensive and discriminatory banter everyone just laughing along. It's moments like this when I realise we have a long way to go yet.'

Some conference delegates argued homophobic banter among clients or on site can pressurise lesbian or gay architects to keep their sexual orientation secret to avoid compromising potential business.

The issues are heightened when practices send employees overseas to more conservative countries. Andrew Best, a director at Buro Happold said: 'In some countries, homosexuality is illegal, even incurring the death penalty in some places. Companies need to think through policies around sending site architects abroad for prolonged periods.'

The AJ is conducting an anonymous survey of gay, lesbian and bisexual architects to find out how practices are meeting their needs. To take part, please visit: surveymonkey.com/s/LGBarchitects.

Rakesh Ramchurn

NO OF FIRMS BY SECTOR IN STONEWALL'S TOP 100 EQUALITY INDEX

Nil

ARCHITECTURE
+ CONSTRUCTION

9

FINANCIAL
SERVICES

31

COUNCILS + PUBLIC
ADMINISTRATION