

# A Female Role Model Who Breaks Through Stereotypes and Supports Women in Architecture

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**A quite but artistic childhood, the starting point of a creative mind**

Li-Yu Hsu didn't know she would become an architect when she was a child, in fact, she didn't know what an architect really is until

much later in her life. When Li-Yu was a child, she was encouraged to experience and explore art such as painting, for her family considered painting as a typical activity for a young girl to be participating. Li-Yu performed well in school, and outside from school, painting became a great part of her childhood.

Li-Yu mentioned that she chose painting because there is a comparatively lower threshold to start with. Once she set foot on the world of painting, she immediately fell in love with it. "Painting was my way of self-expression," said Li-Yu. She was very quiet as a child yet she could spend her whole day drawing without a word. She spoke her mind through drawing while she at the same time conveyed stories from her experience,

her dream, and her imagination. Later in her life while she was about to enter college, she encountered a choice of life. Her family expected her to become an art teacher or a fine artist for these are representations of decent, well-educated, lady-like occupations.

## The true meaning of creativity: bring happiness for others without limitation

Li-Yu started thinking about what she really wanted to do while facing her biggest crossroad in her life at the time, and she seeks advice from her past self. She recalled her childhood memories and she figured that how she obtained happiness via painting is through the positive interaction she brought to the viewers. She felt like fine art pieces belong to a museum, or a collector, which means there is limited access for the general public. Yet Li-Yu wanted her creations to have a different value. She wanted to have the maximum positive impact, which brings all people happiness, and on her way of searching for such expertise, architecture came into her picture. "I want to create something wonderful, and at the same time I can share that wonderful creation to others without limitation." said Li-Yu .

"My initial intention of starting my life as an architect was that I believe that people



who are capable of creating actually own a gift of bringing happiness to others. "Said Li-Yu , "This is what I imagine an architect should be doing, and also the reason why I chose this path." Architecture is a great part of people's life, it composes streets, cities, and every home owned by human beings. In other words, architecture could be one of the most influential forms of creation, and this is why Li-Yu set her path in this direction. She intended to not only obtain joyfulness for herself while creating architecture, but also make others happy with her work.

## Female architect in this male-dominant industry fighting against stereotypes

Speaking of how it is to be a female architect in this comparatively male-dominant area Li-Yu thinks that there are pros and cons. For instance, she feels being a female architect, showing a sense of empathy could gain the trust from the clients fast because they would feel that females could understand their needs better. Yet on the other hand, trust could also be quite difficult to gain for female architects when it comes to dealing with construction sites, and etc. In Li-Yu's experience, she feels that, as an Asian female, she is constantly



being reminded of her character as a wife, a mother, and a lady. With this kind of stereotype, the roles that women should play in society, Li-Yu found it difficult to be treated professionally sometimes.

When it comes to stereotypes and the potential situation that comes with it, Li-Yu has her own way of dealing with them. Clients with stereotypes often examine female architects and their capabilities with a certain perspective, and they build negative assumptions regarding strength, professional abilities, and certain knowledge. Li-Yu has her own theory for this situation. “For instance, if a male architect could be seen as an individual who can provide 100 tons of strength, a female on the other hand, would often be seen as an individual who can only provide 10 tons of strength for people with a stereotype.” said Li-Yu. “If you ask me how I can ever make up this 90 tons gap, my answer is I can’t. I will not fight against this stereotype; instead, I am going to tell you another possibility. I might be as light as a feather, yet I have the intelligence to lift a rock.” said Li-Yu proudly. With her remarkable perspective for her own strength, Li-Yu had conquered countless obstacles associated with gender stereotypes.

She interviewed her client to see if they understood her strength as a female architect and if they would accept the feather theory before she would continue the collaboration.

Li-Yu thinks that there are also learning coming from the unpleasant experiences regarding stereotypes. For instance, females who work in the architecture field tend to be eager to prove themselves in certain circumstances because they might face more challenges compared to men. Their abilities of problem solving are often very well trained, and for Li-Yu, she feels like her ability of thinking has evolved greatly since she started her career as a no regular architect. “The more challenges you encounter, the smarter you will become.” Said Li-Yu with a smile on her face.

This learning started with Li-Yu’s experience of architecture education in college. “In the architecture course I attended,” she recalled. “We girls are assigned to do just about the same thing as our male counterparts, without any exceptions.” Li-Yu did all the heavy physical work in school and she trained herself to solve problems step by step until she worked everything out properly. Her ability of processing obstacles were greatly enhanced during her studies, and later on, during her career. She faced barriers and overcame them whether it’s in the form of hard lifting physical actions, or a shape of a gender stereotype.

## The WAT and its three core tasks that support female architects

Li-Yu's extraordinary persistence and great confidence as a female architect has led her to the position as the president for the WAT (Women in Architecture Chinese Taipei) association. For WAT, there are three core tasks: document "her story", listen to "her voice", and support "her persistence".

During the initial discussions whether we need an association for female architects, Li-Yu asked herself: why do we need to have an independent association just for females? What is this association for? The idea of the first core task of WAT, which is documenting "her story", started with a series of observations on the life of female architects. "The career life of an architect is not very long, considering how long it would take for us to accomplish one project. Usually it takes years," said Li-Yu. "There is only so much you can do in one lifetime." Li-Yu figured that it is more so for a female compared to a male architect for women has to play multiple roles such as a mother and a wife, hence less of their professional side would be seen or remembered. Sometimes not even the families of the female architects know what they were doing with their career yet there are so many great and memorable stories. So who can

reserve these great stories? Li-Yu thought by documenting and telling them for all female architects, the history of architecture could be more balanced and diverse. What's more, we can see the world of architecture from a different perspective.

In 2017, the ruling party proposed a bill alteration of the criminal law number 193 which aggravate the responsibility of architects in the realm of Offense of Negligent Manslaughter, with a possibility of being sentenced to death. This action had greatly damaged the image and professional confidence of all architects in the island and Li-Yu along with all the female architects decided to do something about it. The members in WAT started writing to the mainstream media and newspapers regarding the true opinions from architects and how things should change instead of progressing laws that go against human rights. This is the very first time WAT as a force of female architects stood up for the whole architecture world and expressed "her voice" firmly. "We fought for architects, and human rights." Li-Yu said proudly, "and this is the best starting point for WAT."

Last but not least, speaking of the third core task of WAT--"supporting "her persistence", WAT specified the importance of supporting female architects for female architects would face a complex change of characters once

they get married. Once female architects transform a wife, a mother and with children, the balance between work and life becomes difficult. Li-Yu expressed a common scenario when a female architect becomes a wife or a mother; she has to choose between her family and her job. "Because we only have so much time in one day, many females would choose to put their priority on the families." With this dilemma occurring, WAT created a community of female architects and at the same time offered a platform for support, communication and interaction with.



## A piece of advice for young spirits: Embrace your passion, fight for it, and doors will be opened for you

When it comes to advice for young women who are considering a career in architecture, Li-Yu believes that if one can persist with what she loves, there is absolutely nothing that can defeat you. "Yes, there will be obstacles everywhere, yet if you conquer them, you will shine like a star," said Li-Yu. For Li-Yu, architecture is quite an extraordinary expertise. It is a continuous journey of opening one's eyesight to a brand new level. On the path of this journey one would keep completing and updating one's recognition and true self. "If you are determined to step up to the world of architecture," said Li-Yu with a smile on her face, "you are determined to have a broad and unlimited life. For the learning of architecture could be infinite." For Li-Yu who started her journey as a shy, quiet creator, fulfilling and building a career as a proud female architect had not only transformed her into a confident, brave woman, but also led her to a path of supporting other female architects.