

Firm Owner and Principal Sarah Broughton, AIA, Celebrates 15 Years of Creating a Culture of Inclusion



Sarah with her husband and business partner, John Rowland, AIA.

Based in Aspen and Denver, [Rowland + Broughton Architecture/Urban Design/Interior Design](#) will celebrate their 15th anniversary in June of this year. In terms of services, the firm has evolved since it first started, now offering architecture and interior design for residential, commercial and hospitality projects.

But what really sets this firm apart is their focus on culture. In fact, they take culture so seriously, they even have a full-time Director of Culture on staff. Another point of pride, Rowland + Broughton has 40 employees, approximately 50% of which are women. However, when husband and wife duo John Rowland, AIA and Sarah Broughton, AIA started the firm, their focus was not necessarily on recruiting women. Rather, they were intentional about creating an environment that welcomed diversity of all types, and extending that beyond employees, to clients and projects as well.

We recently chatted with founder and principal, Sarah Broughton to talk about the firm's upcoming anniversary, what it's like to own a business with your spouse and how to create a firm culture that

encourages communication and equality.

How did you get your start in architecture?

I was always interested in architecture without really knowing it. I grew up in a 1920s English Tudor home, which really influenced me and made me spatially-aware. I drew floor plans at an early age, but my interest in architecture didn't really crystalize until I was a senior in high school. By that point I was deeply involved in art and at the same time, was very interested in and liked the problem-solving aspect of math. With the help of a teacher, I realized architecture would be a good fit.

I loved the architecture courses in college [at CU Boulder]. I loved the social and environmental side of design.

When I graduated, I got an internship through a design competition with EDAA, now AECOM, in Sydney, Australia, and then moved to New York City in 1997. At the age of 22, my first big project was managing a multimillion dollar office fit-out for [McKinsey](#), including the furniture. It was really influential to see how integrated and interdisciplinary architecture is.

What stands out as you reflect on the last 15 years since establishing Rowland + Broughton?

It's gone by really fast! It's important to take time to reflect and celebrate the success of creating something great over the last fifteen years, and to see how that will continue to evolve and grow in project types, complexity of the work and our team. I'm also really proud of our career and leadership development opportunities for every member of our team.

What is it like to own a business with your spouse?

It's been awesome to own a business with my husband. I can't imagine it any other way! We are good about not talking about work all the time. We have an active social life, travel life and outdoor life, and we are good about creating those boundaries and not being one dimensional. We are both passionate and care deeply about our work, and it's really rewarding to have my life partner also be my business partner. It strengthens me. We handle any relationship issues that might come up the same way we handle architecture—with a solutions-focus.

What led to Rowland + Broughton's high percentage of women employees?

In part I think that stems from being a woman and principal myself. But we really don't look at gender as a differentiator—we welcome all talented employees, regardless of gender or background. We are all here for the common goal of being stewards of placemaking through excellent design, and that is what drives us. We really believe design can change the world.

But I think one way to support diversity within a firm is by having a lot of leadership development opportunities, especially for the women. We've also embraced flexible work schedule. I am from Generation X and grew up in a different time, and my way of working may be different than what is being asked of us today. But it's important as leaders to be open, to listen and to make changes that allow flexibility for our team, which adds to our design and culture. That is a personal goal of mine, and I think that mindset will elevate our firm and continue to bring talent to the profession.

How do you model a flexible schedule as a leader?

I've chosen not to have a traditional family, so I don't have the same parameters in my life that many women do. But I think it's important to also be flexible with my schedule and to take time for outside things like travel.

In fact, John helped me block out 12 to 1 p.m. for lunch every day to make sure I get up from my desk and at least take a walk and eat. It's important for our team to see me prioritize taking breaks too. We do yoga as a team every Friday, and if I am in the studio, I am religiously in there with the team.

How do you create a culture of open communication?

It's important to be my team's advocate when they need flexibility. I also think it's critical to be really transparent with communication—what's working, where can we improve, etc. It's amazing what little tweaks can be made to make our work so much smoother. Communicating in real time and honoring open dialogue is huge!

For example, when people feel like they are not able to balance both their life and the profession, I hope they tell us. We want to find a solution, but I can't read the minds of 40 people. I ask that the staff openly communicate so that we have the ability to problem solve around it.

We strive for a culture of feedback, and not just relying on an annual review. Instead, we seek to understand individual needs of each person.

What is your advice to architects, especially women, who are struggling to balance their career with the demands of their personal life?

You must be your own personal advocate. Most firm owners truly want to figure out how to make it work. For example, women who are mothers and need flexible schedules: think about ideas to make it work and openly communicate that to your boss. And never stop communicating! Be willing to pivot and try new things and don't feel like the last resort is having to leave the profession. I cannot emphasize that enough! And finally, be choosy and find work environments where you are respected and get equal opportunities, and if you don't, ask for them!

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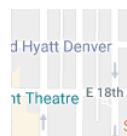


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