





alexi's tale

‘We’re sometimes perceived as just number crunchers – and the description isn’t fair. The real issue is which numbers do you crunch and what do you do with them?’

We’re talking with the charming and fascinating Alexi Marmot, who heads up AMA Alexi Marmot Associates. She’s right, there’s way more to AMA than the mere retrieval and processing of stats, but the fact is that evidenced-based design is at the heart of what AMA is about.

‘Evidenced-based design is all about helping organisations get the best out of their buildings. It’s about working with people to make better use of their buildings. AMA is small, boutique, niche and quirky – but above all a good team. We don’t suit all clients, and we don’t do big delivery rollouts. We tend to come in early, at the strategic end. It’s the time when decisions are made, when heads have to be shaken. We design pilot projects to test new ideas. We help to create an appetite for new working practices through change management. And then we come in again after delivery. We look at lessons that can be learned and make minor tweaks and changes. It’s strategic and although our input is based on Human Resources, IT and new ways of working, it is always also about the physical aspects too – interior space, furniture and the building itself. The question we ask ourselves is ‘How can we make good decisions about the workplace?’ and those decisions are based on findings from techniques like questionnaires and workshops. We cover everything that is to do with the investment in buildings and staff, including interior design, furniture and technology.’

‘The techniques – always customised – make up the core of our knowledge, we don’t thrust them at clients, but they come to us because we’re good at that performance stuff! There are strong ▶▶▶▶▶▶



▶▶▶ antecedents to what we do. For example, many manufacturers have an R&D arm, and employ techniques based on test and refinement. The silly thing is that lots of architects and designers don't apply the techniques.

'There was great work in the field of building design carried out post-war, by groups such as Mass Observation. The thinking then was that we fought that war for a better life, and so the country invested on a big scale in new council housing, hospitals, schools and universities. In those days many government departments employed sociologists and architectural researchers! But the great idea got buried by a lack of investment. So I don't think we're breaking new ground at AMA – but rather we are trying to do the right thing and help clients to take brave decisions.

'I set up AMA on 1st January 1990 – I always knew I would do my own thing. The economy and market conditions were difficult. I don't think I knew clearly what I wanted to do but I had IBM as a client and I knew I loved working with them to try to help them get the best out of their buildings./

We changed tack and asked Alexi about her early background. 'I'm from Sydney – I grew up in Beach Road, Bondi. I graduated as an architect from the University of Sydney, and then spent five years doing two Masters degrees – in Architecture, and City and Regional Planning – and starting a PhD at the University of California in Berkeley. My husband (also an Australian) and I then came to London only intending to stay for a couple of years. I love London. Terrific for life. Terrific for work. It's interesting here, full of choice and a welcoming society. Although I don't feel particularly British, I love being part of Europe.

'My first job was at Nathaniel Lichfield & Partners – well known for urban design and planning. After two years I was awarded a RIBA grant to do research at The Bartlett School to complete my PhD on 'How high should they live?' This was a blend of sociology, design, political issues and the role of the designer in the peculiar story of British high rise housing. I did some teaching in architectural design and planning at the Bartlett, started a family, and started work at DEGW in 1984, becoming Director of Research and Consultancy. I was at DEGW for five years – a great place to work, wonderful. I still see lots of friends and colleagues from my time there. I think of DEGW as my fourth good university!

'At DEGW I had to apply all that design, social, economic and political thinking I had learned to the workplace. It was a great challenge and personally very satisfying because you see the outcome of your work so much more quickly in workplace design.

'In urban planning you can do good work but not see the true results for 20 years.

'They were exciting times at DEGW because we were right at the heart of Big Bang. The deregulation of London's financial services was happening, and at DEGW we were at the forefront as new tools and techniques in workplace design spread rapidly through the industry. As well as grappling with new concepts for London such as dealing floors, this was a time of change in other areas too. Manufacturing industry was changing with old trades dying out, to be replaced by new service industries. We met with resistance from planning officers in City fringe areas like Hackney who were vainly trying to stem the inevitable tide. We said that the old industries were already gone – better to adapt, adjust and try to achieve a healthy economic environment for everyone.

'Today I still think the same way. We can develop and design excellent urban spaces which incorporate the stuff of daily life to allow us to live, work and play. It's a missed opportunity when spaces are developed to be less brilliant than they could be. But when you▶▶▶▶▶



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Now in its 19th year, AMA boasts an impressive roster of clients who share Alexi's vision and appreciate her approach. With core services covering consultancy and briefing, research and best practice guidance, design and change management, AMA has worked with many important organisations including FTSE 100 corporations. Many clients commission AMA to write reports based on original research and case studies – CABE, Home Office, Sport England and Scottish Funding Council, to name just a few. The practice is also well established in the Higher Education sector. Recent developments brought about by information technology, the changed expectations of students and the ever more vital need to use space efficiently means that AMA is increasingly called on for guidance on meeting these new challenges. Projects undertaken include London South Bank University, Nottingham University, University of Huddersfield, Oxford Brookes and University of the Arts London, among others.

But perhaps it is for evidence based design delivery that Alexi is still best known – that unfairly described number crunching referred to in our opening paragraph. As Alexi points out, there is certainly a

lot more to it than that! AMA WorkWare is a toolkit of quantitative and qualitative methodologies invented and developed by AMA and now used around the world. In a nutshell what WorkWare delivers is evidence about how buildings are really used. Combining building measurement and social science techniques, evidence is gathered by space audits, space occupancy surveys, questionnaires, workshops, focus groups and interviews. The result is an extensive database drawn from 60,000 people in over 250 office buildings to provide benchmarks for individual projects and reports on sector trends.

Away from her successful business, Alexi Marmot is clearly a lover of life. Before rushing off from our meeting (no time for lunch because she's currently heavily involved in work for The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) she briefly rattled through some of her interests. 'My family is really interested in outdoor pursuits. I love alpine walking and skiing (Am I good? I've done a lot of it, put it that way!), as well as jogging and yoga. I love all of the urban and artistic life that London has to offer as well, recently taking in the Duchamp exhibition and a couple of short operas by Stravinsky and Walton at the fantastic Village Underground venue...'

As erudite, fascinating and rounded a number cruncher as you are ever likely to meet! ●

