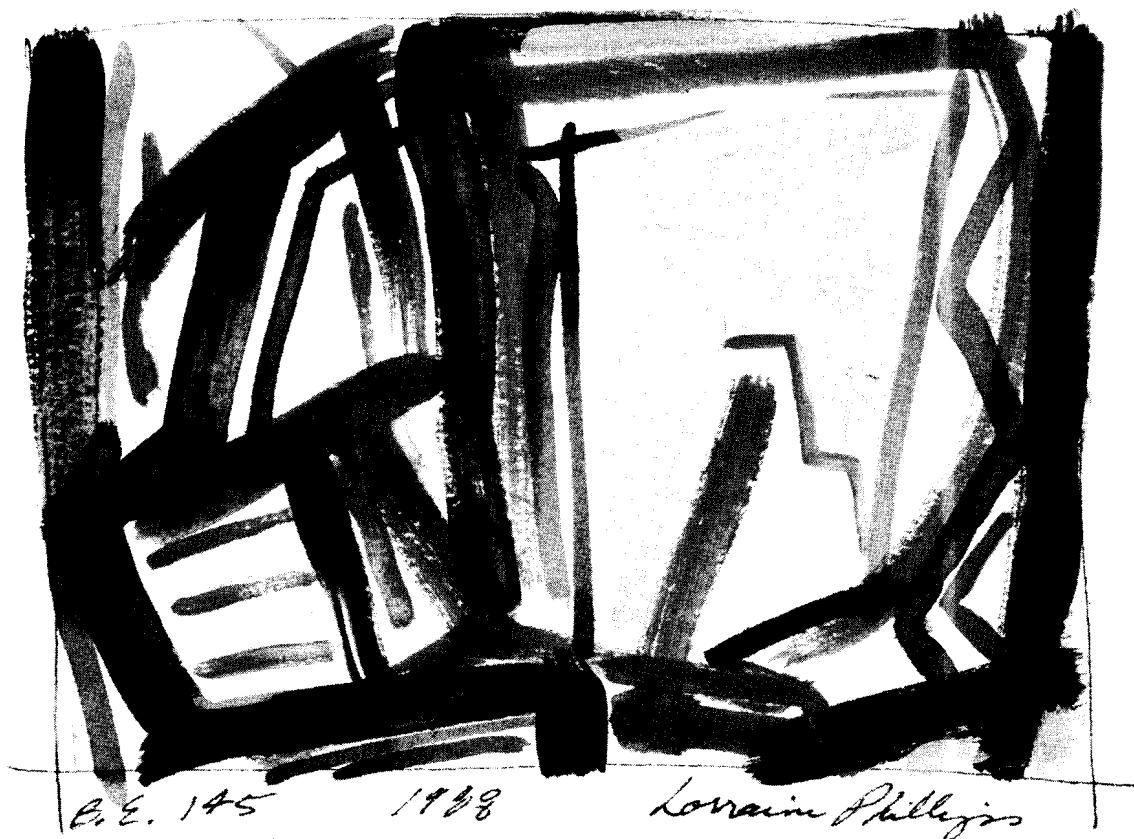


Working on the “Hard” Side

BY ANNE OTHER



I work in a field dominated by men, in the “hard” side of housing development. I enjoy the “non-traditional” aspects of my work — the negotiating of contracts; the coordination of technically oriented activities, such as buying and zoning land; coordinating the work of architects, engineers and builders; visiting construction sites and discussing wall assemblies and the virtues of various construction materials.

I have a sense of the “worthwhileness” of my work. Also, it often dovetails with my personal involvements and interest, particularly women’s issues related to housing, and women’s involvement in non-traditional roles.

My workplace, in a rapidly growing Canadian city, is ostensibly committed to equal opportunity employment, and much is made of the commitment to promote women and ethnic minorities to positions of responsibility. An Equal Opportunity representative attends interviews when women are being considered for management-level positions, or jobs considered non-traditional, to monitor the process for fairness.

This setting is far more progressive in its policy than any other in which I have worked. And yet, there are no women at senior management levels in my department. The support and clerical staff are overwhelmingly female, with only the accounting sections including a strong contingent of males at lower levels. The

hierarchy dominates all, and there is an extreme consciousness of levels of authority, with obvious deference to the levels above.

In spite of a progressive staff development department producing the very latest in human relations oriented courses, workshops and seminars, the bottom line is “the boss is the boss” — even if he — and I do mean he — makes arbitrary, and sometimes uninformed decisions.

I find daily contradictions in my work. My bosses are constrained, as I am, by an organizational system that is largely self-perpetuating. There is a significant level of sincere commitment to the purpose of our organization — creating housing for those unable to afford it on the open market. But the line is kept firmly drawn between the tenants and the professionals who run the organization. When the “chips are down,” there is no intent to give any more than a small amount of control to the tenants.

I observe this situation with some frustration and dismay. Additionally, I have rather directly experienced the inherent bias against women’s advancement to the upper levels of the organization. I am told that I was hired only because certain individuals, specifically a woman and the only woman in this position for many years, insisted that I be interviewed. Although my application addressed the job requirements more fully than those of many male applicants, I had been “screened out” by the personnel

department in the initial review.

Following this, I learned inadvertently that a male hired later than I, was being paid significantly more. When I questioned this situation, I was told that he had "negotiated" his pay level, as I had had the opportunity to do — obviously more effectively. He came from the same position that I had held prior to my appointment, and my experience in the development field is more extensive.

While it was pointed out that this was the "luck of the draw," and the management must have the freedom to negotiate salary levels to acquire appropriate staff people, I was given a small increase, and a policy has since been implemented putting constraints on starting salary levels.

This experience has left me somewhat bitter. I am the only woman on my work team, and I am the lowest paid. Is this not the perpetual story of women operating in a man's world?

On the brighter side, there is one woman who has been promoted to a senior level after many years of service, and with the help of a male mentor. Three other women have been promoted to middle management positions, but their salaries are comparatively low in these newly created positions, and their responsibilities are extensive compared to those of men getting much higher salaries.

In this organization top-heavy with white male management, another distressing phenomenon is the treatment of the almost totally female support staff. I observe some quite overt sexism and patronizing behaviour on the part of some men. Others are more sensitive and respectful, but they all accept that the support staff have fewer privileges and rights by virtue of their position in the hierarchy, and there is no move to change those basic assumptions. Unfortunately, many of the support staff reinforce their subservience by not openly expressing their anger and frustration at their treatment and/or not supporting each other. Those few who do attempt to raise issues or question their treatment are not encouraged or supported by management in doing so. If anything, there is an attempt to embarrass them into silence, even when they use the proper channels, such as the formal grievance process.

As a woman who has struggled with the process of her own liberation, how do I

place myself in this organization? I am making more money than I have ever made, and am doing work that interests me. I have been told of the possibilities of advancement, and have even applied for another position during my short tenure. The position was filled by a (white) male, but I was told that I would be given opportunities to "stretch" myself.

I am asking myself about the conditions attached to such a promise, and my ability to "play the game" to meet those conditions. I know that I am not alone, as I watch other women struggling toward the higher levels of this and other organizations. Some are "fed up" with being left behind, and are ready to do whatever it takes to get there. Others are still hopeful of bringing different values to the centre of decision-making, if and when they make it up there. Still others have made a conscious decision not to bother trying because the price is not worth the prize. Finally, some have just stopped trying, having been rebuffed too often, or totally overwhelmed by the struggle.

I haven't mentioned women who get ahead without any apparent awareness of women's overall position, or with a deliberate effort to ignore it, and proceed to out do the worst of the stereotypical insensitive and chauvinistic male managers. (I think they have been called "Queen Bees.") There is also the phenomenon of misplaced resentment of women who do get ahead, by women who have been left behind, have been ill-treated or have chosen to drop out of the "climb." This tends to further divide women from each other, women who ought to be giving each other support wherever they are struggling. And the women who "make it" — how easily do they get co-opted by their new, and perhaps isolated positions, and forget what is happening to their sisters as they adopt their new (male) "management perspective"?

I find myself caught in more than one of these categories. I have not yet entirely given up on the notion of "getting ahead" in the organization. But I am in a dilemma about the potential cost, and whether I have to pay it, or can I "have my cake..."

My values of non-hierarchical, consensual decision-making and management are challenged constantly on the job. If it weren't for my volunteer involvement with women's groups, I might lose my perspective and sense of self. I sometimes

ask myself whether consensus and "no bosses" could ever get a house built. But I hear of an incidence where it has happened. And if women, consensus and non-hierarchical management ever got a "toehold," who knows?

I also know that I am in some danger of shifting to the "soft" side of the housing development, the "people" side, because that is where I feel that my ideas might be more compatible and where I will feel less constantly challenged, safer.

Ironically, I sense that some technically oriented males are intimidated by my "people skills," which they just don't have — or refuse to acquire. But these so-called "soft" skills are generally given less importance — certainly they are paid less money. Even though it's accepted that managers should have "people" skills, it is those with "harder," more technical skills who get promoted most often. Are they expected to acquire the "people skills" suddenly and magically the day they are appointed managers? Or are they sent on expensive training seminars? Am I becoming sarcastic? I fear that women have to "out-technocrat" the technocrats in order to prove that they are made of the stuff of managers. And I fear that my "people skills" may become an excuse to relegate me forever to a lower, "softer" level in the organization. In fact, I was encouraged to apply for such a position when it opened recently. I suspect it is this very phenomenon of conflicting, stereotyped fear that keeps women from getting promoted in technically and male-oriented organizations.

I think that women often turn aside from the struggle to get ahead, and find a more comfortable level in their professions and careers, not admitting perhaps that we are exhausted and discouraged, and simply need to rest, instead of choosing to be challenged in the extra way that women are when they enter a man's work world. Who am I to lay blame? It has been suggested to me by well-meaning women colleagues that maybe I should get out of "the rat race," and find a more supportive setting in which to use my skills. Maybe I should. Part of me would be happier. Another part of me knows that walking away reinforces all the old stereotypes. The challenge is to stay whole and at the same time work towards meaningful change. I wish I knew how.

Anne Other is a pseudonym. This article was published in Women and Environments, Spring 1990.