

# LEAN INITIATIVE

## MIA SCHARPHIE DELIVERS A DOSE OF START-UP ENERGY TO PEOPLE AND PROJECTS.

BY JENNIFER REUT



**LEFT**  
Mia Scharphie leads a six-week workshop for women designers.

**BOTTOM**  
*Made With Love* documents small-scale community projects.

The merging of soul and role is a laudable idea—it refers, very broadly, to the ability to bring a set of personal, mission-driven values to your professional life—but it’s hard to integrate into full-time practice. For most designers, it means working on public projects with a community engagement component, or collaborating on one-off social impact design projects, or cordoning off pro bono work into a separate part of their business. Mia Scharphie wants to shake that up a bit.

Scharphie runs two consulting businesses—Proactive Practices, a research collaborative with Gilad Meron and Nick McClintock, and Build Yourself+, a workshop series. At first glance, they seem unrelated, but when you talk to her, you begin to see the kind of connections that are at the core of Scharphie’s work. Drawing on her training in landscape architecture (she began her career at the firm Public Architecture in Boston), which Scharphie says is “supercore” to spatializing community projects, she also brings in current thinking

from the world of entrepreneurship, citing Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In*, Tara Mohr’s *Playing Big*, and Eric Ries’s *The Lean Startup* as touchstones and agents for social change that shape both Proactive Practices and Build Yourself+.

Build Yourself+ is a six-week course aimed specifically at women working in the design fields, investing women designers with the skills to articulate issues and obstacles to their own success and then get past them. Scharphie says designers, and women designers in particular, can be hobbled by the total work ethic of design. “The strange irony of design is that we do these renderings of superhappy people in our parks walking with infinite numbers of dogs and



strollers,” yet the design culture of work-all-hours doesn’t permit any of this. “There’s a disconnect between what we try to imagine for people and what our social lives are like.” It’s a workshop approach that frankly acknowledges that the personal is deeply embedded in the professional, and it builds on the current cultural conversations about gender equity and cross-cultural communications in the workplace.

With her partners in Proactive Practices, Scharphie has recently completed research on emerging business models, partly funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, which will be published next year. You can see some of this entrepreneurial thinking at work in *Made With Love*, a report on

eight community projects in a cookbook format published by Enterprise Community Partners. Each of the projects undertaken by Enterprise Rose Architectural Fellows is represented by cooks (collaborators); ingredients (materials and resources); steps to take; a description with photographs; “impact facts”—and of course,

one actual recipe sourced from the community. The format allows the usual components of a report—resources, outcomes, stakeholders—to appeal to a wider audience. “If we wrote a report that wasn’t wonderful to read, no one would read it and use it,” Scharphie says. It also wrests the “outcomes” of projects out of the realm of policy and metrics and into the small-scale realm of the possible.

Scharphie describes this work as “in between the power of commercial organizing and the power of placemaking,” and the book is refreshing in the candor it brings to describing the results of the collaborations between designers and the communities where they are outsiders, as well as a scrappy sense of what it’s like to get a small business or urban intervention off the ground with scant resources. “There are ways that designers and artists can think about impact that isn’t necessarily qualitative or quantitative but that recognizes that scale matters,” she says. “We need to be precise in our language, but if we only try to capture things that can be boiled down and verified, we’ll miss a lot of how change happens.” ●