Crossing Boundaries. Architecture, Design and beyond in the Age of the Pioneers

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MoMoWo · 100 WORKS IN 100 YEARS

EUROPEAN WOMEN IN ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN · 1918–2018

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Crossing Boundaries. Architecture, Design and beyond in the Age of the Pioneers

Creativity is a vast field. To select categories and criteria within is almost a pointless struggle. So, why could architecture and design, together with civil engineering represent the perfect lead into discussing female creativity specifically? And, to continue, why not the former or the latter alone?

When Sigfried Giedion wrote, as early as 1948, *Mechanization takes command* he united architecture and design leaning towards anonymity and industrialism (tall buildings, balloon frames together with barbers' chairs, economic kitchens and trains) eliminating, from the point of view of militant historiography and perception, the division between the two disciplines.[1]

Giedion effectively demonstrated that Crossing Architecture in the broader sense including civil engineering and design in the stricter sense of interiors and home furnishings allows us to understand the development of design culture more easily.

Nevertheless, the Western outline is as diversified as the starting points of the disciplines and of the disciplines themselves in a modern approach.

A consistent number of designers sat, in fact, in the middle between architecture and design, having received an architectural education and practicing both; those originating from the applied arts, almost always remained in the field of crafting and, later, of design.

So why did so many architects –male and female– turned against design, only to return through architecture to set up a cycle between the two?

The phenomenon does not occur uniformly in all western countries and the switch is further complicated if we take gender into consideration between the various logical factors.

If the 'official' entrance of women into architectural projects, and therefore in the pre-set educational bodies such as schools and academies, started only at the end of the nineteenth century, Signe Hornborg was the first woman to graduate in architecture in Europe in 1890 (Helsinki); the launch of circularity between architecture and design can be dated back to the same period, starting at different times in different countries and not at all in many.

One of the first and simplest answers to this question regards architecture's point of focus from the end of the nineteenth century the middle class home, and the working class home at the beginning of the next century.

However, we should also make some distinctions in this case, too. In some cases, houses were built by professionals without architectural training, while in others, architecture played a vital role.

When in 1895 Elsie de Wolfe created the interiors for the women's Colony Club in New York, in a building designed by Stanford White, she selected light, soft colours and several late eighteenth century French pieces of furniture. Her training as an enthusiastic, cultured and curious amateur fulfilled the demands of those wealthy clients searching to change the style of their homes. Her role as one of the first professionals in the field of interior design was slowly changing the darker and heavier styles of men's clubs, with barely a passing relationship with architecture.[2] However, in her attempt to set out rules regarding new interiors, De Wolf looked at homes in which "we must accept the standards that artists and architects accept, the standards that have been passed down to us from those exceedingly rational people: our ancestors".[3] The statement is generic and abstract, but gives us a preview of the subsequent separation

between different research fields: architecture, objects (antiques in De Wolfe's case), and the design of both.[4] In the USA, a home is a way to show off your social status. Its design and the design of its furniture and furnishings is undertaken in a sectorial way, thanks also to the unique condition of technological development in which projects make use of patents, automatisms and, briefly, the industrial production aimed at work areas and middles class homes, in extremely fast times. Schools such as Cranbrook Academy, founded by Eilel Saarinen (1929) partially following the Bauhaus model, quickly identify sectorial training which signal a rather clean division between architecture and design which still continues today.[5]

Remaining in the Anglo-Saxon ambit, design schools in the United Kingdom were established early and contributed to launching the specialisation: in 1837, the Government School of Design was founded in London and after the *Great Exhibition* in 1852, Henry Cole was appointed superintendent of the Department of Practical Arts, including the Museum of Manufacturers and the School of Design.[6] The next periods to contribute to defining the Arts & Crafts culture highlight the subdivision of the disciplines: architecture continues to be 'guided' by the conservative Royal Institute of British Architects which follows a sectorial and traditional training format.[7] The culture of design, therefore, finds openings in schools of applied arts –where women are also more easily accepted– and industrial design within technologies applied to production.[8] Thus, the cycle between architecture and design is both sporadic and rare. The fact that Margaret and Frances McDonald, having attended the Glasgow School of Arts, embraced interior design during their career is thanks to their professional collaboration with Charles Rennie Mackintosh, who trained as an architect, and the founding of the Glasgow Four,[9] whereas the path taken by their partner was occasional and inverse.

Crossing boundaries, therefore, is due to the cultural, social and industrial context.

In northern countries, their focus on social needs and the domestic dimension advanced both the role of women in the design professions and the cycle between architecture and design.

The interventions by the activist and writer Ellen Key (1849-1926) in Sweden, and her essays that covered home management not only in the functional aspects,[10] stoked the interest in the domestic project which grew in social and reformist importance and favoured a broad scale of designs among architects.[11] The result was twofold: the first woman to graduate in architecture in Europe was Scandinavian, and architects trained in northern universities often dealt with interior design: from Finland's Aino and Alvar Alto,[12] to Sweden's Gunnar Asplund (1885-1940), Osvald Almqvist (1884-1950) and other designers involved in the *Stockholm Exhibition. Swedish Arts & Crafts and Home Industries* in 1930, to Denmark's Kaare Klint (1888-1954) and Hans Wenger, both educated as architects and furniture designers, or Paul Henningsen (1894-1967), who trained in building techniques and architecture.

Furthermore, the substantially classical training of Nordic architects is directed towards a design with motifs inspired by the climate and anthropological conditions of the native geography. The particular importance that the home takes on in cold and inhospitable places pushes the designers of 'containers' to widen their spheres of work to the 'contents' as well. Long Nordic nights and the need for shelter are the point of inspiration for those functionalist architects in considering prime industrial products –such as wood and glass– as 'living matter' for the characterisation of warm, bright interiors, thereby giving origin to the renowned 'Nordic style'. Furthermore, starting from the development of industrial design in the 1920s and 1930s, social-democratic and welfare administrations explicitly asked designers to show interest in home appliances.[13] The directive, for example, that emerges from the Stockholm exhibition in 1930 –so greatly desired by the Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson– demands perfect correspondence between standards applied to architecture with those for furnishings, thereby coinciding the figure of the architect with that of the designer.

Further industrial spurs, together with similar social and political entreaties affected Germany even before the First World War, when research into the *Deutsche Form* (German shape) represented perhaps the greatest push towards complete design – not only theoretical, but also and primarily applied: architecture for the home and work, daily objects, graphics, communication and equipment for transport. Peter Behrens (1868-1940) and the group surrounding the *Deutcher Werkbund* supply design tools and ideologies for the passing from one design scale to another;[14] a

fig.1

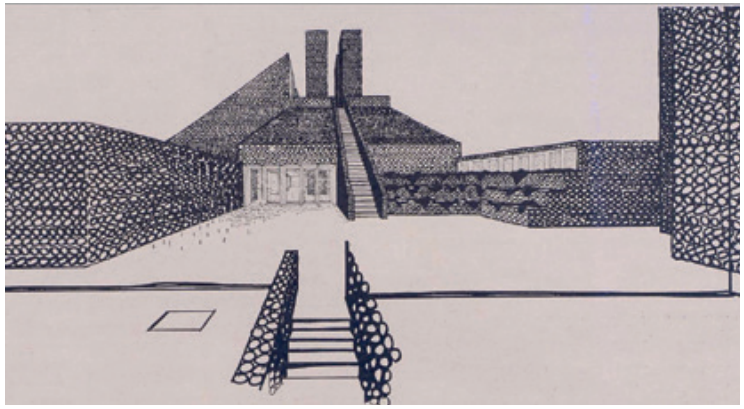

fig.2

passing that was perfected on the theme of home after the war within the definition of Weimar's social-democracy and the focus on themes of *Wohnung* (housing) intended as both a category of the spirit as well as a land in which to measure industrialisation, formal innovation derived from the experience of avant-garde art and project for the architecture and design of interiors.

Blurred lines between architecture and design favoured the entrance of female designers in the professions as training –in a moment of cultural and political upheaval– became less academic and allowed students to pass from typically feminine curricula – applied arts– to the more technical ones of architecture, as was the case for Margarete Schütte Lihotzky (fig.1).[15] Education and training may be decidedly innovative and transversal as in the case of the female students of the Bauhaus and its managerial apexes (Lilly Reich),[16] or in the case of its Soviet counterpart, the Vkhutemas, in which –at least in the final phases– the disciplinary differences are programmatically very weak.[17]

In countries with less industrial weight, like France where artistic craftsmanship has a long tradition and artistic innovation sets its foundations, and find its voice, and where the curriculum only slightly conditions careers, the go-between for architecture and design are visual arts and their renewal. Eileen Gray (1878-1976) can easily pass from applied arts to architecture and industrial design, within the logic of the modern building as an artistic masterpiece.[18]

A different process was in Italy – close to France for its artistic tradition and less invested by industrial progress compared to countries in Central Europe and North America. In this case, the intervention of the architects, trained in architectural school from as early as 1919, in the field of design everything rotates around the tradition of the *domus* (home), as a unifying element of national design culture.[19] *Domus* and *La casa bella* (the beautiful house) are the titles of two magazines founded in 1928, both in reference to the home and both which gave their readers examples of architecture and interior design. From as early as 1926, the architects Gio Ponti (1891-1979) and Guido Andlovitz (1900-1971) were commissioned by the artistic management of important industries to promote domestic use ceramics (Richard Ginori and SCI) and a huge number of architects within the Modern Movement programme or still connected with Art Deco or revival design worked in furnishing and decor in unique pieces, small series or for industrial production. The importance of this phenomenon can be traced to three aspects: on one hand, as mentioned, to the centrality of the domestic theme within Italian architectural culture - Giò Ponti published in 1933 *La casa all'italiana* (The Italian Home), establishing a relationship that would prevail for a good part of the twentieth century.[20] Secondly, to the substantial absence of schools for the education of designers in applied arts that are taught or those with a Fine Arts approach or those aimed at training manufacturers.[21] Finally, to the presence of areas renowned for specialised production requiring high quality skills and knowledge, which are looking for new possibilities and a better position within the international market, such as the Cantù wood area or Tuscany's ceramic district. A new class of

fig.3

entrepreneurs, focussing both on new opportunities offered by industry as well as the demands of the market, give architects the chance to design interiors and home furnishings, but also transatlantic planes, trains, offices - all far away from the 'industrial aesthetics' that are typical of other western countries, and united on the other hand by the focus on creating surroundings and atmospheres that are characterised by the 'calm simplicity' that is typical of the Mediterranean areas and the classic tradition which has always been so appreciated by travellers from all over the world and all time periods gone by. This is the case for Luisa Aiani and Franca Helg, both graduated in architecture at the Polytecnic University of Milan, at the very heart of the distribution of Italian Modernism, and both creators of buildings and furnishings, in partnership with their native atelier, with their professional and life partner or as a unique author,[22] and later, after the 1950s, the 'heroic' era of Italian design, marked by Anna Ferrieri Castelli, Gae Aulenti (fig. 2-3) and many others.

Despite its almost random origin, the cycle between architecture and design –born from cultural, economic, politic and climatic factors– represented an opportunity for research and debate that has been well-documented in magazines and can even be found in productions by several today's designers.

Notes:

1 Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization takes Command* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948).

2 Penny Sparke, *Elsie De Wolfe: The Birth of Modern Interior Decoration* (New York: Acanthus Press, 2005).

3 Elsie de Wolfe, *The House in Good Taste* (New York: The Century Co, 1913), 13.

4 Elsie de Wolfe, *After All* (New York, London: Harper and Brothers, 1935), 2-3.

5 Women rose to the top positions rather quickly: Pispian Saarinen Swanson, Eilel's daughter, was the first manager of the Faculty of Design (1932-35); *Design in America: The Cranbrook Vision 1925-1950* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984).

6 Anthony Burton, *Vision and Accident: The Story of the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London: V&A Publications, 1999).

7 Marc Crinson and Jules Lubbok, *Architecture, Art or Profession? Three Hundred Years of Architectural Education in Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

8 Adrian Forty, *Objects of desire: Design and Society since 1750* (London: Thames and Hudson 1986), 62-118.

9 Pamela Robertson, "Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh (1864-1933)," in Jude Burkhauser (ed.), *'Glasgow Girls': Women in Art and Design 1880-1920* (Edinburgh: Canongate. 1990), 112.

10 See Caterina Franchini, "History Doesn't Stand in a Single File: 100 Works, 100 Years, 100 Creative Women in Europe," in this publication.

11 Barbara Miller Lane, "An Introduction to Ellen Key's 'Beauty in the Home'," in *Modern Swedish Design: Three Founding Texts* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 19-31.

12 Renja Suominen Kokkonen, *Aino and Alvar Aalto: A Shared Journey: Interpretations of an Everyday Modernism* (Jyväskylä: Alvar Aalto Museum, 2007); Ulla Kinnunen, *Aino Aalto* (Jyväskylä: Alvar Aalto Museum, 2004).

13 Ingrid Sommar, *Funkis. Stilen som byggde Sverige* (Stockholm: Svenska, 2006).

14 Frederic J. Schwartz, *The Werkbund: Design Theory and Mass Culture Before the First World War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996).

15 Susan R. Henderson, "Housing the Single Woman: The Frankfurt Experiment," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 68, 3 (2009), 358-77.