Women in the history of architecture and design. Sailing to a new history

Original

Availability:
This version is available at: 11583/2667122 since: 2017-03-16T11:44:17Z

Publisher:
France Stele Institute of Art History ZRC SAZU

Published
DOI:

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27 January 2019
Ljubljana - Torino
MoMoWo · 100 Works in 100 Years
European Women in Architecture and Design · 1918-2018

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Published by
France Stele Institute of Art History ZRC SAZU, represented by Barbara Murovec
Issued by Založba ZRC, represented by Oto Luthar

Printed by
Agit Mariogros, Beinasco (TO)

First edition / first print run: 3000
Ljubljana and Turin 2016

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Publication of the project MoMoWo - Women’s Creativity since the Modern Movement
This project has been co-funded 50% by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Commission

This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.
This book was published on the occasion of the MoMoWo traveling exhibition *MoMoWo · 100 Works in 100 Years · European Women in Architecture and Design · 1918-2018*, which was first presented at the University of Oviedo Historical Building, Spain, from 1 July until 31 July 2016. The Exhibition's further stops are: Lisbon (September 2016), Grenoble (November 2016), Amsterdam (March 2017), Ljubljana (April 2017) and Turin (June 2017)

**MoMoWo Travelling Exhibition, Oviedo**

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Thematic Essays
Women in the History of Architecture and Design.
Sailing to a New History

Women's studies in the History of Contemporary Architecture and Design have been gathering pace recently. In the long-term and with a broad perspective, their higher aim is to reach equality of the sexes in the professions, and consequently, foster the ambitions of new generations of women architects and designers.

In some cases, these studies aim to demonstrate the existence of the so called ‘woman's touch’ by seeking to answer the following questions. Are there features typical to women's design? Is a woman's approach to the design process different from a man's? If works created by women are unlike those created by their male colleagues, what are their distinctive features? In other cases, gender studies focus on the exploration of the tension that has existed between the architectural or design professions and its women members. They aim to demonstrate the influence that these women have had on architecture and design by taking into account their confinement to the profession's restrictive and sometimes discriminatory practices.

Rather than trying to prove the existence of a ‘woman's touch’, MoMoNo's historical research mainly shares the above-mentioned aim by taking into consideration that working conditions, social, cultural, geographical and technological factors influenced the architect's or designer's project process much more than gender.

Architecture and Design History have long ignored the achievements of women professionals in architecture and design fields with the consequences that women have been denied their own place in History.

Considering that, since the end of the nineteenth century, specialised magazines have covered works by creative women, it is surprising that their contribution has still not been completely acknowledged by mainstream histories or ‘seminal histories’. It is a fact, that the History of Contemporary Architecture and Design has too frequently favoured men professionals' works simply omitting to mention works by their women colleagues. Despina Stratigakos's book entitled Where Are the Women Architects? proves yet again that in 2016 this subject is far from being completed and it is still worthy of close attention.

Delay in bringing women's studies into the History of Contemporary Architecture or Design can be attributed to several reasons. This discipline neglected, or deliberately eluded, open debate about what influence religious doctrines and social cultural norms had on women's creativity which ultimately led to their marginalisation. This hampered research into the variety of strategies that these women adopted in their own professional choices and ways of working.

There are also objective obstacles to overcome especially when researching the ‘pioneers’ and having to decipher pseudonyms or track down archives that have been lost or destroyed as regarded unimportant in a predominantly male, professional environment.

Since the late nineteenth century, women have been architects, designers and planners and even contributed to the world's most important exhibitions, as revealed by Jeanne Madeline Weimann (1981) and Mary Pepchinski (2007). As professionals they also organised and built important exhibitions dedicated to women's work. The Swiss exhibitions for women's work, Schweizerische Ausstellung für Frauenarbeit (SAFFA), of 1928 and 1958 were outstanding examples.
From the end of the first decade of the twentieth century up to the 1930s, women also had an active role in the early avant-garde movements, as outlined in the Exhibition catalogues by Jean-Claude and Valentine Marcadé (1983) and later by John E. Bowlt and Matthew Drutt (1999). However, in most cases, History did not give full credit to women’s professional contribution suggesting that women were not interested in architecture or design and so did not take an active part. This even happened in the most notable examples of professional partnerships where individual roles in projects have long been difficult to identify.

Women architects married to men who were also architects have been marginalised in history, put in the background and labelled wife, helper or assistant. Only since the 1980s, efforts have been made to understand more about architect/designer couples and to assign both names to their works. Examples can be found in: Pamela Reekie (1983) about the Mackintoshes; Renja Suominen-Kokkonen (2007) about the Aaltos; Donald Albrecht (1997), Pat Kirkham (1998) about the Eames; Roberto Masiero (1996) about the Scarpas.

Even women professionals’ contributions to the work of the great Masters of the Modern Movement took time to be completely recognised. It is sufficient to mention here, the works by Lilly Reich (1885–1974) for Mies van der Rohe, those by Charlotte Perriand (1903–99) for Le Corbusier, and those by architect and artist Marion Mahony Griffin (1871–1961) for Frank Lloyd Wright, whose professional roles were re-assessed, respectively, in the studies by Matilda McQuaid and Magdalena Droste (1996), Mary McLeod and Roger Aujame (2003), and Debora Wood (2005).

In the United States of America, the academic community began to work on minority issues reflecting the complexity of the country’s multicultural nature earlier than in Europe or the rest of the world. This early North American interest can also be explained considering the diverging ideas, between the USA and Europe, of women’s roles in national economies.

Americans soon focused on realising the potential of women’s participation in national and global economies, while Europeans focused mainly on defining a woman’s role as domestic. Consequently, research quickly started mapping women professionals and architects focusing on an overall view instead of individual cases.

In New York in 1962, Madeleine Bettina Stern published a volume on the first women professionals entitled *We the Women: Career Firsts of Nineteenth-century America*. Some women pioneers in USA architecture featured in the book were: Harriet Morrison Irwin (1828–97, the first woman to patent an architectural design), Louise Blanchard Bethune (1856–1913, the first female professional architect) and Sophia Hayden Bennett (1868–1953).

In 1977, Susanna Torre published an in-depth, evaluative study of women’s roles and achievements in American architecture, reviewing the careers of outstanding women architects and architectural critics.

Since the 1980s several national biographic collections have been dedicated to pioneering women architects starting notably with the Nordic countries and the United Kingdom. In 1983, Ulla Markelin reconstructs the Finnish situation and dedicates a section of her book to Signe Hornborg (1862–1916) who was the first women to graduate in architecture in Europe, in 1890. Women architects in Finland between the 1890s and 1950s are the subject of Renja Suominen-Kokkonen’s book (1992). Demark and Sweden were covered respectively by Tove Koed and Edith Kjærsgaard (1986), Helle Bay (1991) and Gunilla Lundahl (1992), while more recently Wenche Fidal (2004) covered the entire Scandinavian countries, including Norway. The first book about women architects in United Kingdom was published in 1984, edited by Lynne Walker, while her second book on the same subject was published in 1997.

Since the 1990s, national compilations have been published for Switzerland (Evelyne Lang, 1992), Austria (Patricia Zacek, 1999; Anne Bauer, Ingrid Gumpinger and Eleonore Kleindienst, 2003), Czech Republic (Jan Machonin ed., 2003) and Germany (Kerstin Dörhöfer, 2004; Ute Maasberg and Regina Prinz, eds., 2004).

Writing about the complex relationship between women, architecture, dwelling and domesticity, Katrin Cosseta included the subject of women ‘pioneers’ in Italy. In her book, *Ragione e sentimento dell’abitare* (Reason and feeling of dwelling, 2000), she wrote widely about Elena Luzzatto (1900–25), the first female to graduate in Architecture (1925), in Italy from *Regia Scuola Superiore di Architettura* of Rome.

Many national studies have been listed here, but there is not yet a comprehensive publication covering systematically the whole of
Europe, although publications exist covering Australia (Julie Willis and Hanna Bronwyn, 2001) and the USA (Sarah Allaback, 2008).

The first book considering the work of women architects in an international perspective was published in 1990. Clare Lorenz’s book examines the work of forty-eight women architects from twenty countries, discussing their achievements in all aspects of architecture, as well as the national context where each architect worked. A review of the significant work being created by women architects from around the world was published in 2011 and edited by Maggie Toy.

Increased interest in including women’s contribution can also be observed regarding the History of Applied Arts and Design.

One of the first biographical surveys was by Isabelle Anscombe (1984) analysing the lives and work of pioneering women, such as the English interior designer and painter Vanessa Stephen Bell (1879–1961), the Ukrainian-born French artist and designer Sonia Terk Delaunay (1885–1979), and the American actress and interior decorator Elsie de Wolfe (1859?–1950), whose textile tableware, and furniture designs made important contributions to the industry of interior design.

In 1988 Liz McQuiston’s book was published entitled Women in Design. A contemporary View. This book highlights the work and life of forty-three designers from Great Britain, the USA, Italy, the Netherlands, India and Japan, and spans a broad range of design fields including product design, furniture design, interior design and architecture. A similar broad approach was undertaken by Luigi Patitucci in his book published 2012. Marjan Groot (2007) covers applied and decorative arts and crafts in the Netherlands, whereas Ann Calhoun’s book (2000) specifically covers arts and crafts in New Zealand.

Some books are specifically dedicated to women’s works in the fields of weaving and ceramics such as those by Sigrid Weltge-Wortmann, about women’s textile art from the Bauhaus (1993) and Cheryl Buckley about women designers in the British pottery industry (1990). This is due to the fact that numerous women have always practiced in these fields, as the practice of an applied art was socially approved as a sign of domestic industriousness when carried out at amateur level in time left over after family responsibilities. Initially, these women were only executors of other people’s projects, then—since the end of the nineteenth century, by imposing their own design-process—they became regular authors enabled to sign their own creations and supervise the manufacturing process.

The theme of a woman’s role both as student or teacher in the great European design schools has also been researched in response to mainstream studies that had previously neglected it. By way of example, are the studies by Jude Burkhauser (1990) concerning the Glasgow School of Art, Ulrike Müller about the Bauhaus (2009) and Gerda Müller-Krauspe (2007) about the legendary Ulm School of Design (Hochschule für Gestaltung–HfG).

Many exhibitions took place to increase the visibility of women architects and designers, giving fair acknowledgement to their works and life experiences. The majority of these exhibitions were dedicated to a single creator, while less were devoted to mapping authors and works. Among these were two exhibitions about design in Spain, the first in 1999 Women made: dones dissenyadores a Catalunya i Balears and the second “¡Mujeres al proyecto! DiseñADORas para el hábitat!” This second exhibition examined the works of emerging Spanish women designers in the domestic sector and was inaugurated in 2007 in Las Palmas before moving to Latin America.

The publication of catalogues encouraged research into ‘women’s projects’. Exhibition catalogues such as Frauen im Design /Women in Design. Careers and Life Histories since 1900 (1989) dedicated to German designers, Dal merletto alla motocicletta / (From lace to the motorcycle. Women artisan/artists and designers in 20th–century Italy) (Ferrara 2002) and Nientedimeno / Nothingless. The strength of female design (2011) devoted to design from 1945 to 2000, express the desire to pay tribute and publicly acknowledge work done by craftswomen, artists, designers and entrepreneurs who have contributed their efforts and fostered the design discipline since the early twentieth century.

Significant interest for design created by women has been recently confirmed by prestigious institutions such as the Centre de création industrielle (Centre national d’art et de culture Georges-Pompidou, Paris) and the Triennale di Milano. The first, presented a new display of its collection devoted to women artists/designers (Elles@Centrepompidou, 2009), while the second opened the exhibition W. Women in Italian Design in April 2016. Curated by
Silvana Annicchiarico and set-up by Margherita Palli, this exhibition is conceived to be the ninth edition of the Triennale Design Museum. This event demonstrates, once more, the current interest in women’s creativity and the need for its dissemination.

As revealed by this essay, from the 1960s the Anglo-Saxon women academics were the first to research women’s studies, but they were not alone in exploring this ‘unknown territory’. Thanks to individual academics’ research and publications, the scientific community has recently realised that women’s work is much more widespread than was previously believed including in the fields of architecture and design.

Most notably since the 1970s, the feminist movement had an important role in drawing public attention to women’s studies. Leaving aside feminist and ideological interpretations of history—often motivated by the social and political situation and tension in which they built up—what emerges is the existence of contribution to projects and design of space by women’s professionals. This contribution can no longer be interpreted as a mere result of the centuries-old role played by women in the domestic environment. It should, however, be re-considered in the framework of creative and technical professions.

Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, who never ran a household and never cooked, designed the legendary Frankfurt Kitchen (1926) thanks to her studies and innovative approach to the project. Well known are in fact her innovative time-motion studies and interviews with housewives.

It is surprising to notice that most of the studies mentioned in this essay were accomplished by women scholars. This demonstrates that the topic still seems to lack serious consideration by the majority of men scholars. Is this history destined to remain a history of women written by women? In another words, will its destiny be just another example of marginalisation?

Notes:


2. An example of this approach is given by Annemarie Adams and Peta Tancred in their book about women architects’ major innovations and contributions to the field both in practice and design in Canada. See Annemarie Adams and Peta Tancred, Designing Women: Gender and the Architectural Profession (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).


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23 Tove Koed and Edith Kjaersgaard (eds.), Historien om Kvindernes Bygning (Copenhagen: Kvindernes Bygning, 1986). This book is about history of women in the field of construction in Denmark.


17 This different approach was already expressed by women’s buildings at European and American universal expositions between 1873 and 1915. As claimed Mary Pepinchinski in her book (Feminist space, 2007).


112 Kerstin Dörhöfer, Pionierinnen in der Architektur: Eine Baugeschichte der Moderne (Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth, 2004).


110 Katrin Cosseta, Ragione e sentimento dell’abitare: La casa e l’architettura nel pensiero femminile tra le due guerre (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2000).


102 Kerstin Dörhöfer, Pionierinnen in der Architektur: Eine Baugeschichte der Moderne (Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth, 2004).


100 Katrin Cosseta, Ragione e sentimento dell’abitare: La casa e l’architettura nel pensiero femminile tra le due guerre (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2000).


93 Luigi Patitucci, La Donna è Mobile: Donne del Design (Siracusa: Letteraventidue Edizioni, 2012).


This world-renowned German school, known because the concept of *Gute Form* (Good form) originated there, saw a woman among its founders. As it is well known, Inge Scholl (1917–98) founded the school together with her husband Otl Aicher, and Max Bill (former student at the Bauhaus), in 1953.


Marcelo Leslabay et al., ¡Mujeres al proyecto, diseñADORAS para el hábitat! (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: Gobierno de Canarias, 2007). Exhibition catalogue.


Anty Pansera and Tiziana Occleppo (eds.), *Dal merletto alla motocicletta: Arigiane/artiste e designer nell’Italia del Novecento* (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 2002). Exhibition catalogue. The exhibition was held in Ferrara in the Palazzo Massari, Padiglione d’Arte Contemporanea, from 3 March to 5 May, 2002. It was organised on the occasion of the tenth edition of the Biennale Donna, and realised in collaboration with the legendary association Unione Donne Italiane (UDI) founded in 1945.


About women entrepreneurs and women in communication see Luisa Bocchietto and Anty Pansera (eds.), *Dcomedesign* (Biella: Eventi & Progetti, 2008). Exhibition catalogue.


About feminism and design in United Kingdom see Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham (eds.), *A View from the Interior Feminism, Women, and Design* (London: Women’s Press, 1989).


“Drugā ženska gimnazija, koja će se na proleće dovršiti, imaće oko 250 prostorija,” Vreme, October 19, 1932, 8.


Spominski almanah slovenskih strokovnih pisateljev, publicistov in projektantov. Ljubljana: Nova strokovna založba, 1940.


Verschuuren, Nel, Mourik, Frans van, and Boekbinder, James. Dia’s van werk/264 images: Nel Verschuuren binnenhuisarchitect/interior designer. Amsterdam: Bis publishers, 1998.


