Collecting & Linking Creative Cultures of Women. Women Designers and Women Clients for another history

Original

Availability:
This version is available at: 11583/2730195 since: 2019-04-06T16:59Z

Publisher:
France Stele Institute of Art History ZRC SAZU

Published
DOI:

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Introduction

Women’s traces in the architectural archives are as faint as they are scarce and, with a few famous exceptions, women’s contributions in the modern era appear too vague when we consider the radical changes in society and the roles played therein by women. While female protagonists were becoming more common in certain fields, the field of architecture seemingly had no equivalent to, say, Maria Skłodowska Curie. What we should rather say is that there is no evidence of an analogous female contribution to the history of architecture and design. Moreover, this presumed lack of input into the field of design might be misinterpreted as a failure to participate in building common ground. It might ultimately appear to be a failure – culpability even – ‘to conceive’ of a new modern environment for their own new life in a modern society. This nonsensical vision of a lack or, at best, of a discontinuous range of initiatives made by women within this framework highlights the importance of the role played by archives and source material in making history, and thus necessitates some preliminary considerations. Were women really disinterested in shaping, in terms of design, a way of life tied up with their emancipation, or, rather, are sources providing evidence of their involvement really just not accessible? Some examples of overlooked female creativity may help to underline this lack of information and the consequent need to reframe the crucial links between sources and history in order to gain a new understanding of women’s contributions.

It is our belief that there is a need to put female creative culture in the spotlight, and a digital approach offers a new perspective by making it possible to create a new kind of digital archive.
any event, what is certain is that a new critical approach to collecting sources and making history is overdue. Institutional records officers are essential for the collection and spreading of cultural heritage as well as for the fostering of research. Digital platforms can create links capable of shaping a new cultural context since they provide an overview of the broad networks operating in design processes. From the point of view of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, as well as of the built environment, there exists no single author-de SUPREME but rather a collective of collaborative workers. In this perspective we aim to introduce a couple of case studies of women’s creative work as demonstrations of possible new critical approaches to architectural and design culture and its history. The first focuses on the little known designers Margaret and Frances Macdonald and the entrepreneur Kate Cranston, the second on the almost unknown landscape designer Norah Geddes. In this context they aim to articulate some aspects of this cultural perspective. Case studies take into account the period just preceding the Modern Movement as a turn of important changes. Lastly we discuss how a digital archive which makes known the historical, creative culture of women as this comes to light.

Il n’en ne brode pas des coussins

It should be noted that since the nineteenth century the matter of new designs has been tightly bound up with the reorganisation of private and social spaces. If, on the one hand, modern design has included noteworthy architectures dedicated to institutional buildings where women were generally not very numerous, on the other, the general overhaul of the built environment has included a wide range of functional buildings essential to the lives of the general public and catering to all needs and pleasures, not to mention the domestic environment forever perceived as a ‘womanly realm.’ According to Le Corbusier, the design program to change architecture was a means for changing the world, and this light, the notion of ‘architecture or revolution’ must have represented more than a mere slogan for the women of the time. Some masterpieces, such as the Frankfurt Kitchen by Margarethe Schütte – Lihotzky, have recently been highlighted by providing evidence of specifically female involvement. Many others, however, are scarcely documented in spite of their extraordinary freshness and social significance. One such example is the iconic self-portrait of Marianne Brandt.

1 "Architectures and revolution" was the title of a chapter in Le Corbusier, Vers une architecture, (Paris: Éditions Crès, Collection de l’Esprit Nouveau, 1923).
8 Charlotte Perraud, Une vie de dévouée (Paris: Éditions Édile Jacob, 1998), 25. When the young designers went to the rue des Silos to put herself forward for his furniture program, Le Corbusier reproached her... He needed time and above all a visit to Perraud’s... Her assis to be exhibited at the 1927 Salon before he would consider her a suitable partner in his atelier.

wearing her teapot on her head as a hat, which speaks of a multi-layered participation by women in innovating both products and imagery. Related architectural historiography revealing a still little-explored theme explains the difficult context in which she expressed her talent. Her direct participation in furniture production in the Walter Gropius atelier, albeit for a short period, also recalls the contribution of Charlotte Perraud to Le Corbusier’s modernization of domestic furniture. Apparently both modernist masters were radically promoting architecture as social commitment; addressing then design to the aim of changing family life and social interaction by firmly believing that architecture could drive change. The naïvety and failure of this kind of effort is evident in their underestimation of the female contribution to their ateliers. Given the significance and standing of Le Corbusier and Gropius, the difficulty experienced by these women designers to ‘break through’ is quite telling. Brandt, a woman student, was indeed admitted to the Bauhaus school, but, notwithstanding this, Gropius only allowed her to be part of the metal laboratory as an exceptional case since women students were almost always directed to ‘more feminine’ arts activities. On the one hand, if women were admitted and did enthusiastically apply to the school, they had all but disappeared from the studies on Bauhaus until some recent contributions on the subject were published. On the other hand, Perraud mentioned how Le Corbusier had been more than incredible to take her on as a partner in his atelier. ‘I se on ne brode pas des coussins’ (We don’t embroider cushions here), she said on their first meeting as, in answer to her proposal to work in the atelier, he saw her to the door. These unpleasing behaviours are a sign that women were still spared in the male domain of design. This sign is echoed in their personal archives, as Le Corbusier declared...
its archive was conceived to become a spiritual entity, that is, a continuation of the endeavour pursued throughout a lifetime.\footnote{Le Corbusier collected his personal documentation and shaped his archive. I thereby declare, for every eventualty, that I have everything that (constitutes) an administrative entity, the "Foundation Le Corbusier," in every other meaningful item, which shall become a spiritual entity, that is, a continuation of the endeavour pursued throughout a lifetime. The online Guocis archive at the Bauhaus in temporary offline. https://www.bauhaus.de/en/bauhaus/archiv/188, [Juliette Lord and, archive/BFO/open_archiv_walter_gruensig (accessed June 22, 2018). On the Stanford Guocis collection see Bauhaus- Rezsina Museum. (The Walter Gruens Archiv: An illustrated catalogue of the drawings, prints, and photographs in the Walter Gruens Archiv at the Bauhaus-Rezsina Museum: Harvard University (New York: Gerdol PIL, 1999).}

Two Wives and One Client: Traces of Women in Glasgow

Irrespective of individual attitudes, the industrial revolution had started to change society radically and it had brought new duties and opportunities for women. In parallel it created enormous problems and a new poverty as much as it fostered women’s integration and solidarity. The manufacturing environment especially drove important transformations both in the urban setting and in life style. For example, innovative workers housing included new types of private and collective functions (e.g. kindergartens) which may be linked to women’s ‘liberation’. Some women, however, started to become involved in new challenges.


Frances also married an architect, James Herbert McNair, with whom she carried out projects. Frances Macdonald’s projects are even less well-known than those of her sister even if as a student she did win local and national awards. In 1899 Frances and her husband moved to Liverpool where almost all her works were destroyed by fire in 1921. Some still exist artworks and documentation about Margaret and Frances Macdonald are collected in the ‘Archives and Collections’ of the Glasgow Art School.\footnote{Frances Macdonald and Margaret Macdonald’s Memorial Exhibition Catalogue (Glasgow: MoMA, 1993); George Lawson, “Select Bibliography with annotations.” Mackintosh’s Mainstream: The Glasgow School of Art (edited by William Buchanan (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2004).}

The Macdonald sisters worked in the ‘Group of Four’ where Mackintosh played the lead while doing architectural practice in a studio.\footnote{Juliette Kirch, “Mackintosh and the City,” Charles Rennie Mackintosh, edited by Wendy Kaplan (New York: Abbeville Press, 1996), 31–61.} Margaret and Frances certainly designed graphics, textile artworks and book illustrations. But we could argue that they did much more. Especially in the case of Margaret, however, we can assume that her involvement in the studio must have been very intensive. She worked closely with her husband for many years when he redesigned the studio partnerships and finally she assumed the leading role when they moved to Suffolk, London, and France. Mackintosh’s ill health in this period leads us to believe that Margaret did not merely work on decorative details.

This approach includes a further path for a different research framework. Among celebrated masterpieces, the Willow Tea Room (1903) was Mackintosh’s most important commission for Miss Cranston. It was the culmination of a meaningful ‘partnership’.\footnote{Juliette Kirch, “Mackintosh and the City,” Charles Rennie Mackintosh, edited by Wendy Kaplan (New York: Abbeville Press, 1996), 31–61.}

It should be noted that among Margaret Macdonald works, there is a record of a menu also designed for the same client for her exhibition cafe, The White Cockade. Kate Cranston thus played a leading role as a client both of Mackintosh’s atelier and of design products of the Glasgow style in general. She commissioned these projects because of her leading role within the city. Her Cranston’s Tea Rooms was in fact a social endurance.\footnote{Juliette Kirch, “Mackintosh and the City,” Charles Rennie Mackintosh, edited by Wendy Kaplan (New York: Abbeville Press, 1996), 31–61.} Glasgow, as an industrial city had to deal with the consequences of people’s life styles, of which the consumption of alcohol was one, and a serious one at that, even for women. Kate Cranston created and supported these nice and pleasant tearooms to counter alcoholism through new social activities. In these places women could meet and socialise over a cup of tea and some scones. Alcohol was not served there, unlike in the pubs where workers would meet. Tearooms were a cross between parlours and social clubs, and they promoted new behaviours, women’s emancipation included. Kate Cranston played an important role as a client by offering job opportunities for developing a common phenomenon known as Glasgow style. Furthermore, she also played an essential role in creating the concepts for design and production by conceiving new kinds of visions of urban life.
Norah Geddes: a Talented Daughter and Creator of Children’s Playgrounds

Although Patrick Geddes and his Outlook Tower in Edinburgh are well known, the role played by Norah Geddes (1877–1967) has received scant attention.15 Norah was one of a biologist-sociologist-town planner’s children, and was deeply involved in her father’s projects, even writing biographical notes on him and his archive.16 In 1915 she married Frank C. Means, the architect with whom Geddes worked closely as his drawings could lend physical form to the latter’s ideas. Norah worked, above all, in the context of the Outlook Tower Committee established to carry out the Outlook program in the absence of her father. It should be noted in fact that after its beginnings as a new kind of museum laboratory in Edinburgh, the Outlook Tower project developed into a number of different activities. Several women were interested in Geddes’ cutting-edge project and were involved in the education and exhibiting program.17 Norah Geddes took part in various activities including design. She specifically signed some drawings of gardens and playgrounds for children. In the context of the hard living conditions of the industrial city, she focused particularly on the housing situation in the cramped old town as a social and philanthropic commitment. Her designs are clever reflections on rethinking unused urban spaces.

In the courtyards as well as in marginal waste ground, she created and curated visions of a new and hopeful urban life. She certainly conceived her designs as forming part of Geddes’ overall project for Edinburgh which included a survey of the city, also with the aim of introducing some improvements in urban life. Nevertheless, documentary traces of Norah’s creativity do also provide evidence of her autonomy and independent spirit of initiative. Norah has been overlooked by architecture historiography, but under her maiden name she did sign some drawings which redefined urban areas recognizable today as historical urban landscapes.18

The Outlook Tower was conceived as a proposal to establish a new kind of place for overlooking the city and at the same time a sort of laboratory for creating a new awareness among citizens about their city. Helen Melville, Patrick Geddes, Social Evolution and City Planner (New York: Routledge, 1966), Ross Tambourin, “The City on Display: Entering ‘Urban History’,” Built City, Designed City, Virtual City: The Museum of the City edited by Caterina Calabria (New York: DIA, 2015), 39–58.


Historical Urban Landscape is defined as “the urban area understood as the result of a historic layering of cultural and natural values and attributes, extending beyond the notion of ‘historic centre’ or ‘ensemble’ to include the broader urban context and its geographical setting.” UNESCO’S Global Conference, Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (Paris: UNESCO, 2015), LAE/14, https://whc.unesco.org/uploads/documents/ activity-639-M.pdf (accessed June 22, 2018).

Fig. 1. Drawings by Norah Geddes related to King’s Walk Garden and Chezak’s Court. Courtesy of University of Stirling Archives and Special Collections, United Kingdom.
A commemorative plaque in the existing gardens celebrates as their creator Patrick Geddes, but makes no mention of Norah. Although a direct trace of her signature can only be found in a few drawings – e.g. Garden of Saint George’s School for Girls, Robertson’s Close Garden Playground, Garden near Castle Wynd, Garden at McConachie’s Close, Portsburgh Garden, St John’s Garden, Castle Terrace, Chessell’s Court, Kings Well Garden – we could argue that she was responsible for other projects only identified as ‘Outlook Committee’ (Fig. 1).14 Her work was developed over a long period and also includes involvement outside the Outlook Tower Committee. She is responsible for the landscape design of the Scottish Zoological Park commissioned to her husband (Fig. 2).15 Moreover, her endeavours were not limited to practice with her husband or to assisting her father. The extent of her significance in the broader cultural framework is finally attested by some drafts of papers which she wrote on teaching methods.21 A written text on what educational programme will best meet the needs of our developing social & economic situation, is the only printed one to have come to light to date.22 More traces are available, albeit scattered among various archives around the world, as she had contacts with artists and intellectuals of the day including Lewis Mumford.23 It is to be hoped that we will be able to shed greater light on new connections in the future.

**Toward a New Concept of Digital Archive**

New sources need to be explored if a multifaceted history of architecture and design is to be built. However, new sources will become available only through the shaping of new approaches and new research frameworks.

In the public institutional archives, in fact, files are classified according to criteria set out by the producers of the papers themselves. The so-called ‘architectural archives’ are more or less recent collections of selected materials, the classification structure of which is a question of specific

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14 Some drawings in the University of Strathclyde Archives and Special Collections: Sketch of King’s Well Garden, arranged by Oliphant Spaces Committee; GB 249 T-GEV1/7/3; 301/4; Sketches of Chessell’s Court; GB 249 T-GEV1/7/301/1, Sketches and elevations of proposed shops at King’s Well Garden; GB 249 T-GEV1/7/301/9.
16 The drafts of some papers, University of Strathclyde Archives and Special Collections: “The Writing of English in Schools,” GB 249 T-GEV1/7/3; 38, “Suggestion for method in teaching that would integrate several of the newer ideas already in use here and there,” GB 249 T-GEV1/7/30, “Suggestions for group activity in the junior classes of a secondary school,” GB 249 T-GEV1/7/30.
CCA, the challenge facing architectural archives was to represent ‘a new type of cultural institution, with the specific aim of increasing public awareness of the role of architecture in contemporary society and promoting research in the field’. In the 1960s and the 1970s important nineteenth- and twentieth-century buildings had been demolished and their loss generated a new awareness in rethinking modern heritage and collections were established when the post-industrial trend also put the fate of industrial heritage in the spotlight in the 1980s.

Architecture repositories, thus, dealt with the strategic task of both collecting and exhibiting a wide range of documentation. As a result, archives fostered new approaches to the history of contemporary architecture by providing direct sources (i.e. architectural drawings and documentation about designs produced by the architect). They made it possible to focus on a richer notion of architecture, as the output of a design process (from the creation to the building site through variants and changes over time). On the other hand, the increasing importance of these specialized architectural archives drove research in directions guided by the sources and their structure around the figure of an architect.

Existing collections of documents need to be contextualized in the light of updated criteria and coherent arms through dedicated surveys. Digital archives could improve both collections and their contexts. They can also improve documentation, provide links to related data, and lastly improve research and interpretations in order to achieve a reformulation of architectural and design culture in the modern era, as well as its tangible and intangible heritage. The online Italian archives portal SIUSA provides a perfect example and includes a section entitled ‘The Archive in the Feminine’ which has been conceived in order to enhance and make more ‘immediately accessible’ papers related to women’s history and activities in various fields. This approach correctly emphasizes the complexity involved in the production of archives, and the need to draw attention to some special papers which may be ‘hardly known’ by providing a dedicated access to sources. This recommendation implicitly suggests that the scarce visibility of sources can have consequences on studies.

The classification and recording criteria of repositories need to be reconsidered with a different structure being required to take into account more kinds of contributions in the conception and production of architecture, design, and planning. This method could best be combined with the women’s approach. Newer research on Macdonald shows that ‘more than two thirds of Macdonald’s work is collaborative; therefore, collectivism is a definitive characteristic of Macdonald’s artistic vision’. The Geddes Papers also make reference to a project conducted through range of activities requiring collaborations and creating further opportunities. Not to mention Geddes’ wife, Anna, who organized musical and artistic meetings.

Digital Humanities methodologies now allow us to conceive of completely new kinds of archives in the digital environment. One aim will be to create new more inclusive and gender-oriented approaches. Some interesting experiments in online digital archiving show how ‘to translate’ a personal archive by making accessible more than just drawings and papers. A digital platform conceived as a collection of information can shed light on a range of subjects and ultimately promote a new history. The purpose of digitization, indeed, is not mere-data sharing, it is knowledge implementation too.

In this way, a digital environment makes it possible to shape new large-scale research frameworks, and also collaborative research, with the aim of introducing new critical approaches to the interpretation of data. One new strategy for digital archives on design and architecture culture might be to emphasize the links among data as a critical and cultural approach. As an alternative to the book, a digital platform can be created for the purposes of linking related data. In addition, instead of emphasising the producer or collector of the repository, the digital archive could be better serve to highlight sources in remote small archives, making accessible a range of connected sources, and finally making visible other hidden women creators. To this end, digital archives can be related to digital libraries in order to make the specific issue (i.e. the artworks and craftsmanship as part of the women creative culture) more understandable within a larger cultural and topographical context. Digital libraries can also host narratives and collect the new digital cultural productions on the subject (i.e. 3D models, videos, virtual reality environments). While documentation in archives and libraries is almost always aimed at experts, this approach can enhance both research and this intangible heritage for all.

28 The role of Charles Geddes has been described by the French sociologist Edmond Demolins, “Le Mouvement Social,” 1892–2, page 84, quoted in Tammy Chadbule, “Creating a ‘More Than Earthly Paradise of Love’” (PhD thesis, School of Humanities College of Arts University of Glasgow, 2014), 112 n. 117.
29 The Charles Booth poverty maps and Policy notebooks website is a small example of a continuously evolving project allowing development of new access to a document collection. The website is a development of a digital database on Charles Booth’s study of Life and Labour in London, 1888–1953, developed by the London School of Economics. It shows how a huge amount of data could be managed and made available by linking nineteenth-century places to the current city. “Learn more”, Charles Booth’s London Poverty maps and policy notebooks, https://booth.lse.ac.uk/learn-more (accessed June 22, 2018).
Conclusion
An archive backbone needs to take into account a range of builders and creators. If design activities have always been ‘produced’ collaboratively in studios, women’s contributions have always been by definition up to the task. Importantly, this approach could make sources on women more accessible. While their names are not immediately identifiable as those of ‘producers’ of the archives, many women designers did indeed strive to create. In a field traditionally unfamiliar to women, cultural and social mores meant that they were not permitted to lead studios, and even in forward-thinking contexts they were only rarely allowed to study. Nonetheless, their talents were developed in collaborative projects. This approach to sources and to digital archives requires us to reshape our notion of architecture production by reformulating questions about attributions as well as about processes of creation and construction. The role played by clients is another important feature of this reformulation in terms of co-creation in this type of production. Some accounts of the role played by some female clients, while fragmentary, do lead us to understand that this was by no means a negligible one. When Miss Schroder was interviewed she gave an idea of her role in conceiving her house together with Gerrit Rietveld, the architect who she had chosen. The house was intended to interpret her new life with her children again after her divorce: ‘It wasn’t that I was determined to make something “modern”’ That was the direction I preferred. It was a spontaneous choice...’ – she said and added: ‘So, when Rietveld had made a sketch of the rooms, I asked, ‘Can those walls go too?’

Such wide-ranging involvement is extremely common but, notwithstanding, it still remains difficult to recognize the full extent of women’s contributions without first revising archive criteria and concepts.


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The Bloomsbury Global Encyclopedia of Women in Architecture 1960–2015 (forthcoming 2021) aims to address the limited representation of women architects, gender issues, theories of gender and non-canonical spatial practices in architecture’s public sphere. The book’s lengthy title declares its intention to include a wide range of women’s spatial practices beyond the ‘women architects’ paradigm, by narrating the separate and ‘interwoven histories’ of women in architecture across the globe. This publication directly addresses the MoMoWo conference theme of women as actors and agents in the production, reception and conceptualization of the built environment.

By situating women’s agency in a global context, the Encyclopedia significantly refocuses histories of women in architecture, shifting the historical lens from the nationally-delineated histories of the Global North to a transnational frame. This transnational history aspires to include a much wider range of practices and practitioners, and to unravel global networks. Our essay for MoMoWo 2018 will argue that the Encyclopedia’s transnational and intersectional methods are key topics for renewed debates about histories of women in architecture. The Encyclopedia aims to situate intersectional feminism at the core of women’s spatial histories. As we argue below, women’s biographies provide important case studies of the specific intersections of gender, race, class, sexuality and geography; they allow us to understand how lived intersectionality impacts individual careers and lives.