

May Women Practice Architecture? The First Century of Debate

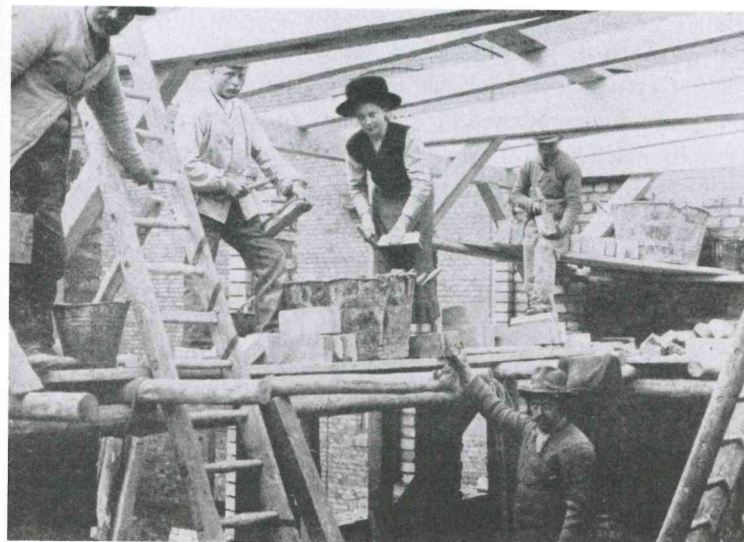
The question of women's absence from architecture has a surprisingly long history. In July 1872, women's rights advocate Julia Ward Howe gave a lecture on women artists to the Victorian Discussion Society in London. She wondered why architecture had no female practitioners, given what she saw as their aptitude for the field and potential contributions. "An architect ought to have taste," she reasoned. "Women ought to agitate to be articulated to some of our architects, many of whom, unfortunately, have neither taste nor ideas, and could do nothing but calculate the bricks wanted, and the profits to be made." Howe's assumption that women possessed an innate sense of beauty and loftier spiritual and moral inclinations than profit-minded men reflects deeply held cultural notions of femininity in the Victorian period. For Howe, women's imaginative capacities and their natural disposition "for the higher functions of life" made architecture an occupation better suited to their characters than medicine, with its study of disease and anatomical dissection, to which, she noted with dismay, her female contemporaries dedicated themselves with "so much zeal."¹

Despite lobbying for women's inclusion in architecture, Howe was thus shaped by the ideals of her time. The finest women artists, she maintained in her speech to the Victorian Discussion Society, were also "the very best daughters, wives, and the most tender mothers." Even as they achieved success in their new vocations, these women "never forgot the broom, the frying-pans, the blankets and the sheets—those indispensable adjuncts

of a comfortable household, over their paintbrushes, color, and canvas.”² The insistence that women would not forsake hearth for career was not an uncommon assertion made by early suffragists, partly because it helped to assuage both male and female anxieties about a disruption in the “natural” order of the sexes. At the same time, many such activists genuinely believed that a woman’s value, both at home and in the public sphere, was rooted in her biological differences, particularly her supposedly inborn domestic and maternal nature. Seen from this perspective, women would contribute to the greater social good by bringing their “essential” womanliness, honed by rocking the cradle and sweeping the floor, to the public sphere rather than by leaving it behind to become more like men.³

When, in 1880, Margaret Hicks became the first woman to graduate from Cornell University’s new architecture program, newspaper reports about her echoed Howe in wondering why women had not entered the profession “long ago” and in assuming that woman architects would remain closely tied to the domestic sphere—if not by brandishing a broom, then by designing the closet for it. “If anyone knows what a house should be,” reported the *Washington Post*, “it is the woman who is to live in it.” The *Cincinnati Enquirer* went a step further in suggesting that female designers limit their interventions to the nonpublic, housekeeping areas of the home: “If the woman architect will devote herself to kitchens and cellars, and closet-rooms and servants’ sleeping-rooms, the world will be better for her appearance.” Hicks herself, while not departing entirely from domestic concerns, had larger ambitions: her graduate thesis addressed tenement housing reform.⁴

Those determined, however, to keep architecture a male preserve were unwilling to make any such concessions. Opponents to integration were numerous, they often occupied powerful positions, and they were decidedly vocal in their resistance. In 1902, Thomas Raggles Davison, editor of the *British Architect*, published an article titled “May Women Practise Architecture?,” in which he concluded that they may not. Like many other male



1. Katharina Pfeiffer, Germany's first female journeyman bricklayer.

critics, he assumed a chivalrous tone, presenting himself as the protector not only of architecture but of women as well. For in his view, the traits with which nature had endowed a woman and made her so irresistible to a man were precisely those that made her unsuitable for the building profession. In particular, Davison argued that women were “temperamentally unfitted” to the “production of good architectural design,” their “lightness of touch,” “changeability,” and “charming” decorativeness lacking the masculine “strength of handling,” “steadfastness of view,” and “judicious reserve” needed for architecture. He maintained that “in the supreme and essential qualities of fine architecture a woman is by nature heavily handicapped.” But then came the chivalrous silver lining: “May we not say—as a mere man of course—we are glad it is so, for that which is deterrent to her

higher attainment in the practice of the art of architecture makes for her chiefest charm and glory as a woman.”⁵

In Germany, Karl Scheffler, a popular and influential architectural critic, published a treatise on gender and creativity in 1908 in which he similarly defended the inequality of the sexes in the realm of art while largely dropping Davison’s chivalrous veneer. Women who contradicted nature and recklessly pursued artistic productivity, he claimed, paid the price with their femininity. They became “irritable hermaphroditic creatures” who might suffer from a hypertrophy of the sex drive, leading to prostitution, or, more often, from lesbianism, which he warned was “terribly rife” among women artists of his day. Beyond the personal and social costs of such deviancy, the arts themselves were put at risk. This was particularly true of architecture, which Scheffler considered among the most masculine. “Woman,” he thus declared, “must stay very far away from architecture.”⁶ Indeed, Scheffler believed that men with feminine qualities must also be discouraged from entering the field. The following year, writing about the nature of an architect’s work, he emphasized the exalted masculinity required. “Our times,” he asserted, “are anxious for men who are at once capable of idea and deed.”⁷ The architect pursues “a man’s supreme yearnings” and possesses “great, masculine qualities.”⁸ Rugged, energetic, autocratic, he is, Scheffler contended, “a man of action.”⁹

Two years later, German architect Otto Bartning echoed these sentiments in his 1911 article “Should Women Build?” Like Davison before him, Bartning was distinctly unenthusiastic about the idea, claiming that women produced feminine or weak architecture because they listened all too readily to the client. A collaborative approach to design, he insisted, undermined the masculine ideal of the architect’s autonomy. In particular, Bartning rejected the participation of the housewife in the design process, arguing that her “often troublesome wishes” destroyed the “strict lawfulness” of the plan and led to the dominance of the “marginal” over the “fundamental,” which he termed “feminine” architecture. In his view, strong architecture emerged from a

definitively masculine process that was necessarily adversarial: the architect realized and imposed his vision in the face of “struggles, adversity, [and] misunderstandings.” Ultimately, however, Bartning was concerned less with women architects than with their insufficiently virile male colleagues. He critiqued the “weakness of our contemporary architecture,” arguing that what “our architecture needs to recover is truly not female architects but rather supremely manly men.”¹⁰

The strong resistance to women’s efforts to integrate architecture, which extended beyond individuals to educational policies, school admissions, and professional associations, had a deep and lasting impact on the profession. Not only did it discourage and denigrate any so-called feminine traits in architectural practice, such as cooperation with the client, but it also raised the bar for men by producing a hypermasculine professional image defined by aggressive heterosexual virility. Howard Roark, the über-macho protagonist of Ayn Rand’s hugely influential 1943 novel *The Fountainhead*, embodied the new ideal in fictional form. Roark, a “brilliant” architect, is represented as heroically violent, claiming his rights through masculine brutality. When his greatest work is defiled through compromise, he dynamites the finished building; scorned by a beautiful woman, he wins her over by a vicious sexual attack.¹¹ Roark was, literally, a tough act to follow, and the novel possessed a cultlike status among architectural students for decades after it was published. By exalting such “heroes,” early discourses against the feminine in architecture served not only to box out women but also to box in men.¹²

Unsurprisingly, women architects resented being portrayed by their male colleagues and the media more broadly as sexual degenerates at worst and broom-closet designers at best. On rare occasions, the press itself acknowledged the discrepancy in views. “Women architects, it is said,” as the Baltimore *Sun* reported in 1911, “resent the association of their names with closets. ‘Just as if we couldn’t build anything but closets,’ one of them snapped the other day, ‘and just as if any sensible man

architect couldn't make all the closets that are necessary.'"¹³ Women architects occasionally went to great lengths—or heights—in their attempts to shift perceptions. In 1911, for example, Fay Kellog, a successful New York City architect, insisted on being interviewed while standing on “a perilously swinging beam,” nine floors up, of a skyscraper that she was constructing. When Kellog was asked whether there were any special fields particularly well suited to women in architecture, she answered, “I don't think a woman architect ought to be satisfied with small pieces, but launch out into business buildings. That is where money and name are made. I don't approve of a well-equipped woman creeping along; let her leap ahead as men do. All she needs is courage.” That Kellog herself possessed such courage was emphasized by the reporter's own terrified description of the architect happily swaying high above a New York City street.¹⁴

Already within the first decades of entering architectural practice, women broadened their public image beyond the domestic sphere by designing buildings at worlds' fairs and other high-profile exhibitions. Most were pavilions showcasing women's work, which began to appear regularly at such fairs by the end of the nineteenth century. The widespread phenomenon of women's exhibition pavilions in the United States and Europe reflected growing efforts in Western countries to improve women's social and economic status by demonstrating in concrete, visible terms their contributions to hearth and nation. Women's buildings designed by women appeared at, among other venues, the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago (by Sophia Hayden), the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta (by Elise Mercur), the 1897 Tennessee Centennial and International Exposition (by Sara Ward-Conley), the 1913 Leipzig International Book Fair (by Emilie Winkelmann), and the 1914 German Werkbund Exhibition in Cologne (by Margarete Knüppelholz-Roeser).¹⁵ The Haus der Frau or women's pavilion at the Werkbund Exhibition—an event considered by historians to be a watershed moment in the development of modern architecture—caused a stir because of its severe and



2. Recalling Fay Kellog in New York City, a woman builder in Berlin shows off her daring for the press. She is pictured making repairs to the roof of Berlin's City Hall in 1910.

boldly unornamented forms, prompting some design critics to argue that the pavilion's lack of “feminine grace” made it unsuitable as a women's building and to ridicule it as an architectural masquerade in men's clothing. Recalling Bartning's earlier criticism about architecture's need for supremely manly men, one vocal critic employed the masculine reputation of the women's pavilion to rebuke the male architects of the other exhibition buildings for not being, by comparison, manly enough.¹⁶ Twenty years earlier, Hayden's design for the Woman's Building at Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition had been criticized on polar-opposite grounds. While its “femininity” was considered

appropriate to a women's building, it was also blamed for producing a weak and timid impression, especially amid the other, "masterly," male-designed fair buildings.¹⁷

Such judgments about gender and style reveal the difficult position women architects had to navigate in avoiding accusations of designing in a manner that was excessively feminine or masculine—terms that were, in any case, elusive and highly subjective. Although, as noted earlier, the policing of architecture's gendered borders also served to discipline men, who were compelled to better perform their heterosexual masculinity, the work of male architects was rarely judged on the basis of gender alone. A notable exception was the discourse on men's failings in domestic design and the consequent need for women architects. But even there, male architects' shortcomings were blamed less on an incapacity inherent to their gender and more on men's lack of interest and expertise, which, presumably, could be remedied if they tried (although trying too hard in this respect might make their masculinity suspect). In those rare cases in which a male architect's work was criticized for being "too feminine," the flaw was typically considered to lie with the individual, not with the gender itself (hence the demands made by Bartning and others that male architects "man up"). By contrast, a woman architect who was considered a professional success was often seen to have achieved this *despite* her gender.

In the same period of exhibition building, women architects also entered and won numerous prestigious architectural competitions, further bringing attention to the broad range of women architects' work. In 1894, for example, two young women barely out of their teens, Alice Hands and Mary Gannon, who formed the United States' first female architectural partnership, won the competition for the Florence Hospital in San Francisco. When built, their design was lauded as "the finest and most practicable sanitarium on the Pacific Coast."¹⁸ In 1907, Emilie Winkelmann, the first woman to open an architecture firm in Germany, won a competition for a large entertainment center near Alexanderplatz in Berlin. She earned high praise for her ingenious design

solution for the irregular plot, which had stumped her male competitors (as the Residenz-Casino, it became one of the city's most famous dance halls of the Weimar era).¹⁹ Two years later, in 1909, London-based Ethel Charles, the first female member of the Royal Institute of British Architects, won a competition for a church design in Berlin over two hundred other architects.²⁰ In 1915, another female architectural partnership, Anna Schenk and Marcia Mead, won a City Club of Chicago competition that asked architects to design an urban neighborhood center anywhere in the United States. Their project proposed a redesign of a one-mile-square area of the Bronx to provide residents with services closer to home, such as social clubs, parks, and schools.²¹ In 1928, a collective gasp was heard in the architectural world when the winner of the international competition for the new Shakespeare Memorial Theater at Stratford-on-Avon, one of England's most prestigious public buildings, was revealed to be a young woman and recent graduate of the Architectural Association School in London, Elizabeth Scott. Her simple, functionalist design—an important early example of modernism in England—was selected over the proposals of seventy-one male architects competing from Canada, Britain, and the United States. Scott's victory was widely reported in the international press with headlines such as "Girl Architect Beats Men."²²

But despite such successes, stereotypes of women architects as the profession's misfits, best consigned to domestic or interior design, proved stubbornly resistant to change. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century and into the 1960s and 1970s, appeals continued to be made in the North American and European press for women to take up architecture in order to ameliorate poorly designed housing—"like cures like," it was said.²³ Women architects had long decried the limitations of this strategy; in 1891, Louise Bethune, who had opened a highly successful architecture firm in Buffalo the previous decade, warned that house building was the "worst-paid work an architect ever does," a sentiment later echoed by Fay Kellog.²⁴ The housing boom in the decades after the Second World War, however,

seemed to offer lucrative new possibilities to women architects who marketed themselves as domestic specialists.²⁵ A 1966 *Chicago Tribune* feature on Jean Wehrheim, a licensed architect with a successful residential design practice in Chicago, described her as an “attractive, vivacious young homemaker” and quoted her encouraging more women to consider a career in architecture: “‘We have a natural inclination for designing homes,’ she said. ‘Men seem to prefer big projects, like offices and public buildings, but I know what I am doing when it comes to designing a kitchen.’”²⁶

Beginning in the 1960s, the women’s liberation movement challenged women to get out of the house, and the call was felt, if somewhat belatedly, in the architectural world as well. In a 1977 *New York Times* article, “The Last Profession to Be ‘Liberated’ by Women,” architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable voiced her outrage that female architects were still treated as glorified housewives: “Professionally speaking, women architects have yet to get out of the kitchen. They are chained, tied and condemned to the house—to house design and house interiors in the name of design efficiency, *gemütlichkeit* and the family. They are supposed to know more than anyone else about kitchens and related matters, practically and symbolically, through intimate familiarity and natural concern, and they have vacillated between treating the affinity as an advantage or as a curse.” Huxtable made clear that she did not demean the value of housework and family life. At the same time, she insisted that women architects’ inability or unwillingness to “get away from the house” was “essentially, a dumb and minimally rewarding way to spend one’s maximum designing life in the context of all architecture, and of the total built environment.” She continued: “Yes, house design is important. But not that important. What is more important is that it is a limited vehicle that has led practically nowhere for women, in terms of larger architectural and environmental skills.” For Huxtable, “all that pious claptrap that was preached and written from the 19th century on about women’s greater domestic sensibility” had so manacled women

architects’ talents and professional prospects that they had distressingly little to show for a century of struggle and work.²⁷

Even if one disagrees with Huxtable’s assessment of the meagerness of that legacy, a look at the numbers reinforces her more general view that women architects had failed to thrive. The U.S. occupational census in 1939 revealed 379 women architects nationally. In 1949, the number had declined to 300. In 1960, women’s presence had fallen even further, to an estimated 260 in architectural practice—a decline of almost a third in twenty years. By 1975, the trend had reversed, but there were still only 400 women architects nationally. As a percentage, in 1975 women represented just 1.2 percent of all licensed architects in the United States, or 3.7 percent of the entire architectural workforce. In 1926, women had made up 1 percent of all architects nationally; thus, fifty years later, there had been an increase of (at best) less than 3 percent. As one writer surveying the situation in 1977 put it, by any measure, these statistics were “ridiculous.”²⁸

For opponents of integration, this anemic progress simply affirmed their conviction that women had little to offer architecture. “How much is tradition and how much is biology, I don’t know,” Marcel Breuer stated when interviewed by Rita Reif for the *New York Times* in 1971, “but so far we just don’t have great women architects.” The Bauhaus-trained designer, one of the most influential voices of modernism, did hire women architects for his Madison Avenue office, who he claimed made “excellent draftsmen.” But he believed there was a limit to what they could do. Architecture, he stated, “as building [conceiving the plan and supervising the construction] is too tough for women to achieve a name and success.” Breuer refused to send women to construction sites, fearing that “tough” guys would create problems. Ultimately, however, it came down to husbands and babies: “I think the biggest problem of all is the biological story. Being married, being a mother is a full time job. Somehow liberation women do not want to recognize it.”²⁹

Breuer’s female employees, interviewed by Reif for the article, admitted the difficulty of working in a masculine profession

(and in Breuer's office), but beyond meeting in the company lunchroom to vent over sandwiches, there seemed to be little in the way of a united front. Given the vocal and concerted efforts already made by American women in the 1960s to fight gender discrimination, some wondered how the architectural world could remain so unaffected. In 1970, Jane Holtz Kay, then architecture critic for the *Boston Globe*, trained her lens on women architects and accused them of distancing themselves from the women's movement: "They work, some might say, in the world of the hard hat. But they wear velvet gloves and tend to speak in muted voices on the subject of Women's Lib." Kay interviewed women designers in Boston who claimed never to have experienced any prejudice and who asserted that "there'd be more militancy if there were more problems." Men and women faced the same difficulties, another stated, but women, being "too sensitive," felt "discriminated against."³⁰

In 1973, Reif wrote a second article on women architects, whom she called "latecomers to the women's movement," and noted that in the interval of two years, they had begun "comparing notes and soon discovered that personal experiences of small slights and outright discrimination were shared by others."³¹ Indeed, by then women architects had also begun to organize to collectively fight what they increasingly recognized as entrenched discrimination in the profession. As Gabrielle Esperdy recounts, the American Institute of Architects (AIA), the powerful U.S. national organization for architects, was challenged for being "an exclusive gentleman's club": although women had been allowed to join since 1888, when Louise Bethune became its first female member, more than eighty years later they were still discouraged from participating and had almost no visibility within the organization. At the 1973 national convention in San Francisco, a resolution on the "Status of Women in the Architectural Profession," co-authored by Judith Edelman, the first woman elected to the executive committee of the AIA's New York City chapter, called on the AIA to better integrate its female members and to take concrete action to address

discrimination against female practitioners. The resolution was passed, although with considerable opposition and controversy. Accused of not acknowledging changing realities, particularly the sweeping social and legal changes bringing women into the public sphere, the AIA's male leadership insisted there was no problem. Yet when the organization, compelled by its small but vocal female membership, undertook a survey in 1974 of male and female architects to assess the status of women in the profession, a picture emerged of pervasive and deeply embedded discrimination, including lower pay for female architects, sexual harassment, and barriers to advancement. Against men's insistence on a contented and undivided profession, the survey clearly reflected women's frustration and disillusionment with the status quo.³²

In keeping with the grassroots activism of the era, women architects formed independent groups to push for greater professional equality. The Organization of Women Architects (OWA), Chicago Women in Architecture, and the Alliance of Women in Architecture (AWA) were among the associations founded in the 1970s. Like other feminist organizations of the era, they served to raise awareness of discrimination faced by women in the workplace as well as to provide mentorship and support to their members in advancing their careers. The sense of solidarity and contact with other women in architecture was also important. Women who joined such organizations expressed how it helped them to overcome their feelings of isolation and of being "a freak."³³ Some of the groups, including the OWA, remain active today, their mission far from accomplished.

Not only professional organizations, but also schools, came under scrutiny in this era. Highly critical of the role academia played in maintaining and reproducing structures of power and privilege, seven women with different design backgrounds founded the Women's School of Planning and Architecture (1975–81), run by women for women. Held in summer in different locations in the United States, it offered an experimental curriculum that encouraged women to learn new skills, break free of gendered stereotypes, and explore how to use



3. Founding members of the Organization of Women Architects gathered at the San Francisco Art Institute, 1973.

architecture to help other women.³⁴ Feminism also began to make its influence felt within established architecture schools through special programming, such as the 1974 Women in Architecture Conference organized by female architecture students at Washington University in St. Louis and the West Coast Women's Design Conference, organized by female environmental design students and faculty and held the same year at the University of Oregon, where Denise Scott Brown spoke about sexism and architecture's "star system."³⁵

The 1970s also saw the rise—at first, a mere bump—of writings about women architects. These publications mapped out their

professional history (and, to the surprise of many, there was one) and addressed the issues they faced in the contemporary world of practice. Ellen Perry Berkeley's comprehensive and shocking article on the profession's rampant discrimination, which appeared in 1972 in *Architectural Forum*, politicized many women architects and catalyzed them into action.³⁶ The following year, Susana Torre and a small group of other women architects in New York City decided to organize an exhibition on women in their profession. They founded the Archive of Women in Architecture, housed at the Architectural League of New York headquarters, to support their planning. The extensive research they undertook was published as the groundbreaking 1977 book *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective*, which provided a sweeping overview of a century of women's work in architecture in the United States, with a focus on the domestic. The volume, edited by Torre, also served as the catalogue for the show, which opened at the Brooklyn Museum on February 24, 1977, and was perhaps the first-ever exhibition on the history of women architects.³⁷ Huxtable was among the visitors, and what she saw prompted her to pen her *New York Times* article. In the same year, *Ms. Architect* appeared, representing a new style of how-to-do-it books that encouraged young women to enter male-dominated fields.³⁸

The first century of debate about women in architecture thus ended on a note of promise. The second wave of feminism in the 1970s, following the first at the end of the nineteenth century, once again pushed the issues of gender discrimination in architecture to the fore, resulting in greater awareness of women's history in the profession, the challenges they continued to face, and the need to organize to effect change. At the same time, looking at the century as a whole, the progress that women had made collectively in the architectural profession toward achieving equality with their male colleagues was surprisingly limited. That is not to say that they did not contribute in significant ways to the built environment: women architects participated in the rise of modern design movements and intervened dynamically

in the urban landscapes of Europe, North America, and elsewhere.³⁹ Their accomplishments and the richness of women's history in architecture more broadly should not be underestimated and are all the more astonishing given the profession's aversion to women's involvement. Nonetheless, well into the 1970s, the numbers of women in architectural practice remained tiny, and the debate about whether they could be anything more than domestic designers raged on. The profession's gendered borders remained largely intact. Although individual women had managed to break through institutional barriers over the decades, those doors quickly shut behind them, necessitating yet another pioneer to repeat the process. After many successive generations of such pioneers—representing a century of struggle, progress, and retrenchment—the question remained of how women architects could solidify and build on their gains, thus moving once and for all beyond their outsider status.

Chapter 2

The Sad State of Gender Equity in the Architectural Profession

Women currently make up 44 percent of architecture students in the United States and the United Kingdom.¹ These figures are perhaps the most hopeful sign of a more equitable future for American and British women in architecture. And yet they are also among its most troubling. How can they be both? Despite robust female enrollments in past decades, we have not seen a comparable rise in the number of women in practice, because female graduates drain out of the system. Questions about this pattern of attrition and why it continues have largely focused on women's entry into practice, particularly the early years of the transition. But the loss also suggests that not all is well in academia and that we need to better prepare female graduates for the professional conditions they will encounter. Moreover, schools themselves must be challenged on their discriminatory attitudes and practices, which architectural graduates carry forward into the workplace.

Today's enrollments in the United States would not have happened without much earlier efforts to dismantle educational barriers, including Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments Act, which legally ended discrimination against women in federally funded education programs. Although some architecture schools, including Cornell University and the University of Illinois, began admitting women in the late nineteenth century, many did not open their doors until legally forced to do so. Architect Cassandra Carroll, interviewed by the *New York Times* in 1977, recalled that when she applied to architecture programs

in the late 1950s, not a single architectural college was open to women in her native New Jersey, forcing her to move to Pennsylvania to pursue her education.²

Under the influence of the new legislation and the women's movement, female architectural enrollments began a steady climb. In 1972, women had made up less than 6 percent of all architecture students in the United States. By 1975, in the wake of Title IX, this figure had doubled to 14 percent. A decade later, in 1985, the percentage had again doubled and stood at a national average of 30 percent, although that number varied wildly at individual schools (from less than 7 percent to more than 50 percent). The pace of women's enrollments slowed thereafter, reaching 40 percent of all architecture students nationally by the end of the 1990s.³ And there the numbers have largely remained, with only fractional increases in the intervening years.

In light of the enrollment gains made over the decades and antidiscrimination legislation, it would be easy to assume that architecture schools have wholly eliminated the deep and widespread discrimination against women that Ellen Perry Berkeley exposed in her 1972 "Women in Architecture" essay for *Architectural Forum*. She revealed a distressing picture of women discouraged by deans and faculty from pursuing architectural studies, critics refusing to engage with their work, male peers harassing them for taking jobs from men, and financial aid officers awarding them less funding than male students on the assumption that female students "probably" had husbands to support them.⁴ Title IX changed the situation for women in theory, but practice has been another matter. In the 1990s, a series of high-profile reports in Canada and the United States revealed the hostile and even abusive environment women continued to face in some architecture schools.⁵ In January 2014, the *Architects' Journal* announced that a "shocking" 54 percent of the female students responding to an international survey on the status of women in architecture claimed to have experienced sexual discrimination at university.⁶

Other forms of bias, equally widespread but more covert, are found in omissions or absences. For example, students are rarely exposed to the historic roles of women in architecture, whether as builders, clients, or critics. Admittedly, such accounts were slow to appear, emerging only in the late 1970s under the influence of the feminist movement. But the next three decades saw a true efflorescence of writings about women in architecture, even if these remained a small branch of all architecture publications. Books and articles explored women's historical roots in architecture, surveyed their professional status, and offered feminist critiques of architectural design and urban planning.⁷ Writings of this period generally moved away from essentialist ideas about the relationship of biology to design—for example, that men design phallic towers, while women are drawn to curvaceous and womblike shapes—although such views have not entirely disappeared, as recent criticisms of Zaha Hadid's Al Wakrah Stadium in Qatar as "a great vulvic bulge" reveal.⁸ The early 1990s also saw the emergence of an architectural theory of gender that examined gendered values in architecture's modes of analysis and its language, such as in the treatment of structure as masculine and decoration as feminine.⁹

Today these many decades of research and publications amount to a substantial and significant body of literature on women and gender in architecture. Yet its impact remains limited because the knowledge and insights it offers rarely find their way into the curricula of architecture schools, where they are arguably most needed. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a profound transformation of the humanities and social sciences curricula at North American and European universities. Today it would be shocking to find, for example, a survey course on the history of world art or on cultural theory that did not include a single female name. And yet this is routinely the case with history and theory courses offered in architecture schools.¹⁰ In light of such glaring omissions, one can no longer argue that the necessary material is not available; it is there in abundance. But for it to find its way onto syllabi—to be lifted off the library shelf

and actually put into use—there must be a desire to shift pedagogical gears.

Similarly, design studios that make gender or women their focal point are almost nonexistent in architecture schools. The studio curriculum, which is at the heart of any architectural program, is largely shaped by the interests and experiences of faculty members. Although it is simplistic to assume that female faculty will be interested in courses relating to women and that male faculty will not, nonetheless, the gender imbalance among design faculty at architecture schools has almost certainly contributed to the absence of such themes in studio courses. A female student responding to the 2014 *Architects' Journal* survey complained, “There aren’t enough women teaching—it is very male dominated.”¹¹ In the United States, about a quarter of all tenured professors in architecture schools are women.¹² This percentage encompasses all specializations, including history and theory, which have a higher representation of women. In many schools, the presence of women among the ranks of tenured design faculty remains negligible. Because design studios, especially the more prestigious upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses, tend to be assigned according to seniority, the gender imbalance among tenured design faculty results in the overwhelming majority of such courses being taught by men.¹³ Moreover, nontenured female faculty who teach studio courses are much less likely to risk a “controversial” theme.

Several years ago, at one of the nation’s top architecture schools, a female tenured design professor offered an undergraduate studio that addressed a pressing social need: housing for survivors of domestic violence. The theme was truly exceptional for an architecture school, a provocative gesture in a milieu where faculty and students typically shun courses perceived as feminist. And yet, although highly unusual, the material could hardly be said to be irrelevant: architects have an important role to play in creating environments that promote a sense of security and healing for the occupants, and the studio offered students a chance to combine design and social justice concerns.

At the end of the semester, I participated in the final review as the only woman on a panel of five guest critics. Over the course of the three-hour review, the male critics discussed the formal aspects of the designs but did not once refer to the function of the proposed buildings or to their users. They could have been discussing anything—parking structures, fire stations, coffee shops, cinemas—take your pick. Whether from discomfort, ignorance, or a lack of interest, they thus removed the projects from their intention and context, abstracting them to an assemblage of architectural elements. The challenge of designing spaces for a highly vulnerable population suffering from severe trauma was left unexplored. It was almost as if there were no language in this architectural milieu with which to discuss it.

The conversations that do not happen in architecture schools also extend to public lecture series. These talks are an integral part of the pedagogy of architecture schools, a way to promote intellectual exchange and to expose students and faculty to “luminaries” of the profession. Additionally, they are a time for the school’s community, both academic and beyond, to come together and engage in broader discussions. Lori Brown and Nina Freedman, co-founders of the New York City-based advocacy group ArchiteXX, surveyed the public lecture series at seventy-three architecture schools in the United States during the 2012–13 academic year. They discovered that in the fall, 62 percent of the schools had invited just one woman or no women at all to speak. The following spring, over a third had no women on their lecture podiums.¹⁴ Privileging male voices in this way sends a strong message about who a school considers an authority and deems worthy of an audience. It also discourages female students. As one student-respondent to the 2014 *Architects' Journal* survey stated, “Women architects are never discussed or celebrated in school. It is almost perceived as a negative to be a woman in architecture.”¹⁵

But even these statistics are misleading as indicators of exposure to gender issues per se in architecture schools. Most women architects invited to speak about their work choose not

to discuss their experiences in the field as women. And one could argue, why should they? A male architect, after all, would not be expected to reflect on being a man in the profession (although it probably would be a good thing if he were). But if these women do not speak out, who will? Lectures that specifically address women in architecture, whether in terms of contemporary issues or their histories, are in short supply on the architecture lecture circuit. This silence is particularly astonishing at a time when the status of women has become a public relations nightmare for the profession, with a deluge of negative stories appearing in the press and online blogs. You wouldn't know it, though, from the discussions happening—or rather, not happening—inside architecture schools.

Unsurprisingly, women leave architecture school poorly prepared for the gender discrimination they will face in the professional world. Recent studies support what women architects have been saying for years: in terms of job opportunities, pay equity, mentoring, and promotion, the deck is stacked against them. This contributes to an appalling and enduring phenomenon: the massive drop-out of women architects from practice. Although the proportion of women has grown from a third to 42 percent of architecture school graduates in the United States in the past fifteen years, their numbers in practice have climbed at a glacial pace. In 2000, women represented 13 percent of registered architects; today that number stands at 19 percent.¹⁶ If this rate of progress holds, we will have to wait until 2093 before we reach a 50–50 gender split. Although the numbers vary somewhat, this pattern of attrition also holds true for other countries, including England and Australia. More than a glass ceiling, there would appear to be a massive, choking bottleneck squeezing women out of practice. Since the 1990s, the question of “Where are the women architects?” has surfaced repeatedly in the media in response to this disappearance. Studies of the phenomenon that attempt to provide an answer, and that have been initiated by women themselves, suggest that the root of the problem is not what most people think.

In 1908, German architectural critic Karl Scheffler insisted that creative productivity and human reproductivity did not mix. The assumption lives on, and to the question “Where are the women architects?” the facile response has been “At home, having babies.” This explanation has never been able to account for the women who choose not to have children but leave architecture anyway. Nor do mothers in architecture who leave necessarily do so because of their children. Nonetheless, the perception remains that having a baby will damage a woman's architectural career. The 2014 *Architects' Journal* survey revealed widespread anxiety among women about the professional consequences of maternity—88 percent believed it would have a negative impact. (By contrast, 62 percent of men believed that having children would have no affect at all on a father's career.) In an example of life imitating art, one of the respondents admitted that—like Michelle Pfeiffer's architect character in the 1996 film *One Fine Day*—“she had hidden the fact she had kids from her employer ‘for fear it would hinder her career.’”¹⁷ Unfortunately, women's anxieties are not unfounded. Architecture perceives itself as an all-or-nothing profession, and part-time or flexible work schemes are discouraged, adding to parents' burdens in juggling family and work.¹⁸ Employers all too often expect pregnant architects to leave or lose interest in their work and demote or sideline them accordingly; women report returning from maternity leave to find their positions stripped of their former appeal and interest—not by their babies but by their bosses, who assume they are unable to continue with their usual responsibilities. Others discover that their jobs have vanished altogether.¹⁹ And yet, even taking into account these obstacles, only a fraction (3.8 percent) of the *Architects' Journal* survey's female respondents stated that parenthood resulted in their leaving architecture altogether.²⁰

Instead, it is the pervasive and deeply rooted inequality of professional opportunities and treatment as well as a male-dominated workplace culture that lie at the heart of most women's exodus from architecture. The factors are complex and tend

to be multiple and varied—not a single event but, as architect Deborah Berke explains, the “recurring small blows” or “death by a thousand cuts” that pushes women out the door.²¹ Moreover, recent studies suggest that, rather than one large bottleneck, there are various “pinch points” along the trajectory of a woman architect’s career, such as in pursuing licensure or hitting the glass ceiling, where attrition is more likely to occur.²²

In an effort to understand and combat women’s high dropout rates, in 2013 members of the San Francisco chapter of the AIA created “The Missing 32% Project,” named after the percentage of female architecture graduates who are lost to practice. As part of its research mission, the project surveyed nearly twenty-three hundred male and female architects nationally and found that job satisfaction was notably lower among women (28 percent) than men (41 percent). The reasons are not hard to discern. There is, to begin with, a pronounced difference in what men and women earn. In a profession known for its long hours and low compensation, this issue hits hard. The pay gap exists at all levels, from entry-level positions to principals, but increases sharply at midcareer. For example, the Missing 32% Project reported that male architects with fifteen to twenty years of experience earned on average \$100,000, whereas women with the same level of experience earned \$80,000. In 2014 the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics also found that, among full-time architects, men earn on average 20 percent more than women. The 2014 survey by the *Architects’ Journal* suggests that the imbalance is even greater and calls the pay gap “the most effective barometer of gender inequality in the profession.” But because salary transparency is rare in most firms, the extent of these disparities is usually hidden. As the journal noted, many women who responded to their survey grossly underestimated how much more their male colleagues were earning.²³

Folded within this salary gap is another story about women architects and stalled promotions that also contributes significantly to job dissatisfaction and dropping out. According to national AIA records, the numbers of women principals



4. Graphic used to advertise the Missing 32% Symposium organized by the American Institute of Architects, San Francisco Chapter (AIA SF), and held on October 13, 2012. The event was the second in a longer series of meetings, begun in 2011, that led to the creation in 2013 of the Missing 32% Project (since renamed Equity by Design) to investigate the status of women in the architectural profession.

and partners at firms quadrupled from 4 percent in 1999 to 16 percent in 2005. What seemed to be a breakthrough in women’s professional ascent soon proved, however, to be another instance of stagnation: a decade later, the figure stands at 17 percent.²⁴ The National Council of Architectural Registration Boards, which administers registration examinations and develops internship programs in the United States, reports that women represent only 13 percent of supervisors in architecture firms who are overseeing interns. Stated differently, 87 percent of young architects working toward licensure are doing so with a male supervisor, at least according to the official record.²⁵

Various factors contribute to women's slow professional climb up the architectural ladder. Maternity is often seen as the chief culprit, and many women with children do express frustration at the profession's "mommy track," with its diminished opportunities. But, as architect Diana Griffiths writes, "if family commitments were the only barrier to success then women architects without children should be thriving" and "flying through the ranks."²⁶ That they are not indicates that there are other, broader impediments. Among them, women are less likely to receive the more glamorous types of projects that help to advance careers. This is often blamed on women themselves: they lack the ambition to go after the big jobs, it is said, or are unwilling to put in the long hours required to pay their dues. The underlying presumption here, deeply engrained in the professional culture, is that architecture is a meritocracy that rewards talent and hard work in a straightforward way.²⁷ Women who share that belief and commit themselves to architectural practice without seeing professional returns are apt to lose confidence in their own abilities. As Denise Scott Brown has written, "On seeing their male colleagues draw out in front of them, women who lack a feminist awareness are likely to feel that their failure to achieve is their own fault."²⁸

Mentoring can make a critical difference: careers are advanced not just by ambition and sacrifice but also by having a sponsor to show you the ropes, make connections, and put your name forward for those career-enhancing opportunities. The first attrition pinch points for a woman come in the early years after she graduates from an architecture program, when she struggles to make the transition to practice. As an intern working toward licensure, she will rely for guidance and support on a pool of architectural supervisors that, as noted earlier, is 87 percent male. Later in her career, as she strives to break through the glass ceiling—another attrition pinch point—she will be dependent on finding mentors among a leadership that is 83 percent male (based on the gender breakdown of partners and principals). Women in male-dominated fields benefit from having a mentor, whether it

is a man or a woman. But, as Sheryl Sandberg writes in *Lean In*, "Men are significantly more likely than women to be sponsored." Moreover, mentors tend to choose protégés who remind them of themselves.²⁹

A few years ago, I met with a group of women at a prestigious global architecture firm that has an almost exclusively male leadership. The women, despite degrees from the nation's top architecture schools and years of hard work—they ate not only lunches but also dinners at their desks (and none had children)—had not advanced significantly up the firm's corporate ladder. They described an office culture deeply shaped by an "old boys' club" mentality. It was customary, for example, for the male partners to informally select an incoming young architect to mentor and bring up through the ranks, a process that included plum assignments, invitations to important meetings, and introductions to prestigious clients. Among the women, the protégé was known as "the anointed one," and in their time at the firm they had never seen the honor bestowed on a woman. Meanwhile, the very few women in senior management offered little support. Speaking as a female executive who finds direct requests for mentorship "a total mood killer," Sandberg cautions young women not to be too aggressive in this pursuit and advises them instead to focus on excelling, which will draw mentors to them.³⁰ Yet women can excel day after day, year after year, and still remain invisible in a system that sees only men as leadership material.

Beyond low pay and stalled careers, job satisfaction for women architects is eroded by routine sexism in the workplace. The "Women in Architecture" surveys published annually by the *Architects' Journal*, beginning in 2012, suggest that the problem is widespread and getting worse. The survey asks: "Have you ever suffered sexual discrimination in your career in architecture? (This might include inappropriate comments, or being treated differently because of your gender.)" In 2012, 63 percent of the 700 female respondents answered in the affirmative. Some online commenters have objected to the breadth and subjectivity of the question, arguing that holding a door

open for a woman or giving her maternity leave could qualify under this definition. But the examples submitted by respondents indicate that they know what discrimination means. These include being given more secretarial work to do than male peers, being asked whether they are menstruating, and being told that pregnancy will result in a salary cut. In the 2014 survey, 66 percent of the 710 female respondents answered in the affirmative. These accounts cannot be dismissed as tales of the dark past: most respondents are young—80 percent are under the age of forty. Moreover, the discrimination continues, for some on a regular basis: 33 percent encounter it on a monthly or quarterly basis, while 11 percent say it is a daily or weekly occurrence.³¹

The more overt forms of sexism tend to occur in work with contractors, and two-thirds of the female respondents to the 2014 *Architects' Journal* survey felt that women's authority has yet to be accepted in the building industry, with half of the male respondents agreeing. When women first entered architecture in the nineteenth century, their opponents claimed that they would be defeated by their lack of authority on the construction site, a claim that is still used to justify women's lower promotion rates compared to men. But as Patricia Hickey, co-founder of Bubble Architects, stated in response to the survey, "We need to be clear that women are being held back from promotion in architectural offices not because the practice directors think they will not be respected on site, but because the primarily male directors do not respect female leaders within the office; otherwise a gender pay discrepancy for the same roles would not persist."³² A number of studies suggest that it is easier for women architects to develop coping strategies for the overt sexism they may encounter at the building site. By contrast, the more subtle and pervasive forms of discrimination encountered in the architectural office do more damage because they are harder to counteract or defend against.³³

As a historian, what alarms me about this picture—beyond the legacies that have been lost to us and the sheer injustice of it—is how familiar it all is. For well over a hundred years, in one

form or another, women architects have been fighting the same battle. In 1905, for example, Mabel Brown interviewed women architects for the *San Francisco Chronicle* to discover why they remained "something of a curiosity." She was told "that popular prejudice is against women architects—that it is next to impossible for one to get an opening in a regular office; and since experience means everything, it is impossible to make headway when denied a beginning."³⁴ Resistance to their employment, as we know from other sources in this period, was based on fear that a female presence would disrupt a male environment, skepticism about their training and skills, the certainty that they could not exercise authority on the building site, and the assumption that their commitment to practice would evaporate as soon as they married.³⁵ If a woman did manage to get her foot in the door, Brown learned, she could expect menial duties and a "pittance" for pay. Architectural offices typically assigned women drafting or detail work, because they were believed to lack the "all-round" skills of their male colleagues.³⁶ To avoid such constraints, women architects advised other women considering the profession to open their own firms. But they also warned them to think twice about pursuing architecture at all if they lacked "the influence necessary to get on," meaning the personal and professional networks for success.³⁷ By and large, the hurdles to equity a hundred years ago sound strikingly similar to those encountered today.

At the same time, 2015 is not 1905. Laws now protect against discrimination, even if they are not always enforced, and women architects have the numbers and allies to push for real change. The latter include male architects also dissatisfied with the status quo. The 2014 *Architects' Journal* survey revealed that 73 percent of the male respondents (and 79 percent of the women) believe the profession is too male.³⁸ Moreover, although there have long been global forms of communication, the accessibility and reach of the Internet have both revealed how widespread the problem is and created the possibility for meaningful collaborations across borders and cultures. Finally, studies on gender

discrimination in architecture, some of which have been cited here, have proliferated in recent years. In some cases, they provide us with concrete recommendations for tackling architecture's gender inequities, whereas in others, they highlight new areas of research that still need to be explored.

While money is not a panacea for architecture's gender inequities, it is a good place to start. Professional organizations must step up and exert pressure to end illegal pay practices. In the United Kingdom, architects are calling on the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) to "name and shame" firms that pay women less than men for similar work, saying that it is no longer enough to issue general statements of condemnation. The demand arose after a report was released by the U.K. Office for National Statistics indicating that women architects earn 25 percent less on average than their male counterparts. Those denouncing the pay divide argue that change will not happen until the culprits are exposed and that inaction suggests indifference or even acquiescence. As Stephen Riley of Kiran Curtis Associates stated, "This issue has been raised constantly over the past 30 years and [the RIBA] is now looking rather foolish and damaging the image of the profession."³⁹

Persuasion of a different sort has been explored by the Beverly Willis Architecture Foundation (BAAF) in encouraging large firms to take responsibility for promoting diversity among their leadership ranks. Beverly Willis, who opened an architecture office in San Francisco in 1958, founded BAAF in New York City in 2002 to advance women's status in the building industry. Since 2010, she and others at the BAAF have been holding round table forums with industry leaders as a means to educate them about the importance of diversity in senior management. The participants include principals or partners and human resource executives of the nation's largest architecture, engineering, and construction firms. In addition, the BAAF invites female executives from the organizations representing their most important clients. The mix is an effective one. When companies know that their clients are mindful of their lack of diversity, they become

much more motivated to institute changes to protect their image and bottom line.⁴⁰ Professional architecture organizations, such as the AIA, have an important role to play here in setting and promoting strong industry norms. Without such pressures, the status quo is likely to continue, with the anointed of one generation passing the baton to the anointed of the next.

Female role models can exert their own influence and need to be far more visible in classrooms, firms, and professional organizations. Having a personal relationship with a role model is not necessary; an effective role model may be a prominent figure in the profession or even a historical one. Role models boost self-esteem by countering negative stereotypes that cast doubt on a person's abilities to perform well in the profession. They increase motivation for career advancement and success. They foster a sense of identification with a field, combating alienation. The scarcity of female role models in architecture is thus profoundly damaging. According to the Missing 32% Project, almost a third of women who left practice gave the lack of role models as the deciding factor.⁴¹

To date, studies conducted on the status of women architects have largely focused on countries where attrition rates have been high, including Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In addition to this national research, we need cross-cultural investigations that would allow us to compare places where women architects languish with those where they thrive. Among the latter is Greece, which by 1967 had seen women's architectural enrollments at the National Technical University in Athens reach 70 percent. That same year, women represented 50 percent of practitioners in Greece; today they are in the majority (58 percent). What makes Greece a welcoming environment for women in comparison to, say, Estonia, where 85 percent of architects are men?⁴² Along similar lines, what makes architecture different from other demanding and traditionally male occupations, such as medicine and law, in which women experience greater success? Women currently represent a third of all doctors and lawyers in the United States, and those

numbers are moving closer toward parity: half of the youngest doctors and lawyers are women.⁴³ Our understanding of what holds women back in architecture would benefit from comparative studies with other professions that have better integrated and retained their female practitioners. An extensive literature on gender diversity and women's leadership exists for other fields, but the lack of comprehensive long-term data for architecture has limited the ability to engage with it in order to determine what conditions are specific to the profession, and where it can implement successful strategies developed by others.⁴⁴ Studies of this scale require considerable resources, however, and architecture's professional organizations have been slow to take the initiative.

That may change as their members become more vocal in demanding greater gender equity in architecture. Among the highlights of the 2015 AIA National Convention in Atlanta was a "hackathon" workshop organized by Equity by Design (formerly known as the Missing 32% Project) that brought together women and men from diverse backgrounds in a shared search for solutions. Many of those present had become interested in the issues through Equity by Design's social media outreach and were meeting for the first time at the convention, reinforcing the role that new forms of networking are having in knitting activist individuals and groups into a larger and more powerful movement. Equity by Design also displayed its research findings on gender equity issues, making visible, through its bold infographics, the impact of discrimination on the careers of women architects. Additionally, Rosa Sheng, the group's founding chair, co-authored a resolution for "Equity in Architecture," overwhelmingly passed by the convention delegates, that calls on "both women and men to realize the goal of equitable practice in order to retain talent, advance the architecture profession, and communicate the value of design to society" and states that "equity is everyone's issue." As the resolution points out, although the institute has recently called on the public to "look up" and value architecture and the service architects provide to

society, the profession itself needs to look inward and to reflect on why it so devalues its own "human capital." The resolution calls on the institute "to develop an ongoing program to assess data, set a plan of action, track progress, and report on results. Now more than ever is the time for action both from grassroots and Institute leadership." As the resolution itself underscores, there have been many similar resolutions passed over the years—the first, as noted in chapter 1, at the 1973 AIA convention in San Francisco, over forty years ago.⁴⁵ Whether the leadership of the AIA and other professional organizations will finally take up their members' calls for action and address architecture's ongoing diversity problems through courageous and effective policy actions remains to be seen.