



Women's Place in Space: The Erasure of Women in Architecture – a Reconciliation

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Abstract

The number of accredited architecture degrees awarded to women now surpasses that of men in the United States. Thus, women's presence and participation in the architectural discipline is poised to redefine the futures of both the profession and the built environment. Various social justice initiatives have advocated for decades the need to formally acknowledge women's presence in and contributions to the profession throughout its history. The proposed research will examine past and current opportunities for the transition away from this historic inequity and away from the fear such a transition incites; examining how women explore freedom in design expression and practice as it becomes obligatory for peers and superiors to take their voices seriously. Women's ongoing fight for recognition has also brought to focus the fact that architecture as a practice is fundamentally an ecosystem, operating at and in its highest capacity when contributions from diverse communities are honored. In the 21st century, as advocacy for equitable and inclusive legislation, professional frameworks, and decision-making have become increasingly more prevalent, the necessity for female designers and their leadership is greater than ever. The research will explore what initiatives women are drawn to and the progressive opportunities women may offer to the progress of the discipline.

Keywords: architecture, feminism, glass ceiling, women in design, women in architecture, architecture pedagogy, design pedagogy, architecture history, women's history

Introduction

Feminist revolutions have occurred in the professions of law and medicine however, in the profession of architecture, change has been slower and more resistant to women gaining professional autonomy and enjoying individual visibility (Deamer, P., Dunn K., et al.). As of 2023, 53% of accredited architecture degrees in the United States were awarded to women, (NAAB, 2023). Title IX legislation provides these women with a perception of equality during their academic experiences, yet they matriculate into a profession where just 27% of all licensed architects are women (NCARB, 2024). So as not to be blindsided by these truths, as the profession tentatively creeps towards demographic representation that reconciles with the makeup of our country's population, it is crucial for women and other minority architects to understand the historical demographics of this discipline.

Throughout history, women practicing architecture have been confronted with a glass ceiling, defined first and foremost by a lack of recognition for their contributions to the work which was established as a result of and has been perpetuated first and foremost by faulty legislation, including the still unpublished Equal Rights Amendment, despite its being ratified as the 28th amendment to the Constitution in 2020. Each wave of feminism responds to events corresponding with issues that women have faced and opportunities they have recognized during their struggle for recognition in architecture, which is a microcosm of those faced across all professions and in society at large. Thus, the issues women experience, and their time-delayed equal participation and representation in architecture today continues to be frustrated by struggles of the recent and distant past, which will easily perpetuate if left unaddressed in architectural education, the profession, and on a greater scale, in future legislation.

Exposure in Retrospect

In America, the second wave of feminism lasted through the 1980's. This era of feminism reflected the highest volume of legislation changes and research published on the topic in the country's history to date. The second wave of feminism brought the United States closer to legislative equality, with the introduction of numerous reproductive, economic, and employment rights, such as the Women's Business Ownership Act (1988), Roe V. Wade (1973, *since*

overturned by *Dobbs v Jackson*, 2022), Title IX (1972), Equal Pay Act (1963) (National Archives, 2022). Additionally, in 1977, American architect, Susana Torre organized the exhibition, “*Women in American Architecture*,”:

framed to look at the work of women in architecture in the context of issues such as domesticity, private and public life, and the relationship of space to gender relations... because they shaped the way in which domestic environments were conceived and, consequently, how women saw themselves functioning in the social hierarchy (Genevro, p. 2).

This exhibition was revolutionary for its time, because it was the first time the broader context of women's struggles in architecture were framed publicly, through a comprehensive, feminist lens. Attention was squarely focused on the lack of recognition of women in architecture, despite a long history of substantial contribution to the built environment.

In response to the second wave of feminism, third wave feminism, or post-modern feminism was born into American culture in the 1990's. As a continuation of the second wave, third wave feminism defines an era of American women beginning to enter the workforce, exercising reproductive and financial freedoms, and to work towards the mythological opportunity to “*have it all*”. Society progressed in this third wave with more social and cultural attitude changes as women and men settled into further equalities. However, this is also the era where women's recognition in architecture was unable to match the pace of greater societal feminist reforms.

The fourth-wave feminist era manifest in the wake of the Me Too movement, which began in 2006 and became #MeToo in 2017. These events underlined an evolved set of feminist principles expressed through progressive mediums, reflected in the architecture profession through a growing participation in specialized organizations, educational structures, and in civil rights and digital activism. The feminist belief in full social, economic, and political equality for all people and the mediums and velocity carrying feminist theories continued to evolve as technology advances, and more information becomes more widely accessible to the public. Fourth-wave feminist theory finds its traction in ideals focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion and a specific emphasis on intersectionality (Lange, et al., 2020). Intersectionality is the idea that individuals have different and varied experiences which results in both seeking and gaining equality, since in this framework, many variables affect how any one individual is treated in

society. Therefore, achievement of equality requires curated solutions according to different groups of people in varying environments (Crenshaw, 1991). This translated into the architecture profession in earnest effort towards attracting and retaining members of marginalized groups in the profession. Still, the fact remains that these individuals are confronting varying barriers at different progression points in their journeys, underscoring the need for curated solutions for individual groups.

Where are the Women Architects?

Recently, the struggles women have faced and continue to confront in architecture are being brought into focus through a review of podcasts, books, articles, and research papers. These modern issues remain deep-rooted in discriminatory patriarchal foundations set in motion well before the founding of our country. The question remains, then, what must happen in architectural practice and in academia for women to enter and participate on a leveled playing field? The answer to this question certainly lies in an examination of the ways that the societal norms of the past have informed our progress to, and the context of, the present moment. In architecture, women's attrition has been linked to varying factors. Analysis of these obstacles through time can provide solutions that improve retention rates for women architects in present-day practice in the United States and beyond.

Women in architecture have suffered a lack of visibility in the past which has translated to a lingering lack of authority, manifest in general lack of recognition, which is at least in part attributable to faulty legislation. Therefore, many women have effectively become stifled in progressing beyond the glass ceiling, stuck in what has been observed, primarily through testimonials, as an overall atmosphere and experience of insignificance, which contributes significantly to higher attrition rates as women enter the profession (Möller, M. et al., 2021, p. 331). However, as fourth wave feminist efforts grow through expanded networks, online archival initiatives, petitions, podcasts, and social media, more people are made aware of the ways in which women contribute and have contributed significantly to the built environment over time.

The AIA & New Organizations

The most valuable architecture is created when designed and realized with diverse perspectives. The built environment reflects designers' intuitions and strategies borne of both

learned and lived experiences, the most successful designs are developed by teams with diverse experiences. Architecture has been historically male dominated, and remains this way when looking at licensed practitioners only. Though, more marginalized groups are getting degrees and entering the profession (NCARB, 2024). Foundational to architecture's networking environment, membership-centric organizations enable architects, and those aspiring to become architects, to meet other professionals in their niche, or to branch out and engage with other specializations. The American Institute of Architects (AIA) was founded in 1957, and since then has been the default professional organization that architects to join for important news, networking events. The AIA has also served as a center for advocacy on varying scales of issues impacting the profession, though until recently, this was generally self-limited to lobbying government officials from local to federal levels. Over 100,000 American architects are registered in the AIA network, fostering community and connections for the profession.

However, following political controversy brewing within the AIA following the organization's blanket-support of president-elect Donald Trump in 2016 and further exacerbated by inaction around the #MeToo movement's confrontation of Richard Meier's multiple sexual assaults of employees and professional associates, members have become more active in affiliated organizations with specialized initiatives with some professionals splintering from the AIA entirely to focus on issues like education, natural disasters, and the amplification of marginalized communities' voices. In Peggy Deamer, Keefer Dunn, and Manuel S. Carrió's, "*A Response to AIA Values*," they underline the general points of tension growing between architecture professionals and the AIA, exploring the issues concerning "AIA directives that ensure no advocacy specific to us professionals. Instead of just "we give you inspired design," why not "we are more valuable, warrant more voice in building development, and deserve better pay than is currently acknowledged?" (Deamer, P., Dunn K., et al., p. 3). These writers argue, on behalf of paying AIA members, for better representation as architects in this organization. This writing reflects the growing unity among individual architects, who believe it would be best for the AIA to officially address their tensions as they work in a demanding profession, wanting their payments to the AIA to go toward advocating for their basic needs, such as salaries that reflect the liability and professional responsibility being undertaken and other social and civil rights, the resources and tools for which, like the annual Compensation and Benefits Report, the AIA keeps behind a paywall even for its paying members. The most recent such report is from

2023, the complete version is available for \$450, regional versions are priced at \$270 (AIA, 2023).

Membership groups such as the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA), Equity by Design, and even AIA have been or have begun keeping track of the developing diversity entering architecture. For women, and other marginalized groups in the profession, which is to say for everyone except white men, NOMA has become the standard network making visible and to find data and support in the profession. Founded in 1971, NOMA has marginalized interests in mind, fostering a network of underrepresented architects. NOMA has started conducting surveys on marginalized groups and their rates of attrition and retention in practicing architecture, while at the same time gathering testimonials on where struggle points are for these architects. In the “*Baseline on Belonging: Experience Report*,” (2021) published by NOMA and NCARB and available for no cost, it was found that, “although white women often respond more positively than their male peers of all races and ethnicities, women of color frequently report the least positive responses when asked about the AXP [Architectural Experience Program®],” (NOMA, 2021, p. 140). In recent years, it is becoming more misleading to view results based on gender alone, highlighting the intersectional inequalities in the profession. This survey also found the most common issues that all architects face on the path to licensure have to do with poor salaries, work-life balance, and firm culture. This report ultimately supports the reasoning that these variables are instrumental causes of marginalized people diverging from the profession.

NOMA is looking into these issues in parallel, promoting initiatives to standardize the acknowledgement of women architects in leadership positions and elevating women as role models in the industry. For example, Kimberly Dowdell was the NOMA president from 2019-2020, and then the AIA president from 2020-2021. Under her administration, NOMA members grew from 500 to 3000, though she is still “most surprised by the level of scrutiny that I have encountered compared to my predecessors this year,” (LaCroix, A., 2024, p. 9). Dowdell’s experience is akin to other women displayed in this article, which highlights ways in which women accomplish in architecture, while also acknowledging the sacrifices they had to reach their goals. Through written articles and conferences, NOMA gives marginalized architects a

platform to discuss their experiences and how they have found success, but also an avenue to share the scrutiny and sacrifices they face while navigating the profession.

Embedded Patriarchy

The unequal treatment of women predates the formation of America by way of “coverture,” a legal doctrine that stems from Middle Ages English Common law and continued through American colonial heritage. “Coverage held that no female person had a legal identity.” A woman’s identity was associated with her father’s identity before marriage and her husband’s identity after marriage. Since women did not have a legal identity, they were unable to contract, sue or be sued, or own a business (Allgor, 2012). As a result, women have long been set up for the prejudicial judgement by society at large as fundamentally inferior to men in roles outside of the domestic sphere; this prejudice is foundational to women’s exclusion from historical records and is perpetuated by men and women alike in their implicit biases. Social researcher, Caroline Criado Perez is engaged in extensive research on the “gender data gap”. Her book, *“Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men,”* (2019) demonstrates that women have been neglected from historical archives, thus “the result of this deeply male-dominated culture is that the male experience, the male perspective, has come to be seen as universal, while the female experience...[is] niche” (Perez, page 12). With architecture particularly, centuries of documentation on male domination in the profession exist. However, as historical records are evaluated in retrospect, more than a century of evidence reveals that women’s contributions have been undervalued and generally unrecognized in the design of the built environment. Nonetheless, over the course of history, patriarchy has sedimented itself into the general social fabric, affecting most structures in languages, prevailing in historical records, behaviors, relationships, fashions, businesses, crime rates, etc. This “male default perspective” is an inherent prejudice, carried into modern society.

Architecture’s Glass Ceiling: Representation, & Education

The glass ceiling is a metaphor used for roles and in professions that suffer from gender and other underrepresented group discrimination. The metaphorical glass ceiling connotes an invisible and impenetrable barrier to fully realized success in the form of advancement to the highest stations and ranks for marginalized groups including and especially women. This barrier

has deleterious effects on the progressive capacities within any given profession. With few diversified voices in the highest positions, there is a resultant lack of diversified input and strategy, thus, blind spots persist and lead to stagnant foundational viewpoints and philosophies in professions embedded into a patriarchal structure.

Education activates feminist theory from a collection of ideas and research concerning intersectional equality into a practical reality. In the research article “*Inclusive Design Studios: Rethinking the Instructor’s Role*” (2022), Stephanie Z. Pilat and Angela M. Person explore successful progressive trends in architectural pedagogy, prefacing their discoveries with the fact that “scholars have repeatedly identified the exclusionary culture of design studios as an impediment to diversifying the profession,” (p. 1). Historically, in the standard design studio, architecture students experience highly subjective teaching styles from their professors and critics. Research such as this explains how students begin to feel creatively stifled or pigeonholed to follow the creative direction of their professors. In today’s fourth-wave feminist era, teaching is expressed in various mediums, reaching new horizons as technology and information accessibility advance, thus beginning to broaden inclusivity and create comfortability in learning spaces, such as design studios at the educational, and practice levels (Pilat, Person, 2022). The learning process is a perpetual reality for architects and architecture faculty as they must follow various educational structures to keep up with continuous social and technological progress in such a dynamic and nimble profession.

Zooming into the foundation that all education is built on, archives are crucial to preserving information and ensuring accountability in architectural research and education. Sponsored by specialized groups of architects: designers, historians, students, and educators, various architectural history archives have expanded into the digital realm, promoting information accessibility to many demographics, and igniting efforts for further research into the social environment architects exist and work within. Digital archives, such as madamearchitect.org and *International Archive of Women in Architecture* at Virginia Tech, serve to chronicle the current and past presence of women in the field of architecture. These sources allow us to gauge women’s presence and visibility in architecture through time, to promote these women as role models to the industry, while also pointing us in a direction to analyze historically how women navigated obstacles while practicing and obstacles to the practice of architecture.

Recognition & Digital Activism

Through history, documentation of women's achievements, as well as their struggles while navigating the architecture profession have been overlooked, often, achievements are credited to their male bosses; and struggles are disregarded and instead categorized as ineptitude in fulfilling the standards of the job. This lack of representation has had many negative effects on the collaborative spirit and potential in the industry, trickling down to all scales such as in education, practice, and more broadly, awards and achievements (Stratigakos, 2016; Lange, et al., 2020). Research has shown correlation between less representation of marginalized people in an industry, i.e. role models in positions of power, and an increase in identity struggles, such as discouragement and feelings of inadequacy for those marginalized people (Sacco, 2022; Omoyeni, et al., 2019). When women's accomplishments are not formally recognized in history, there becomes a lack of role models for aspiring architects propagating the sense of a too-large lift for any one individual to overcome. This sense of implicit defeat contributes to women's higher attrition rates from architecture; as their careers progress, they become discouraged by continued and compounded frustrations ultimately preventing them from achieving equal representation in the highest positions of the profession.

Architecture firms have a long history of diminished recognition of the work done by project teams; this bias disproportionately affects marginalized groups, as projects are almost always credited to the sole licensed architect or firm principal who oversees the project. The most popular women architects in the past have often had a male counterpart, or husband, often one and the same, who aided in their gaining respect and recognition for their work, such as Ray and Charles Eames, Sibyl and Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, Marion Mahony and Walter Griffin, Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi, and Louise Blanchard and Robert Bethune (Reggev, 2021). However, these partnerships were not entirely progressive towards an equal future for both individuals, as women were not practicing or gaining recognition autonomously. In the popularized case of Denise Scott Brown, her joint work with her husband was twice officially overlooked by the highest award in architecture, the Pritzker Prize. In 1991, when her husband Robert Venturi was awarded the prize, although they jointly owned the firm, and jointly carried out responsibilities on their projects (Stratigakos, 2016). Since then, especially through social media, there has been heightened advocacy in architecture to hold those in powerful positions

responsible for their roles in diminishing the achievements of women. Exposure through social media has led to an increased group solidarity among many architects, and especially among women in architecture.

In 2013, graduate architecture students from Harvard, Arielle Assouline-Lichten and Caroline James, created a Change.org petition calling for the Pritzker Prize committee to formally acknowledge Denise Scott Brown, and to instate her as a reward recipient in retrospect to her overlooked achievements from 1991. Despite over eighteen thousand signatures on the online petition and support by past Pritzker-laureates, 2013 Pritzker chairman, Peter Palumbo, released a statement neglecting the option to retrospectively amend the decision, resolutely deciding that “A later jury cannot re-open, or second guess the work of an earlier jury, and none has ever done so,” (Palumbo, 2013, p. 1; Stratigakos, 2016). The outcome of the petition from students is not only a step in the right direction to hold award-givers accountable for their discriminatory practices, but the outpour of support online also emphasizes the power of digital activism as a defining principle of fourth-wave feminism. This display of unity across the architecture community demonstrates the power that a collective holds in obtaining the attention of decision-makers who ultimately influence the broader public perception of the profession. Additionally, in response to the petition, Palumbo made a note that the Pritzker committee is adjusting to progressive insights to address the underlying issue:

assuring women a fair and equal place within the profession... keeping in mind the fact that certain recommendations or discussions relating to architectural creation are often a reflection of particular times or places, which may reflect cultural biases that underplay a woman’s role in the creative process (Palumbo, 2013).

The Pritzker committee acknowledges that women architects’ accomplishments being disregarded is reflective of past, discriminatory cultural climates, so one might assume that Pritzker will begin recognizing more women and marginalized groups’ achievements. However, in 2012, Lu Wenyu was denied formal recognition from Pritzker as her husband, Wang Shu won the Pritzker Prize for the work produced by their co-owned firm, Amateur Architecture Studio which they opened in 1997.

The Pritzker Prize association decision has researchers and members of online discussions questioning the relevance of this award, though indeed, awards are important in architecture and

to architects. Awards validate design and practitioners, granting them more exposure and credibility in the industry and making the greater community aware of their work. The work of award-winning practitioners is more likely to find its way into classroom lessons and into our longer-term professional memory. For architects, the validation from awards becomes personal, and a testament to the character of a designer, as researchers find that based on the intuitive solutions and sensible creativity that go into designing the built environment, “architects personally identify themselves with their professional work at higher rates than other industries... [thus] authorship within professional publications and award systems serve as major motivating factors for practitioners (Smitheram, 2017; De Graft-Johnson et al., 2005),” (Möller, et al. 2021, p. 333). This sentiment uncovers the value in promoting equality within a profession that purports to function on a merit-based structure, despite the realization of a building having far too many factors and moving parts to be based on merit-alone. Still, and in a way, tracking the demographics of winners is one way to gauge whether the profession is officially progressing in a way that values acknowledging women architects’ achievements.

Digital Archive & Collective Memory

With the existence of specialized digital resources, a larger question comes to the surface. Why are these outlets necessary? In their 2020 editorial, “*Architectural Historiography and Fourth Wave Feminism*,” Torsten Lange and Lucía C. Pérez-Moreno provide many resources proving that “the power of digitalization can break frontiers and globalize feminist activism” (p. 5). The power of digitized public information sharing creates boundless levels of accessibility and widespread education for anyone interested in learning about architecture, especially the profession’s often overlooked history. These women-led initiatives focus on sharing the history and importance of women architects, demonstrating feminist ideals revolving around transparency in education. Digital archives, podcasts, and blogs allow for a larger reach in educating the public, and other spatial designers, about women’s participation in creating the built environment. Additionally, these resources are focused on transparency, ultimately normalizing passive recognition for women’s accomplishments, and fostering a broader sense of equality as women are heard and seen as valuable designers contributing to a more meaningful and resonant built environment.

Often, students are left to search for these inclusive resources on their own, while Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, Antoni Gaudi, Frank Lloyd Wright, Carlo Scarpa, etc. take center stage in history lessons and precedent studies and sit at the forefront of new students' minds. The podcast, *New Angle: Voice*, is particularly revolutionary in its audio-formatted presentation style and opens a universe of information to the public including research compiled from various media in the Beverly Willis Foundation's archive (Kracauer, 2021-present). These 'lost' stories package immense histories that are not commonly found in architecture education curriculums. *New Angle: Voice* works to dismantle prejudices and stereotypes, and to provide a lens focused on acknowledging important female contributions, their struggles for autonomy, and recognition in the practice of architecture.

Today, recognition of women and their presence in architecture is better accounted for as institutions with feminist principles archive historical evidence to bring attention to women's contributions. These digital archives grant accessibility to overlooked information, displaying female accomplishments alongside the obstacles faced in achievement of success. Even if documented evidence has been lost to time, concerted efforts to wrangle episodic evidence aid in progressing transparency, understanding, and education in architecture.

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