ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

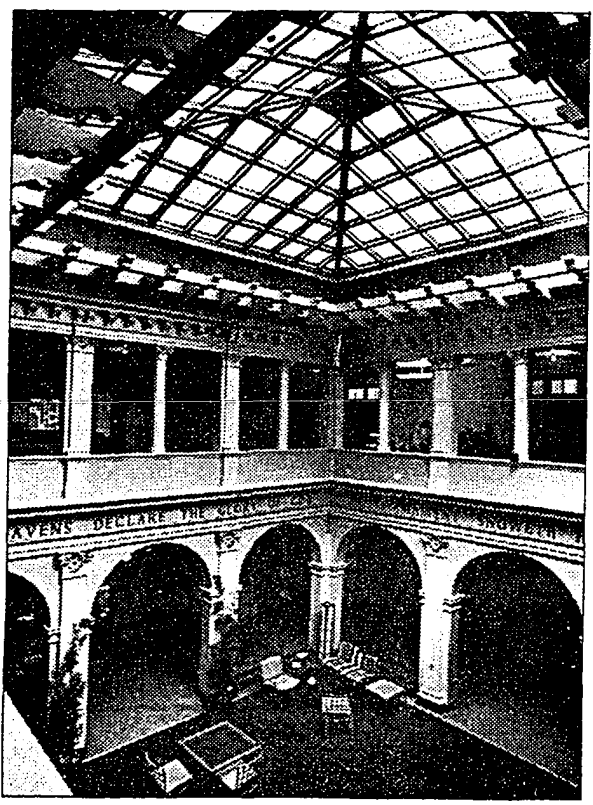
The Last Profession to Be 'Liberated' by Women

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.

I am not concerned here with the standard arguments about the value of housework and the home as the heart of the family—to me, they are beyond debate. The point is that women architects could not and would not get away from the house, biologically, societally or professionally, and that this is, 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.

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.

All of this is made painfully clear, through a great deal of documentation and surprisingly few polemics (propaganda would be redundant in the face of the facts) in an exhibition and book called "Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective." The exhibition, which will be at the Brooklyn Museum through April 17th, consists of a sea of panels—99 of them on easels in regimented rows—made from the book (published by the Whitney Library of Design).



James H. Edelon

Julia Morgan's Oakland YWCA

Don't despair. The show is, as they say, a good read; the story of women in American architecture is so fascinating and frustrating, in fact, that I didn't realize I had been on my feet for an hour-and-a-half following the easels' close-order drill. The one serious defect is the lack of original drawing except for an initial sequence of Beaux Arts projects by early women graduates of M.I.T.

The exhibition has an "Open Wall" meant for women architects who want to show their work informally, and it remains resolutely empty. A far better inclusion than this questionable gesture to architectural populism and sisterhood would be a few more significant primary documents —for example, the incomparable renderings by Marion Mahoney that helped set the style of Frank Lloyd Wright's presentations and contributed so much to the success of her architect-husband, Walter Burley Griffin.

But at least the record has been set straight. Both the show and the publication have been organized by The Architectural League of New York through its Archive of Women in Architecture, with Susana Torre, architect and teacher, as guest curator and editor of the book. The project has been made possible by Federal and State arts grants and corporate gifts, with the notable exception of building materials manufacturers, who were simply not interested.

What emerges is a first-rate history and a most unsettling picture of women's limited architectural achievements. All those bloody houses! And all that pious claptrap that was preached and written from the 19th century on about women's greater domestic sensibility! There are only two blinding moments of truth in a morass of self-deception: Louise Blanchard Bethune's statement in the 1890's that houses were the most piddling and worst-paid work an architect ever does, and someone else's sage remark that the reason women know so much more about the home than men was because they were stuck there.

They were stuck by, and with, a lot of other things, too. In the 19th century architecture schools were closed to women. M.I.T. opened its doors to them in 1887, and classes through 1900 and later might contain one token, determined female. By 1910 half of the schools of architecture still denied admission to women.

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Some women, including Louise Bethune of Buffalo (1856-1913) and Minerva Parker Nichols of Philadelphia (1861-1948) were self-taught and apprenticed to men. Theodate Pope Riddle (1868-1946) denied admission to architecture courses at Princeton, hired its teachers as tutors. Julia Morgan (1872-1957), the most prolific American woman architect, with over 800 buildings completed in a 50-year career including William Randolph Hearst's eclectic castle, San Simeon, was graduated with an engineering degree from Berkeley in 1894 and completed her architectural education at the Ecole de Beaux Arts in Paris through sheer obstinacy. The Ecole did not admit women, and so Morgan stayed in an atelier for two years taking tests and entering competitions until she was accepted.

As late as the 1940's, the Harvard Graduate School of Design debated whether to grant architectural degrees to transferees from the all-woman Cambridge School of Architecture (1915-42) which Harvard was absorbing. Surveys of the profession in 1948 and 1958 found that women made up no more than one percent of all registered architects, with salaries far lower than for men.

It is impossible to judge this work as buildings and nothing more. "The careers of women practitioners have always been linked to the opportunities and expectations of women in the larger society," writes Marita O'Hara, administrative director of The Architectural League, in the foreword to the book. But society has not permitted women either equal opportunity or an equal product. It is therefore difficult to evaluate women's architecture, or even to know what kind of architects women can really be.

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Women Architects

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At best, the woman architect has been poorly prepared in technical and scientific fields by high schools and women's colleges. Social attitudes and cultural forces have steered her away from architecture. She has been excluded from the male clubbiness so characteristic of the profession, and once in a firm, is limited in her contacts with clients and site supervision. She has never been admitted to the architect "star system." As an architect, she has been expected to take stereotyped roles, work conservatively rather than innovatively, shock no one, and stick preferably to a domestic practice with an architect-husband, perhaps branching out into large-scale housing or schools. But the stereotype still holds.

There are a few exceptions, when talented women have worked in the background of the large male firms, where it was possible to be involved in the major commissions of the corporate and institutional worlds. (It is not all sexism; the big jobs go to the big firms.) Natalie de Blois's suave and sensitive work of the last 20 years on the business buildings characteristic of that bastion of male partners-in-charge, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, ranks with some of the best architecture that firm has produced. Still, she was never made a partner.

Whether women's design sensibilities are actually different from men's is immaterial; there is more than one way to design a good building. But society has made certain that there is no way for those sensibilities to operate. The record as a whole is pathetic, provocative, and distressing. This is apparently going to be the last "liberated" profession —far behind medicine and the law.