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ACROSS THE YEARS
An appreciation of "Women in Architecture" in the *SSAC Bulletin* and *Journal*

> DOROTHY FIELD

DOROTHY FIELD (M.Sc. 1986, Bartlett School of Architecture and Planning, University College London) is an architectural historian with Alberta Culture, Multiculturalism and the Status of Women, where she has worked since 1987.

In 1991, the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada held its 17th Annual Conference in Baddeck, Nova Scotia. The theme of the conference, "Architecture on the Edge," invited participants to examine architecture found at Canada's periphery geographically, historically, structurally, or sociologically. I proposed and chaired a session entitled "Women and Architecture," based on the observation that "Although women represent over half of the nation's population they have always been marginal participants in the field of architecture." Subsequently, in my introduction to the March 1992 issue of the *SSAC Bulletin* (precursor to the *JSSAC/JSEAC*) that presented three papers from the session, I noted "a heightened awareness of and appreciation for the role women have played—often anonymously—in the architectural history of Canada."[1]

In 2018, it was St. John's, Newfoundland, that hosted the SSAC's 44th Annual Conference. Tanya Southcott proposed and chaired a session entitled "Is a Woman's Work Ever Done? Revisiting 'Women and Architecture,'" through which she proposed to "explore the gap between the lived experiences of women professionals and their place in our architectural imagination."[2] Following up on this session, Southcott proposed another, "Women and Architecture" session for the 45th Annual Conference, held this year (2019) in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She challenged potential participants with the question: "Where are the women architects?" In addition to "revisiting and revising histories of architecture and design to account more fully for women's participation," Southcott encouraged authors to reflect on diversity and "how interwoven dynamics of class, race, sexuality, age, disability and gender shape the narrative structures of their histories."[3]

Unfortunately, I was unable to attend these conferences, and so missed the opportunity to participate in the discussions resulting from papers presented in these sessions. Despite this absence, I received an invitation to write an afterword to this issue of the *Journal*, to provide my "long view," so to speak, of the topic. Initially I was flattered and then somewhat taken aback when I realized it is approaching thirty years since the session in Baddeck. With some trepidation, and disavowing the label of "expert," or any pretense of having sustained a focused attention on the topic in the interim, I accepted the invitation.

At the time, I do not think I fully appreciated the breadth of the view provided by the 1991 conference presenters and their papers. Erna Dominey, a student at the University of Alberta, was working on her M.A. in History. Her presentation put a spotlight on the lives and work of Jean Wallbridge and Mary Imrie, two Edmonton architects active from the 1940s through the 1970s. Dominey described how "the two were spirited, talented, capable architects and a credit to the profession . . . [who] overcame the obstacles placed before Canadian women architects."[4] Maria Somjen, a Nova Scotia architect, detailed the origins and content of the "Women and the Built Environment" course she developed for and delivered at the School of Architecture and Planning at the Technical University of Nova Scotia (TUNS), merged into Dalhousie University in 1997. Somjen described the course as "a general survey of women in the roles of creators, consumers, and critics of the built environment. The objective . . . [was] to create an awareness of the built environment as a feminist issue."[5] Blanche Lemco van Ginkel, an architect, urban designer, and educator whose own distinguished career included many firsts, outlined how "Women entered the profession of architecture in Canada very slowly and with great difficulty."[6] Van Ginkel was uniquely positioned to provide a first-hand perspective, having graduated from McGill in 1945 and registering as an architect in Quebec in 1952. It is worthy of note that by 1960, there were only five women among the six hundred and ninety-nine architects registered in Quebec.

Inevitably, much has transpired since 1991. Erna Dominey has retired after a career in publishing with Athabasca University, having maintained an interest in architecture, heritage, and the story of Wallbridge and Imrie. Maria Somjen has also retired, from a career as an architect with the Government of Canada, during which she took on a variety of projects and roles, including acting as project director of the multi-year rehabilitation of the Victoria Memorial Museum Building for the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa. Blanche Lemco van Ginkel, now ninety-four years of age, has received widespread recognition for her important contributions as a Canadian architect, educator, and urban planner. Among these are the Order of Canada (2000): "Her career has been a model for women in architecture . . . "; and an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws from her alma mater, McGill University (2014): "An inspirational educator and leader in her profession . . . "

Looking back, it is clear to me now that the stories told by these three women, and the lives they are living, exemplify the evolution of Canadian women's relationship with architecture. The twentieth century saw dramatic changes in the status of women in Canada. Social, professional, and academic paths were blazed, then followed, and inhabited in ways that had never before been possible. Now, as the turn of the century recedes into the past, it is possible for new perspectives to emerge to expand upon and reinterpret those events and lives, and to bring new focus to the stories of women and architecture in Canada.

The six papers in this issue of the *JSSAC/JSEAC* do just that. Through various lenses, they address the roles and experiences of women as students, architects, interior designers, patrons, and educators. The production of architecture and interior design does not occur in a vacuum, but rather is subject to a wide range of influences that have very real effects on the final product. Likewise, architects and interior designers exist in their social contexts, which must be taken into account when retelling their stories and delving into the significance, meaning, and impact of those stories.

Ipek Mehmetoğlu is a Ph.D. candidate at McGill University in Montreal, where she has focussed her research on the relationship between architecture, gender, and travel in the postwar period in North America. Central to her article are the very architects, Jean Wallbridge and Mary Imrie, described by Erna Dominey in 1991. Only now, Mehmetoğlu examines their experience as mid-century women architects through the metaphorical lens of travel. She explores the ways in which they used travel to leverage their own agency and create identities that went beyond the social and professional roles usually assigned to women of their day.

Laura O'Brien is also a Ph.D. student at McGill University. Her area of interest is the intersections of gender, sexuality, and class in benevolent institutions across North America at the turn of the twentieth century. In particular, she interrogates the dynamics of the relationship between the all-female Committee of Management and the male Medical Board at the Montreal Maternity Hospital, especially in the context of the transition from an old to a new hospital between 1893 and 1906.

Leanne Gaudet holds an M.A. in Art History from Carleton University in Ottawa. At present, she is a researcher with Know History, a historic services firm. Gaudet proposes, in her article, that historic house museums provide an excellent opportunity, through their domestic spaces, furnishings, and associated documentation, to highlight and deepen our understanding of the women who inhabited them. Using the Wyatt Historic House Museum on Prince Edward Island as a case study, Gaudet illustrates "how the architecture of a home can be considered as a

historic document that reveals personal histories of past inhabitants." In particular, she points out that the museum does more than present period interiors—it provides insight into the often overlooked lives of the women who lived there.

Nicola Krantz has recently graduated with an M.A. in Art History from Carleton University. She currently works as an architecture archivist at Library and Archives Canada, also in Ottawa. Her article spotlights Minerva Elliot, who carved out a career as an interior decorator before the occupation was recognized as a profession. A close reading of Elliot's articles for and advertisements in the *Canadian Homes and Gardens*, a magazine published between 1925 and 1937, reveals much about the avenues open to women designers to create their own place as authorities within the design community and society as a whole.

Dorothy Stern is a professor at Algonquin College in Ottawa, where she teaches interior design. Her interests include: gender and domesticity, vernacular housing, and theory and philosophy of design. Stern was a student in the Bachelor of Interior Design Program at the University of Manitoba from 1968 to 1972. Her experience there, and her contact with Joan Harland [1915-2016], who had a prominent role as Professor and later Chairman of the program between 1939 and 1980, provides the jumping-off point for an exploration of the origins, development, and future of interior design education in Canada. Additionally, Stern points out the centrality of the debate surrounding the role of interior design within architectural discourse, and the place of gender within the evolving pedagogy.

Co-authors Thomas Strickland (professor) and Marina Schwellnus (student) were part of a team (along with three other undergraduates) from the McEwen School of Architecture (MSoA) at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario, who in 2017 created an installation entitled *The Glass Ceiling* in the Ontario Association of Architects' (OAA) headquarters building in Toronto, Ontario. These authors note that, although the 1992 OAA building was designed by Ruth Cawker, gender parity within the architectural profession has yet to be achieved. The MSoA team used the project to explore the relationship between modes of learning and gender roles within the workplace, in other words, how architectural education currently contributes to female graduate architects experiencing discrimination when they join the ranks of practising professionals. The process of designing and building the installation as a team raised awareness within the group not only of the issue of gender in architectural practice, but also of the significant role hands-on educational experiences can play in revealing and rectifying real world inequities.

When I chaired the session "Women and Architecture" over a quarter century ago at the SSAC Conference in Baddeck, it seemed that a great deal of progress had been made toward equal opportunity and participation in the field. Erna Dominey then noted that Wallbridge and Imrie had demonstrated that success "was possible—if not easy." Blanche Lemco van Ginkel observed that, "despite the painful process and slow pace, women surely are making their place in architecture in Canada . . . " Maria Somjen's report that her students "express some of the frustrations they experience in a faculty which has no women professors . . . " provided a sobering counterpoint within the context of pedagogical progress. My final thought, in the March 1992 SSAC Bulletin, was that the issue "suggests how much [women's stories need] to be documented and appreciated—and how determined they are to continue to influence the future course of architecture in Canada."

The current issue of the *JSSAC/JSEAC* demonstrates that the need still exists. The subject still provides ample food for thought, and plenty of room for progress. It has been a privilege to read the six articles featured in this issue of the *JSSAC/JSEAC.* As an unreformed optimist, and trusting in the intelligence, drive, and passion for architecture of succeeding generations of women architects, designers, and historians across the country, I look forward to future installments of the story of "Women and Architecture" in Canada.

NOTES

1. Field, Dorothy, 1992, "A Note from the Editor," *SSAC Bulletin SEAC*, vol. 17, no. 1, p. 3-4.
2. *2018 SSAC/SEAC Conference Program*, held in St. John's, Newfoundland, May 22-25, 2018, [https://canada-architecture.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/SSAC-SEAC-2018-Call-for-Sessions-Appel-a-propositions-de-sessions.pdf], accessed August 12, 2019.
3. *2019 SSAC/SEAC Conference Program*, held in Halifax, Nova Scotia, May 28-31, 2019, [https://canada-architecture.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/SSAC-SEAC-Program-2019-full.pdf], accessed August 12, 2019.
4. Dominey, Erna, 1992, "Wallbridge and Imrie: The Architectural Practice of Two Edmonton Women, 1950-1979," *SSAC Bulletin SEAC*, vol. 17, no. 1, p. 12-18.
5. Somjen, Maria, 1992, "Women and the Built Environment: A Course for Students at the Technical University of Nova Scotia," *SSAC Bulletin SEAC*, vol. 17, no. 1, p. 19-22.
6. van Ginkel, Blanche Lemco, 1992, "Slowly and Surely (and Somewhat Painfully): More or Less the History of Women in Architecture in Canada," *SSAC Bulletin SEAC*, vol. 17, no. 1, p. 5-11.