

LOOKING AT THE OTHER SIDE OF HISTORY: 'WOMEN IN ARCHITECTURE' ①

photographed by
materials provided by
edited by

Laura Stamer
Danish Architecture Center
Yaelim Youn

There are people who claim that history is suffering from ‘amnesia’. They are individuals who question the story narrative in the history of architecture that – while highlighting the life of a genius architect as someone who supposedly overcame all challenges and accomplished everything by themselves – tends to dismiss the unmeasurable amount of contributions that people of various genders, beliefs, and backgrounds had put in to create a space for everyone. Diversity, consideration, and collaboration—these are words that are commonly emphasized by both the head curator of the exhibition ‘Women in Architecture’ in [Danish Architecture Center](#) and the collaborating archive team [WOMEN IN DANISH ARCHITECTURE 1925 – 1975: A New History of Gender and Practice](#) (hereinafter WOMEN IN DANISH ARCHITECTURE). Let us hear their thoughts on the history of architecture and its narrative method.



Exhibition of Excavation: Unveiling Stories Never Asked in History.

Interview **Sara Hatla** curator, Danish Architecture Center × **Youn Yaelim**

Youn Yaelim (Youn): ‘Women in Architecture’ in Danish Architecture Center is an exhibition that highlights female architects who have been mostly overlooked in the history of architecture. The exhibition offers a general overview of female architects ranging not only from the past and old to the present and young, but also those beyond Denmark across historical eras and geographical borders. What is the central message that you wished to deliver through this approach?

Sara Hatla (Hatla): The architectural achievements and breakthroughs of women architects have greatly shaped society and the world in which we live today. There are so many interesting projects and so many fascinating stories to unveil. We wanted to celebrate women and to unveil an impression of many women architects across time and geography who had a significant impact and left enduring legacies. Further to this, we wanted to contribute to a history of architecture that was not created by celebrated individuals but through mutual and creative collaborations.

Youn: In specific terms, what did you uncover about female architects?

Hatla: For example, the part of the exhibition called 'The Archive' comprises a series of spaces – or rooms – where you can delve into Danish architectural history and rediscover projects created by Danish women architects. A lot of material has surfaced in connection with the exhibition—from a tiny silver thimble that was sold to fundraise the daringly modern 'Women's Building' by Danish architect Ragna Grubb in the thirties, to the original pastel-colored tiles from Kildeskovshallen: A public baths and sport centre which is considered to be one of the most beautiful in Danish post-war architecture. The refined technological architecture is the brainchild of architects Karen and Ebbe Clemmensen and landscape architect Agnete Muusfeldt. We collaborated closely with the research team WOMEN IN DANISH ARCHITECTURE at Copenhagen University. The team studies women's contributions to Danish architecture, observing the women who helped to design Denmark, many of whom were never written into the history books.



Youn: I was particularly impressed at how the kitchen floorplan proposed by Ulla Tafdrup was built to actual scale. It shows that much thought was placed to express vividly the contents – which might otherwise appear somewhat flat – within a 3-dimensional space.

Hatla: Exhibition design is key here in the Danish Architecture Center. We aim to break away from ‘flat’, as you say, exhibitions. Instead, we always try to create an immersive exhibition experience. Our exhibition team does not only consist of curators but also of exhibition architects. We work closely together and ‘translate’ the displayed content into exhibitions that are spatially engaging and that – hopefully – make our guests want to explore the objects and concepts and dive in. In this case the exhibition design stems from the idea of an archive, but we did not want it to be a dusty and dull archive. Therefore, our architects developed the idea further, so that the archive manifests itself in physical rooms made of light textile curtains. Each room is devoted to a woman architect and the experience of each room is quite different from the previous. It’s a tactile, bodily, engaging experience—not merely a cerebral experience.

Youn: While most exhibition items are in the form of archives and the collation of information, three installation works stand out in contrast to this approach. Using the English writer and feminist Virginia Woolf’s essay *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) as its basis, three female architects expressed ‘a room of one’s own’. What did Woolf and these three architects try to convey through ‘a room of one’s own’?

Hatla: Woolf’s essay is a seminal text in feminist literature. It was based on two lectures she had given in 1928 at Newnham College and Girton College, the first two colleges for women at the University of Cambridge. In the essay, Woolf spoke critically about the social constraints on women’s lives and pointed out that a woman must have her own money and her own room if she is to be able to create something of value. Woolf’s room is both a physical room and metaphorical room—a room to work in and room in which a woman can be free to express herself. We asked Tatiana Bilbao from Mexico, Siv Stangeland from Norway and Débora Mesa from Spain to offer their take on what ‘a room of one’s own’ means to them and express it through an installation. And the three results are strikingly different from each other spatially, conceptually and in terms of materials. In many ways Woolf was ahead of her time. She was one of the most important women writer voices of the 20th century, and her thoughts about gender roles and the fluidity of gender and identity are just as relevant today as they were when she first voiced them almost 100 years ago. While experiencing rooms of various types, the visitor encounters areas that resonate with Woolf’s reflections on the flexibility of gender roles made almost a century ago.



Youn: The achievements shown in this exhibition seem to be all somehow related to ‘family’. What perspective should we adopt when we look at the achievements of female architects? Is there a cause or reason why they must be differently approached from the achievements of male architects?

Hatla: Historically, architects were usually men. Therefore women, to a far greater degree, have been forced to be conscious of their gender and societal roles and how it impacted/impacts their chosen field. This still holds sway today in Denmark and all over the world. In the 1940s and 1950s the home was still primarily the responsibility of the woman. This manifests itself in the design by women of the period. For example, Tafdrup’s influential kitchen design from the period was nurtured by the aim that women could spend less time on housework and more time on other activities. In that sense, it is the dawning of the women’s liberation movement, and its demand that the number of women in the labour market increased, when the focus on kitchen design also grew. The idea was that kitchens with a more practical design would help women save time and effort when cooking and doing the dishes. This extra time could then be spent on paid work or give women the freedom to do other things. The same goes for Grethe Meyer’s design. The Ildpot, Meyer’s stoneware series is produced in unglazed cordierite; a magnesium-rich mineral that is well-suited for extreme changes in temperature. The ovenproof bowls and dishes could go directly from a freezer into the oven and then onto the dining table, making serving dinners much more manageable. Meyer’s design represented a new and modern woman who surrounded herself with practical and time-saving designs. These designs played a central role in the increasing equality in the

labor market and pointed towards the breakaway from traditional gender roles that took place in the 1970s. At this time in history women were the ones solely responsible for the home and the children, and this of course had an impact on their approach. As Susanne Ussing, another architect in the exhibition put it in 1982: 'There's a clear difference between men and women in the materials and their use. Women have been surrounded by soft and solid materials in a completely different way than men. They have a different experience of the textiles and substances, for example when taking care of children, doing housework, sewing and so on. Women have lived in a completely different world of materials. I myself am very direct with regard to materials.' This however does not mean that women have specific or inherent qualities. That would obviously be a gendered assumption. It is solely stating that the cultural and societal climate of any given epoch will inevitably influence its architects and designers.

Youn: Video interviews of current female architects are shown in the section 'Women Designing Denmark Today', whereas video interviews of rising female architects are put on display in the section 'Future Dream'. While their opinions admittedly cannot represent for the present and future of all female architects, however, what do you think is similar and different between these two generations in terms of their positions expressed in the interview?

Hatla: I think that for the generation of architects in Women Designing Denmark Today such as Dorte Mandrup and Lene Tranberg, the gender gap is at the very top of the agenda. We are often told that we have gender equality in Denmark but, working in the architectural field, a lot of them have experienced that this is not the case and that we have quite a long way yet to go. Therefore, an architect such as Dorte Mandrup has become increasingly engaged in the public debate on gender equality, using her position to create greater awareness. For the younger generation, in Future Dream equality is seen in a wider perspective—not as much as equality between the sexes but rather equality on broader scale as in diversity. Common to them all is that they believe that architecture – with the right design – can promote inclusion and diversity while providing a sense of security in the physical environment. They also wish to question the narrative about the 'solo genius'. Instead of celebrating the accomplishments of individual architects, they want to focus on diversity and on what we can accomplish together.

Youn: The exhibition asks, 'Should gender and equality in the industry still be on the agenda in the year 2022?' As the exhibition organiser, what would be your answer to this?

Hatla: Yes, indeed it should! Through recent years we have experienced an increasing focus on gender gaps—partly due to the #MeToo movement. However, gender distribution is still a hot topic in Danish architecture schools and throughout the industry. And with good reason. Although we see more women than men among the students at the architecture schools, women professors are still significantly underrepresented particularly within architectural design. Similarly, women are few and far between when it comes to ownership or partnerships at architecture studios. So, what happens along the way? As the

first larger exhibition to address the theme in Denmark we hope to contribute to giving women architects the place in history they rightfully deserve and to raising questions about equality or lack of in the field today. We hope to create awareness and to help push forward in a direction where we will see more women in leading roles.





Women in Architecture

Danish Architecture Center

13th May ~ 23rd October 2022

[Home - http://www.dac.dk/](http://www.dac.dk/)

Sara Hatla

Sara Hatla is the art historian and has worked as a curator in exhibition design and communications at several leading museums and cultural institutions in Denmark since 2006. With a background working at, among others, Ordrupgaard and Cisternerne, Sara's work has revolved around site-specific projects—preferably on a large scale. Her curatorial project include Tomás Saraceno's exhibition 'Event Horizon in the Cisterns' (2020) and the work 'Geometry of Innocence' (2018), which is a gigantic, 20m high bamboo labyrinth in the art park at the museum Ordrupgaard. At present she is working on the groundbreaking exhibition, 'Women in Architecture'.

[NO.658](#) [SEPTEMBER 2022](#) [DANISH ARCHITECTURE CENTER](#) [WOMEN IN ARCHITECTURE](#)

[UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN](#) [WOMEN IN DANISH ARCHITECTURE 1925-1975](#) [EXHIBITION](#)

[WOMEN ARCHITECT](#) [FEMINIST](#) [ARCHIVE](#) [ARCHIVING](#) [HISTORY](#) [ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY](#)

[RESEARCH](#) [COLLABORATION](#)

LIST



COMMENTS

Please Login.

WRITE

SPACE 空間
1966

CNB Media space Lab.

52-20 Yeonhui-ro, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul, Korea 03781

E-mail. editorial@spacem.org

Tel. 82-2-396-3359

Fax. 82-2-396-7331

© 2022 VMSPACE. All rights reserved

