

Lori Brown and Despina Stratigakos in conversation
with Svava Riesto and Henriette Steiner

The Moment We Are In!: Stories of Researching Women in Architecture

Henriette: We have been looking forward to this conversation for a long time! It is part of our ongoing investigation into how we can diversify our historical understanding of architecture, cities, and landscapes. We have worked in particular to uncover the histories of women in Danish and Scandinavian architecture, landscape architecture and urban planning. And now we are hoping to further diversify Danish architectural history. We are therefore grateful that the two of you have agreed to share your knowledge based on your own work on diversifying architectural history, as well as your institutional work on diversity and inclusion in your own institutions. However, first we would like to focus on women architects and ask when you first became interested in this topic.

Lori: I am trained as a practising architect. And so I have come to this through the lens of practice primarily, and from there into activism and teaching. I had to do some very heavy lifting to become more aware of women's practice and scholarship, as well as women's history more broadly speaking.

Actually, in graduate school I was first introduced to feminist theories around art practices through a seminar by Mark Wigley that did include some of the leading feminist architectural theorists of the time, although not to the same degree that art was represented – or that was what struck me the most in the course. I became more aware and then active in this space because I was thinking about who practises architecture, and what sorts of architecture are deemed noteworthy and valuable, and realising that they did not coincide with the kind of practice I wanted to pursue.

So it was in response to what students were asking for, as well as to my own personal questions. I wanted to create new scholarship to promote more women.

I came at it from that perspective, and also by meeting people like Despina, who became really influential in my own growth and knowledge-building. Initially I was mostly interested in finding examples for my own development and expansion, but then I brought those examples into my work with my students.

My travelling exhibition *Feminist Practices* (2008–2009) and my subsequent book (Brown 2011) were a way to bring more contemporary women into discourse, education, and publications.

Despina: I came to this topic because of a radio interview. It was 1990, I had just finished my master's degree in architectural history at UC Berkeley, and I happened to catch a radio interview with a former Bauhaus student – Werner David Feist, a design professor at Montreal's Concordia University – who talked about his experience at the famous school in Dessau. One of the things he talked about was how much fun their parties had been and all the women students that he had danced with. My master's degree was in design history, and I was shocked, because I had never heard about these women students at the Bauhaus. I remember thinking, "Who are these women? What were *their* experiences like? What are *their* stories?"

So off I went to the library, I searched the shelves, and I was frustrated that I could not begin to answer these questions. In 1990, little had been written about women in the Bauhaus. But the shelves were not entirely empty. There were books that had been written in the 1970s and 1980s about women in architecture in other countries or eras, and although they did not answer my questions about Weimar Germany and the Bauhaus, they helped me to see that there were stories to be told. There was a history there; it was not an absence. Eventually I went back to graduate school determined to contribute to that bookshelf myself.

Svava: From your perspectives, how has research on women in architectural history – and questions of inclusion, diversity, and justice more broadly – developed over time?

Despina: The subject of women in architecture has a long history. Women have been exploring their own histories in architecture since at least the nineteenth century. But feminist architectural historiography as a disciplinary approach is more recent and dates to the emergence of the so-called second wave of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Feminist architectural historians of the post-war generation raised awareness about the historical contributions of women architects. Susana Torre's 1977 travelling exhibition *Women in American Architecture* and the book that followed marked a milestone of that era (*Women in American architecture: A historic and contemporary perspective*). Another important aspect of this period was the feminist critiques of the built environment. Although there are earlier precedents of women writing critically on this topic, the 1970s and early 1980s saw these efforts emerge as an important theme of feminist architectural history. Dolores Hayden's 1981 *The Grand Domestic Revolution* comes to mind as an example (*The Grand Domestic Revolution*). In the 1980s and 1990s, we see the influence of post-structuralist, postcolonial, and postmodern theories shifting feminist scholarship towards an examination of categories of gender and sexuality. Beatriz Colomina's *Sexuality and Space* from 1992 exemplifies this new direction, and we see other important challenges emerging at the same time in feminist scholarship

around the politics of space, such as domesticity and the public/private divide (*Sexuality and Space*). Up until that point, most of the feminist architectural history that was being produced focused on Western countries.

Lori: I would also highlight the *Women in American Architecture* exhibition and subsequently the Boston Society for Architecture, which hosted *Women in Architecture: A Centennial Exhibit* in 1984. I think Susana Torre's exhibition *Women in American Architecture* had a more diverse range, both in terms of race and in terms of the types of practice that were included, questioning who we serve as architects.

When we think about the 2000s and then the 2010s, and even the 2020s, these efforts have definitely escalated and have not stopped. One thing I find interesting is that since queer theory and gender fluidity have become more openly discussed and put forward, this scholarship has sometimes called into question why we are so centred on women. I want to underscore that there is still a necessity to be centred on women as long as we are living within a patriarchal society. The focus on women remains incredibly relevant because we are not equal in so many aspects of our lives. All these terms can and should be operating collectively, empowering us to change the status quo.

There were several reports that different architecture organisations put forward in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, all documenting issues around women not being paid equally and their lack of advancement compared with their male peers (American Institute of Architecture 1975, 1983; Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture 1990). One area that has been quite absent from the discipline, especially in North America, is a focus on issues around race and how race intersects with issues of gender. Several Black feminist scholars discuss the intersecting matrix of domination Black women face: they are the least equal – systematically repressed, encountering structural barriers that others do not.

Henriette: What we learn from intersectional research is this idea of always asking the other, and then the other, and then the other question. And as we also do in our work, in architectural history it can be meaningful to start with a traditional binary category of gender by looking at women architects and then move on from there.

Lori: Yes. In the United States, with the murder of George Floyd in 2020, a significant uprising led primarily by students and recent graduates began calling for a reassessment and change in the academy. They are demanding answers to questions about who is valued, who gets promoted, who is written about and what voices are included.

We are seeing far more work being done to bring women of colour into all of these areas, which is crucial. We still have a lot of work to do, but it is really

exciting to witness the ongoing effects of the Black Lives Matter movement. Karen Burns and I co-authored an essay where we intentionally included more diverse voices and examples of practice and really thought critically about our citation practices and our resulting bibliography, demonstrating how architectural history benefits tremendously from looking through these intersectional lenses (Burns and Brown 2020).

Despina: And yet despite the push for more diverse histories, real structural barriers remain to their production. I recently attended a meeting of the newly launched Women in Architecture group of the Society of Architectural Historians. This group has attracted scholars from across different generations interested in feminist historiography, and many of the younger scholars pursue their research globally, beyond the traditional focus on the West. I agree with Lori about the real hunger for globally and racially diverse histories in architecture, including women's histories. I was dismayed to hear the struggles these younger scholars face in terms of the lack of archival materials, the lack of funding, and the difficulties in finding publishers. These are unfortunately familiar challenges to those pursuing women's histories. For me, this reinforces the urgency of continuing to fight against the structural and systemic barriers to the expansion of architectural history, even as we celebrate exciting developments in that direction. It is vital that we do not leave junior scholars to overcome these barriers by themselves. Those of us who are further along in our careers have a responsibility to help.

Svava: Yes, indeed, these systemic barriers exist everywhere, to varying degrees. We know that both of you have worked systematically to break them down by creating new knowledge infrastructures, or by adding untold stories about marginalised figures to architecture history scholarship. Could you tell us some examples of how you work with such issues?

Lori: *The Bloomsbury Global Encyclopedia of Women in Architecture, 1960–2020* is a transnational project that consists of biographical microhistories of women in architecture, accompanied by scholarly essays and a range of thematic entries for each region that explore key ideas and contexts of spatial production, written by over 360 authors. In addition, a global timeline will collate key historical events with the history of women's rights across the globe and significant moments in the history of women in architecture. The encyclopedia challenges chronological histories by presenting a geographically organised approach to a specific historical period. Our project foregrounds women who have previously been ignored, and it also expands the definition of architectural practice to include a much broader range of spatial engagement: from women as architectural critics to pedagogues to urban planners

to heritage architects, policymakers, activists, and curators. Our recognition of these women, including those working in under-represented communities, expands the discipline of architecture and shines a light on global circulations of key texts and travelling ideas. We aim to challenge definitions of architectural practice.

We hope that our encyclopedia will significantly contribute to these efforts, given that the majority of the over 1150 entries will be about women from countries that have not been published about in English in any significant way before. The project calls into question the way we think about practice and the methods of practising. The encyclopedia is a feminist project. I hope this project this project will create a very different future for both architectural history and practice as we move forward.

Despina: I would like to address this question from the perspective of the necessity for new research methodologies. Currently I am working on a biography of the Austrian architect Ella Briggs (1880–1977). Although she is an important figure in modernism, she has been difficult to write about because of her peripatetic way of life – she moved between Vienna, New York, Berlin and London, engaging in and advancing the discourses of modern design. This geographical and cultural scope makes it very challenging for a single scholar to research and write her history. Many historians have attempted it but have ended up focusing on only a slice of her life and career. The fact that her career does not follow the norms of the “genius” male architect, as defined by the traditional architectural history monograph, has also added to the fact that we know so little about her.

Fed up with this ongoing situation, architectural historian Elana Shapira and I decided to do something about it. In 2022, we organised a workshop on Ella Briggs in Vienna that brought scholars who had previously researched Briggs together in one room, so that we could finally piece together the bigger history of her life. The conversations really energised us, and we decided to turn this into a book project. There are 15 authors involved, across four countries, who are working on different aspects of Briggs’s life and career. What we are creating is not an edited volume as we typically understand it, but rather a unified narrative that we are writing together. We are engaged in collaborative storytelling as a new method of recovering the histories of women architects. This approach emerged out of the realisation that a single historian could not write this story, and that what was needed instead was a team of writers – I call us the Ella Briggs Detective Brigade. This also requires a different form of working. We share and discuss our archival finds, read each other’s drafts, cheer each other on when we make discoveries, and discuss options when we are left with unresolved questions. I will admit this is more work, but it is also more fun! We also have the help of the Vienna Architecture Centre, which hosted the initial workshop and with which we are now building an Ella Briggs archive. This more

dynamic role of the archive – as an active collaborator in the making of new knowledge – is critical to advancing the project of more diverse histories.

Svava: It is so inspiring to hear how you both currently work on projects that develop new forms of collaboration. It is not common practice in architectural historiography to involve so many different authors at the same time, but your work shows the value of this approach in adding critical new perspectives, and it also shows what it takes to develop innovative methodologies or collaborative formats in order to diversify architectural history. We have had similar experiences in the work we have been doing with the research network *Where Are the Women in Scandinavian Landscape Architecture?*, which is also the framework for this book. We also find that the collaborative publication formats and collaborative content creation we used for this book – for example, through writing workshops – add valuable stories to architectural research that would otherwise remain unspoken. Looking forward, how do you think we can stimulate critical feminist agendas in academia in the future?

Lori: One thing that immediately comes to mind is international conferences and symposia that bring scholars and practitioners together from across the globe. These are vital for building our community and forging new connections. For example, the Architecture and Feminisms 13th International Architecture Humanities Research Association Conference at KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm in 2016 was a space where many feminist scholars and architects came together, and it provided an opportunity for discussion, discourse and debate that I had never experienced before, which I found incredibly energising.

I know that having those moments where there is solidarity-building as well as space to imagine potential new projects from these kinds of unexpected encounters is really critical and is also a way to foster global networks. For me that has been a lifeline, given the lack of feminist colleagues I have encountered in my own school.

There is a long history of events that have done that. But the situation is different in different schools and strands of practice. In the USA, for example, landscape architecture has become more and more feminised, and the majority of graduates are now women.

Svava: Yes, that is true here as well. At present, the vast majority of students who enrol here, on the University of Copenhagen's landscape architecture programme, are women (almost 80 per cent). Other design programmes in Denmark also have a majority of students who identify as women.

Lori: Oh, that's fascinating. This for me raises a question about the disciplinary boundaries that some people so fervently want to defend. I do not think that does

justice to understanding linkages and connections, or to thinking about design history more broadly as a mechanism to bring in and demonstrate that there are these connections across and through the design disciplines. It would be incredibly useful if curricula really would help to start to bridge the gaps that exist.

I know in my own institution we have the School of Architecture, but then interiors and other design-related fields are located in the School of Design. It has always been this split where we do not intersect. It is problematic because we are not helping students or colleagues to really think about design more broadly. This raises other questions for me in terms of how we teach, and why these different disciplinary boundaries are so fervently defended, which consequently limits the possibilities for responding and contributing to society's most pressing challenges.

Henriette: Speaking of such structures, and looking towards the future, can you say a little more about what you think might be done to change things? How can we make sure that it is not up to every single young researcher to break the glass ceiling, as Despina mentioned earlier, and to undertake the much-needed expansion of architectural history?

Despina: Educational and cultural institutions are changing, driven by a desire for more inclusive histories and truly interdisciplinary approaches to scholarship. As I mentioned earlier, senior scholars have a vital role to play in pushing their universities to reconsider ideas of excellence that have limited knowledge rather than increasing it. This is especially important at a time of cultural and political pushback, which comes when real progress is being made. Junior researchers and students at all levels are driving change, but they need back-up.

Recently, I have been thinking about archives and what I can do as a scholar who has been working intensely with them for decades. Beyond writing books, how can I use my experience and connections to promote a different understanding of the histories that are worthy of collection? How can those of us who have a voice at the table push such knowledge institutions to take the next step towards change?

An important barrier to writing more diverse histories is financial, and this has been especially on my mind with the Ella Briggs project. The production of marginalised histories is expensive because it so often involves archival work or, when there are no archives, extensive travel to primary sources – travelling to interview people, making copies and so forth. With the Ella Briggs project, I have had to purchase materials that are not in archives and that I have found on eBay and other places, and these costs add up. I am very aware of the difference between making those purchases today and when I was a graduate student on a limited budget. We need more fellowships to help with these kinds of costs, which can be prohibitive and can make the difference between a history being written or not.

Henriette: Do you also see these hidden costs in terms of people's career possibilities?

Despina: Absolutely. The hidden costs structurally can be immense. As Lori mentioned, especially since the murder of George Floyd, American universities have been confronted with the kinds of research and projects they support and reward for tenure and promotion. Community-based research, an approach that women and scholars of colour tend to gravitate towards, has often been devalued within academia. Publishers historically were not interested in women's architectural histories – I know of truly excellent books about women that never found a publisher. Although that is changing, these structural costs have taken a huge toll on career advancement. And those costs run the span of a whole career – from getting funding to stay at graduate school, all the way to getting grants and being promoted to full professor. These personal and professional costs are very real and have contributed to the absence of certain histories – to the empty bookshelves I encountered decades ago, which still have a long way to go before being filled.

Lori: This is something I never thought about early on but am quite aware of now.

I have been involved in curating and co-curating several exhibitions that focus on women and expansive modes of architectural practice, and the expense of creating and installing exhibitions is rather enormous. I did not fully understand that until now. Another aspect is also about gatekeeping – who holds the financial purse strings and enables certain people to pursue certain kinds of work. I totally agree with the assessment that the entire structure has been created to promote certain types of scholarship and certain types of people and not others.

It is exciting to hear that you think this is changing. I am maybe not quite as optimistic. I do see some change, but it is glacial. I do not know how we can become more instrumental in creating change in that way, because it does require an immense quantity of resources and access to those resources in order to share and promote scholars who are not getting the support they really need for their research.

Despina: I have seen Lori be a real voice for change, so she deepens my optimism! But I also acknowledge that we need a community of feminist scholars to keep all of us buoyed, through the highs and lows. The international community of feminist architectural historians that I have been involved with since my graduate school days – Lori mentioned earlier a meeting in Stockholm – has been an incredible source of inspiration and strength. With COVID-19 we were more isolated, but at the same time we also developed new tools for building community. It is interesting to see how you have built your new Scandinavian research network online.

Svava: On that note, perhaps we could talk a little more about the idea of collaborating transnationally, not only on research but also on publications, such as the interview we are conducting right now on Zoom, and the many online conversations we have had with our Scandinavian research network to create this book. Traditional publishing, including those wonderful, big, solid books, continues to play an important role, and it has been a real pleasure to experience the breadth of new peer-reviewed journals emerging in the past decade. At the same time, we also appreciate and need more experimental formats that actively seek out alternative ways of thinking and writing, and which bring together researchers across national borders, in contrast to the often nation-oriented ways of writing traditional architectural history.

Lori: Because of the enormity of our encyclopedia project, it required us to be creative with regard to ways to generate scholarship from various regions around the world. We both depended upon and gave agency to those on the ground, respecting and deferring to those scholars' expertise.

The process was an incredibly non-hierarchical distribution of power that we hoped would lead to more inclusivity and diversity of content. It was a grassroots, ground-up way to produce new knowledge.

We also had to be reflective of conditions on the ground, acknowledging differences across the world: socio-economic structures, political structures, gender policies, gender laws. For us, it is a new way to create architectural knowledge. Who is the expert? Who is the gatekeeper of knowledge? We are purposefully working to counter these structures through the ways in which we have established our approach to the project.

Despina: And these forms of collaboration bolster the findings of postcolonial and feminist studies, which have revealed the global connections among women in architecture, and the power dynamics that exist among different creators and users of the built environment. There is a tremendous amount of work that remains to be done, which will continue to make us rethink what we know, including fundamental conceptions such as modernism. These histories are in no way marginal topics but rather challenge our core understandings of the development of architecture. We have already witnessed a transformation of conference topics – for example, at the Society of Architectural Historians' annual meeting and other international conferences. I believe that we will also see similar transformations taking hold in exhibitions and course syllabi, as we rethink how we do architectural history and who and what we choose to know. All of that makes me incredibly optimistic, especially when I know there are many collaborators out there joining in the push for change.

Henriette: Thank you so much for engaging in this conversation, which has been hugely inspirational for us. It leaves us with a great sense of collective accomplishment, and also hope and optimism that the way we pass on architectural history to the next generations will not be quite as biased and limited as the one we ourselves inherited. And that scholars, students, activists, and designers in all design fields will see that being an architect can lead to a great many different things.

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Sylvia Lewis
3 April Marjorie Sedg
4/3 10/4 Dorey Nichell
11/5 2 12/5 Wanda Zaluske
24/6 2 1/6 Boogoo Zaluske
Hilda Reid
50/6/65 Dorey Nichell
5-4 g4 Jean Brown + "alive"
5-7 July Mammie Brown
5-7/29 g4 Marie T. Shepley
6-7/29 g4 Sheila Haywood
"Dinner" Mildred D. Tucker

Sylvia Lowe
Sylvia Gibson
Lillian Gillies

10-16 Pat Groves
13 A. Lundy
15-17 Mildred D. Biddle

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127 Sheila Haywood

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Sylvia Lowe

Marjorie Sedge

11/5 & 12/5 Wanda Zaluske

24/6 27/6 Margaret Kallstrom

Hilda Reid

50/6/65 Dorey Dittell

5-7 July Jean Brown & "Alice"

5-7 July Mamma Brown

17/29 July Marion T. Sheple

17/29 July Sheila Haywood

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Figure 1.4: Cameo repeat with visitors' book and Brenda Colvin. Pattern inspired by "'Talking Plans' and a 'Gastronomic Weekend': Understanding Networks of Women Through Brenda Colvin's Visitors' book".