

Designing Women: Then and Now

by Annmarie Adams and Peta Tancred

Esther Marjorie Hill, Canada's first woman architect, will be a familiar name to many readers of *Canadian Architect*. Featured in these pages in November 1993, she was also one of the women architects profiled in the exhibitions, *For The Record*, first shown at the University of Toronto in 1986, and *Constructing Careers*, shown in Vancouver in 1995. Hill is an important figure in our book, *Designing Women: Gender and the Architectural Profession*, the first book-length national overview of women architects in Canada or abroad.

Perhaps the most frequently published Hill anecdote bears repeating here. Following her momentous graduation from the University of Toronto in 1920, the Alberta Association of Architects changed their entrance requirements, adding a year of office experience, in order to keep her out. Ever resourceful, Hill worked for MacDonald and Magoon on the Edmonton Public Library (erected in 1922-23 and demolished in 1968)—her father was Chief Librarian—and became a member of the AAA in 1925.

Hill's architecture, however, may be less familiar to readers. She spent most of her career in Victoria, B.C.—from 1936 to her death in 1985—and yet even there her work is little known and sometimes even dismissed. For instance, she is not mentioned in the guidebook *Exploring Victoria's Architecture*. Or, if you take the popular double-decker bus tour of the city, one of Hill's best buildings—the superb, Modernist apartment building on Fort Street (1952), described in the *Constructing Careers* catalogue as a work of “functional efficiency and stylistic simplicity”—may be cited by the driver as an ugly threat to Victoria's architectural heritage.

So interested were we in finding out more about Hill that we took out an advertisement in the personals section of a Victoria newspaper last spring. The response was overwhelming. Friends, colleagues, and clients of Hill were delighted to fill us in on this remarkable woman. Many of the calls came from members of the Victoria Weavers' Guild, who remembered “Miss Hill” as a long-time member and a superb tech-



Above, top to bottom: Fort Street apartments; Hanson House; Hill House at Becher Bay. Facing page: weaving by Marjorie Hill.

nician. Hill had turned to weaving during the Depression, when architectural work was hard to come by, and it remained a life-long passion. And many of her architectural clients, we learned, came to know her through her weaving.

The memories we collected were largely anecdotal. Hill could be “difficult” (why are men architects never described this way?), known to bang her cane on the floor when she couldn't hear well. And she loved the colour purple, an infatuation borne out in her weaving, clothing, and home.

Informants familiar with her design process were harder to find. Her drafting table had occupied the living room of her parents' home. She had no employees or associates that anyone remembers, and she rarely discussed architectural issues. The buildings, however, speak for themselves. Hill designed dozens of no-nonsense Modern houses after about 1946, when the Veterans' Land Administration office in Victoria apparently began to recommend her to returning veterans and their families eager to settle in Victoria following the end of the war. For most of these commissions, she was paid \$50.

Although many of Hill's buildings have been demolished (and at least one has been moved), three houses remain in excellent shape and offer unique insight on the condition of post-war Modernism

in British Columbia's capital. The Hanson house of 1946 is remarkably intact, with a sensitive addition. Like many of her homes, it is rectangular, with the entrance in the middle of the long elevation. Although the houses are mostly clean, undecorated forms, more traditional details are not uncommon. Perhaps these were inspired by her Beaux-Arts education at the University of Toronto, or her work on the neo-classical Edmonton library. For the Hansons, Hill included a classical revival entry porch.

In 1948-49, Hill designed the Moore house. Owned and occupied today by the son of Hill's original clients, the house is compelling evidence of the ambiguous relationship Hill had with many of her men clients. In our conversations with them, mostly more than a half cen-

A new book explores the careers of some of Canada's first women architects and examines the current status of women in the profession.

tury after commissioning Hill, many insisted that they had actually designed their houses and that Hill had functioned only as a draughtsperson. Brian Moore clearly remembers his father, Frank Moore, taking credit for the house design.

This pattern reiterates in architectural terms what women in many other male-coloured professions have long noted. Their work is wrongly perceived as only realizing ideas generated by men. And Hill was not the only pioneering Canadian woman architect to suffer from this predicament. Alexandra Biriukova, the first woman to register with the Ontario Association of Architects, designed the Forest Hill home of artist Lawren Harris in 1930. Modern-day art historians have presumed that he was responsible for this icon of Canadian Modernism, despite the fact that Biriukova's name appears on the drawings.

The third house by Hill, a rather isolated structure on the water at Becher Bay, just outside Victoria, was for Lt. Col. and Mrs. F.E. Hill (no relation). The house illustrates beautifully her most recognizable signature features: rectangular footprint, large windows, deep eaves, and inside, coved ceilings, built-in furniture, and generous closets.

Kitchens were one of Hill's specialties. Typical of commissions for kitchen renovations was the job she did for Hugh and Jean Macartney in 1966. Hill removed the old pantry and chimney in their gracious 1930 Uplands home, and built a new, "modern" kitchen, including unusually high (39") counters, a built-in oven, a Lazy Susan, rounded counter edges, and a pass-through from the cooking to the eating area. Jean Macartney gives Hill full credit for the kitchen's innovative design, describing the architect as "a very clever lady." She has not changed a thing in the kitchen since it was built.

Hill's profile as a house (and kitchen) designer is typical of women architects in other countries, especially England and the United States. Their housing, interiors, and later historic preservation served as significant sub-specialties (or ghettos) for women within the profession. We presumed, quite wrongly, when we began research for *Designing Women*, that this might also be the case for Canadian women architects. Although it proved to be true for the earliest pioneers in English Canada, like Hill and her contemporaries, it was absolutely untrue for Quebec's women architects, who were more likely to work on non-residential commissions. The influx of Eastern European women architects to Montreal after the war, the architectural opportunities which came with Expo 67, and the openings for women at three key firms, we argue in the book, made Quebec a distinct society for women architects.

The (un)changing architectural landscape

Hill's experience is, of course, specific to the historical period when she entered the architectural profession—and there have been multiple

changes since then. In particular, the 1970s constituted a watershed for the entry of women to the profession, and in the following decades, registered women architects in Canada came to be counted in the hundreds (rather than in the tens, as in the first five decades of Hill's career), attaining a total of 857 or 11.5% of the profession by 1992.

Although it is often suggested that women professionals have a tendency to withdraw from their professions more frequently than men, for Canadian women architects this is not the case. Between 1960 and 1992, a 30-plus year career period, 11.3% of the registrants in provincial associations were women and, as already mentioned, they constituted 11.5% of the profession by the end of this period.

This end result would not hold true without the extraordinary participation of Quebec women architects. "Les québécoises" registered with their provincial association much later than their colleagues in the rest of Canada; 1942 was their date of entry, nearly 20 years after Hill. Undaunted by this late start, Quebec women have more than played their part within the profession; over half the women registrants from the 1920s to the 1990s were from Quebec, a province that constituted just over 25 percent of the Canadian population over the same time period. In fact, during the 1980s and 1990s, Quebec women streamed into the profession, well over twice the number who entered the association in Ontario. The result is that by 1992, 55% of all registered women architects in Canada were members of the Quebec association.

In spite of many changes, Hill would have shared with contemporary women architects the experience of entering a male-coloured profession. But it appears that Hill and other early pioneers, once they had conquered the process of registration, tended to stay on as registered professionals. More recent registrants, on the other hand, tend to take a decision to leave their associations at a much earlier career stage. They then carry their qualifications into unofficial practice or related architectural domains, where they continue to identify as architects and to work "upstream" and "downstream" from the traditionally defined profession.

We do not know what Esther Marjorie Hill would have decided and what kind of career she would have experienced if she had entered the profession a half century later than she did. We do know, however, that she would have had much more companionship from fellow women professionals who, like her, are now seeking to assert their talents, in a variety of ways, in a new domain for women. **ca**

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