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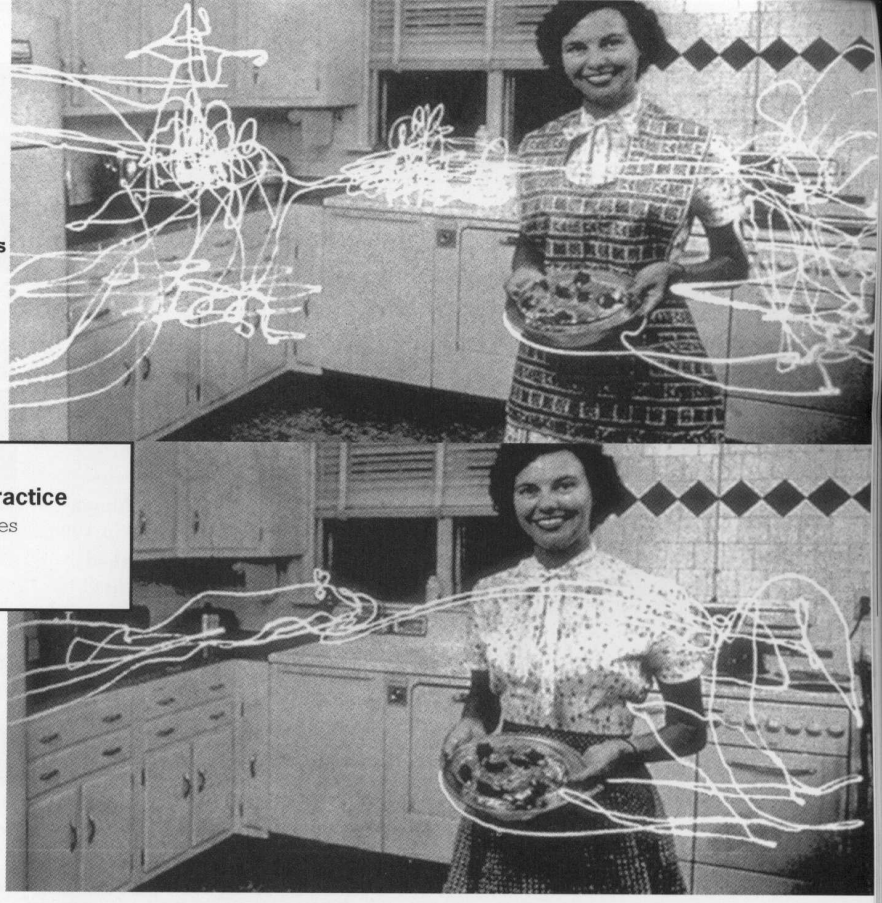
by Annmarie Adams



The Architect: Reconstructing Her Practice
edited by Francesca Hughes
MIT Press, 1996
288 pp., $19.95

A classmate in architecture school once told me that an architectural education teaches women to think like men. "It wipes out all our female instincts," she confided in a hushed, nearly conspiratorial voice during a review of student work at the University of California, Berkeley, "and forces us to value what they [men] do." This notion that architecture school erases "women's ways of knowing" has haunted me for the last fifteen years, returning with particular intensity during design crits. Is architectural education really a form of gender deprogramming? Do I, as a woman and feminist critic, encourage women students to think like men? I hope not.

The Architect: Reconstructing Her Practice, edited by Francesca Hughes, puts an optimistic spin on the premise that female architecture students learn to think like men. In the book's introduction, Hughes suggests that women architects are ideally located to reform the male-dominated profession precisely because they have undergone a process of gender indoctrination. "Insider by her education, her adoption by and of certain professional institutions; outsider by her difference, her gender-related experience contains grounds for a resistive reading of certain architectural operations," states Hughes. The editor then explains that this liminal position of women architects as both mainstream and marginal forces them to "invent" a critical practice. This is a fascinating idea. Architecture school turns us into honorary men, but then we supposedly bring our womanly ways to the office, making the profession a much better place in the end. These same conclusions, in fact, were reached by Sherry Ahrentzen and Linda Groat in their study of women faculty members in professional programs of architecture, whom they saw, like Hughes's architects, as both peripheral and central and thus in positions of relative power.[1]

It is unfortunate that few of the women who were asked to contribute autobiographical essays to *The Architect* seem interested in Hughes's hypothesis. The twelve essays in Hughes's book, in fact, comprise a rather eclectic scrapbook of contemporary architectural "practice." The authors include well-known architectural theorists—such as Beatriz Colomina, Catherine Ingraham, and Jennifer Bloomer—and practitioners like Merrill Elam and Françoise-Hélène Jourda. Many of the contributors are architects from the "real world" who maintain strong links to academia: Diane Agrest, Elizabeth Diller, Christine Hawley, and Dagmar Richter, among others. This choice of contributors, if nothing else, is testament to the profound impact women had on architectural education in the 1980s and 1990s.

The essays display a wide range of comfort on the part of the authors in the exercise of autobiography. The full-time academics, not surprisingly, seem most at home in articulating their various positions, although some are extremely reticent about divulging any personal information. Colomina, for example, makes an interesting start to the book by discussing the sheer difficulty of

Efficiency expert Frank Gilbreth used photographs of men and women at work to demonstrate the quickest way to perform ordinary tasks. In the 1950s, to show the benefits of using prepackaged meals, Gilbreth attached lights to a woman's wrists and photographed her as she worked in the kitchen. The above photograph shows the woman making a meal from scratch; the bottom photograph captures her preparing a precooked meal.
(from *The Architect*)

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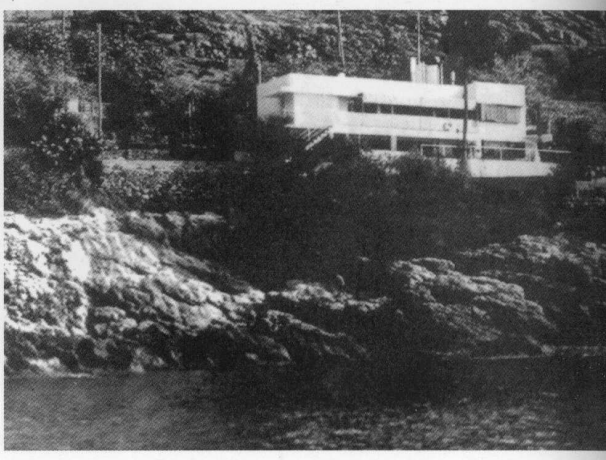


Eileen Gray, E.1027, Roquebrune, France, 1926–29.
(from *The Architect*)

reflecting on the practice of history: "If you think about how you ride a bicycle," she says, "you may fall off." She then changes gears, writing a very engaging paper about Le Corbusier's "occupation" of Eileen Gray's E.1027 house in Roquebrune, France. The essay, she explains, "grew out of an uncontrollable footnote in [her] earlier book *Privacy and Publicity.*" To readers familiar with this genre of literature, however, it may also seem familiar. Beginning on the sixth page of her piece, Colomina's contribution to *The Architect* is identical to her chapter in *The Sex of Architecture,* edited by Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, and Leslie Kanes Weisman, also published in 1996. And it appeared in a third collection published that same year, *The Critical Landscape,* edited by Michael Speaks.

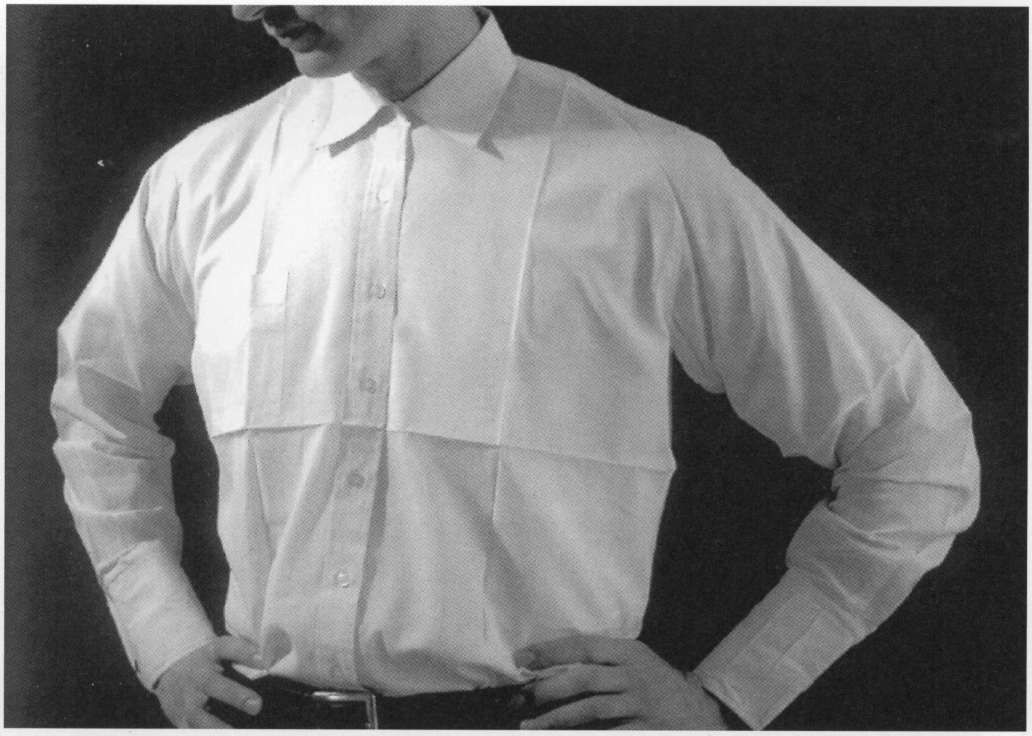
Ingraham and Bloomer, on the other hand, focus on the "how to" of bicycle riding as women. Their two essays are not only bold testaments on the current relationship of architectural theory and practice, but are peppered with fascinating personal anecdotes, which make clear that their femaleness matters. Beginning with the aphorism "a picture is worth a thousand words," Ingraham responds directly to Hughes's challenge, in her contribution, "Losing It in ArchITecture: Object Lament." She states, "Whenever we find a specific group of people almost entirely excluded—in this case, women from the profession of architecture—we might suspect that there is some kind of identification crisis." Ingraham then links the "object loss" experienced by architects, most of whom never construct the buildings they design, to a number of other gender-rich situations: the multiple relations among words, women, and things; the film genre of the western; the settlement of the American West; and the marginalization (and the field's subsequent embrace) of architectural theory. Both Ingraham and Bloomer address the great divide between architectural theory and practice, implying that this gulf is as significant to them as the gender gap. Ingraham describes the (paternal) chill she feels when asked repeatedly what her largely theoretical work has to do with architecture:

> This new form of anxiety, building up around the building and its absence, is the one that most bedevils the architect who is separated from the other architects by the name of theorist or critic. This is not about simply wandering away from the subject at hand but about being in the wrong medium altogether, like trying to breathe air if you are a water animal, or the difference between having blood and chlorophyll. This is species and kingdom anxiety.

Bloomer suffers the same trepidation. She cites accusations of dealing with other-than-architecture as inspiration to move beyond the written word. "I felt challenged to get beyond the judgment of conventional wisdom on the outward form of the work—writing—and explore similar spaces using materials that could be recognized as more clearly architectural." Her essay, titled "Nature Morte," highlights four of her own drawings, in addition to one of Giambattista Piranesi's.

Bloomer's contribution also includes personal anecdotes, which will undoubtedly ring true for many women architect readers. Such stories are ubiquitous in the "ladies' rooms" of architecture schools: male professors who assume female students are there looking for husbands; male design critics who comment on women students' clothes, rather than their projects; male classmates who get better jobs, even when they don't win the big prizes; firms that limit their female architects' responsibilities to running prints and detailing interiors. We were actually called "color girls" in an office I worked in as a student in the mid 1980s, because of our supposedly innate ability to render elevations with Prismacolor. For Bloomer, her gender is an inescapable container, akin to a fishbowl:

> My work is the practice of a sapient primate who lives in a woman's body and who works with an awareness of that perspective. I am a woman who grew up in small towns in the South. I have fixed my hair, worn makeup, and worried about what I was going to wear every day of my life, including the days my children were born, since I was thirteen. I know what it means to be constructed as a thing and to be a container. I am convinced that this has to have an influence on the way that one sees things and containers, a taxonomy of objects into which architecture neatly fits, both in the sense of being a material mass with voids inside for holding people and furniture and in the sense of being a vessel of cultural and social signification.



In her contribution to *The Architect,* titled "Bad Press," Elizabeth Diller addresses the proper way to iron a shirt as well as dysfunctional approaches to the same task.
(from *The Architect*)

The essays by Martine De Maeseneer, Jourda, Nasrine Seraji-Bozorgzad, Hawley, Elam, Agrest, and Margrét Hardardóttir highlight their various design projects, with few references to the fact that they are women. Gender seems almost coincidental. Hughes apparently sent each participant a letter asking her to comment on the suggestion that women are more likely to invent a practice in architecture, and perhaps as a result, several of the essays are written in a surprisingly informal way. Some even read like letters (two include postscripts, for example). Is the suggestion here that the subject of gender or perhaps of autobiography demands a less formal tone?

Unevenness, however, is the bane of the collection, and two essays by practitioners are models of outstanding writing. Diller's piece, "Bad Press," is a titillating work that includes instructions for ironing a man's shirt. Richter's "A Practice of One's Own" is a well-structured how-to guide to critical practice. Had all the contributors followed her lead, *The Architect* might be a true manifesto for a new approach to practice.

In general, *The Architect,* like all collections, would have been more meaningful for readers had Hughes attempted in her introduction to make direct links between the essays or to set them in some sort of historical context. Even the inclusion of an index may have helped readers to make some of these connections for themselves. Is the general message of this book that women have tended toward "wordy" practices? Why does Hughes see the 1990s as a moment of great change? Other themes that emerge between the lines of several essays would have made poignant topics for the introduction, too: the notion of boundaries is articulated by several authors; the division of public and private in new design and in the feminist analysis of architecture, the exclusion of women from the building site, and the relationship of modernism and feminism, to name only a few. Almost every essay begins with some sort of disclaimer to the title of architect, suggesting that each author senses her "otherness." This pattern in itself harkens back to the lesson of Carolyn Heilbrun's 1988 *Writing a Woman's Life* and what she called "women's autobiographical disabilities."[2]

The Architect: Reconstructing Her Practice is an attractive and provocative book, despite these weaknesses, which will no doubt appeal to architects and others interested in the broader topic of gender and the professions. I hope it will convince women architects of their unique position so they will continue to reform the practice of architecture, in both words and buildings. Even from here on the edge of the profession, it's clear that the job has just begun. ■

Notes

1 Sherry Ahrentzen and Linda Groat, "Women Architects in the Academic and Professional Context," *Design Book Review* 25 (summer 1992): 10–11.

2 Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Norton, 1988).