

GIRL ARCHITECTS-TO-BE

EARLY WOMEN GRADUATES OF MCGILL'S SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE, 1939-1970

ANNMARIE ADAMS, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, MCGILL SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

Tiré de l'étude sur les architectes canadiennes que mène, de façon continue, le Centre de Recherche et d'Enseignement sur les Femmes de l'Université McGill, ce mémoire traite de l'éducation et des carrières qu'entreprendent les premières diplômées de l'École d'Architecture de l'Université McGill, de 1939 à 1970.

Among the thousands to receive degrees from McGill University this June in formal graduation ceremonies at Place des Arts was architect Catherine Mary Chard Wisnicki. The Honourary Doctorate of Science is her third degree from McGill. A pioneer of BC Modernism and the first woman to graduate in Architecture from McGill, Chard Wisnicki's contributions to the profession have long been neglected. Chard Wisnicki's momentous convocation in 1943 was not the beginning of the debate over the admission of women students to Architecture at McGill.² The controversy had inspired a flurry of internal correspondence as early as 1918, when Juliana Dallaire of Moose Creek, Ontario, sent the following request to the university: *Kindly send me the calendar of the University and please tell me if it is possible to study landscape gardening, perspective, inside decoration and work in white and ink in the University. Also [if] it is necessary to pass examinations. Yours truly, Juliana Dallaire*³

An optimistic university registrar, J.A. Nicholson, replied "So far women have not been admitted to the course in Architecture, but it is just possible under the changed conditions consequent upon the war that an exception might now be made."⁴ Five years before Dallaire's letter, a request from the Montreal Women's Club had demanded the admission of women students to a number of faculties at McGill, making "special reference to the suitability of women for Architectural work."⁵ Subsequently, the following resolution was passed: The Faculty of Applied Science beg[s] to report (to Corporation) that in view of the very insufficient accommodation of our present classes they cannot recommend admission to the faculty at the present time.⁶ The Club appealed again to the university in 1929, at which time the Faculty of Applied Science justified their rejection of women students once more on the grounds that the Department of Architecture was already overcrowded and that the building was "designed for male students exclusively," without "cloak room, common room or rest room."⁷ Director Ramsay Traquair fiercely opposed to the admission of women, added to these reasons: "Much architectural draughting is done at night, the main drawing-room being open until ten o'clock. The responsibility for the maintenance of discipline in the evening is assumed by the students themselves. If women students were admitted, it would be necessary to provide staff supervision during these evening drawing periods, and such supervision would require additional members of the staff and put the School to extra expense for which it has no funds."⁸

It was, however, the "changed conditions" brought about by World War II, rather than World War I as Dr. Nicholson had presumed (and an anonymous letter to the Montreal Star), which finally convinced McGill's administration to admit women students to Architecture.⁹ Chard Wisnicki was accepted to the program in 1939, having ap-

plied for four consecutive years. Six months later a second woman, Arlene Scott, was also admitted.

McGill's School of Architecture counts many illustrious architects among its 39 women students who graduated between 1943 and 1970. Although relatively few stayed to practice in Quebec, these first McGill alumni made a considerable impact on the profession here, constituting ten of the eighteen women registered as members of the OAQ prior to 1970.¹⁰

Three major themes have emerged from our interviews with early graduates and from the relatively scanty documentary evidence of their time spent as students at McGill. The first is that an extraordinary number of the women who attended the School prior to 1970 were outstanding students. They received top marks, won awards, were published in national journals (fig. 1); and in some instances, such as Chard Wisnicki, wrote or co-authored thematic essays published in the professional press.¹¹ Sheila Baillie Hatch (B.Arch. '46), for example, won prizes for architectural drawing (1942), for the highest standing in second year (1943), for architectural engineering (1944), and was later awarded one of three medals by the RAIC. Hanka Rosten Renehan graduated at the top of her class in 1948, winning the Lieutenant-Governor's Silver Medal, the Lewis Robertson Prize in design, and the McLennan Travelling scholarship. Chard Wisnicki, Blanche Lemco van Ginkel (B.Arch. '45), Rosten Renehan, Ala Mendelsohn Damaz (B.Arch. '46), Barbara Milne Lambert (B.Arch. '47), and Sarina Altman Katz (B.Arch. '60) saw their student projects published in national journals.

Secondly, despite the fact that McGill was the last Canadian school to accept women to its program in Architecture, its graduates occupy a number of "firsts" (or nearly so) for women in architecture. For example, Lemco van Ginkel was the first woman appointed to a teaching position at the University of Pennsylvania in 1951 (together with Siasa Nowicki), the first woman to be elected as an officer of the OAQ in 1971 and the RAIC in 1972, the first woman to become a fellow of the RAIC in 1973 (fig. 2), and the first woman appointed as a Dean of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at the University of Toronto in 1980. Chard Wisnicki was the second woman to register with the Architectural Institute of British Columbia in 1946 and the fourth to become a member of the Ontario Association of Architects the previous year.

Finally, while other studies have presumed that the absence of men in Montreal during World War II provided the ultimate opportunity for women to enter the profession in Quebec, our research points to the important role played by immigrant women, particularly from eastern Europe, in Montreal following the war. Of the eighteen women registered with the OAQ prior to 1970, twelve were born outside Canada with seven from eastern Europe. Our working hypothesis, at this point, is that the cultural backgrounds of the numerous women born in countries where women architects were already a sizable percentage of the profession by the postwar period gave them the confidence, skill, and experience to make it in the male-dominated Montreal architectural scene. "Eastern

Europe (and I am told Hungary in particular) recognized women in the professions much earlier than North America. This led to a natural acceptance of these fields within the family," commented Anne-Marie Balazs Pollowy (B.Arch. '60).¹²

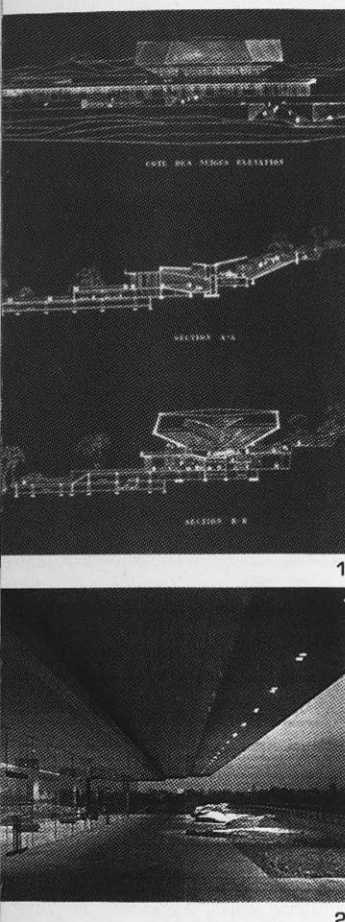
We believe that the case for women architects in the development of Modernism in Quebec was very much contingent on this postwar influx. Among the early McGill students who may fall into this category are Christina Poznanska Perks (B.Arch. '57) of Poland, Tiuu Tammist O'Brien (B.Arch. '58) of Estonia, and Sarina Altman Katz (B.Arch. '60) of Roumania. They are all extremely successful practitioners, whose subsequent careers were built on their early experiences of Modernism.

Chard Wisnicki's honorary degree this year is intended to celebrate the Centennial of the School of Architecture in 1996. Certainly the next century will mean an ever-increasing role for women at McGill and in the profession of Architecture. Chard Wisnicki encourages today's young women to enter the field. "I anticipate a great future for women in architecture, particularly in view of all the current upheavals in society," states Chard Wisnicki optimistically. "It is my contention that women are awfully good at dealing with upheavals."

Annamarie Adams is co-author (with Professor Peta Tancred, Sociology) of the forthcoming book, *Re-designing the Workplace: Canadian Women Architects, 1920-92*.

NOTES

1. This research is part of an interdisciplinary project at the McGill Centre for Research and Teaching on Women, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I am especially grateful to the other team members, Sarah Baker, Jill Trower, and Peta Tancred, and to Margaret Gillett, who generously shared her research notes on the history of women at McGill. The OAQ staff was also very helpful in providing information on its early members. The term "girl architects to be" is taken from a *Gazette* interview (Oct. 13, 1956) with two McGill students.
2. The stormy debate over the admission of women is analysed in Margaret Gillett, *We Walked Very Warily: A History of Women at McGill* (Montreal: Eden, 1981), 317-22.
3. Undated letter in McGill University Archives (MUA).
4. Letter of 20 July 1918 in MUA.
5. Letter from the Chairman to the Faculty, 29 Aug. 1918, in MUA.
6. Ibid.
7. Letter of 5 October 1929 in MUA.
8. "Extracts from Minutes of October 2, 1929 regarding 'Admission of Women to Architecture,'" in MUA.
9. Gillett, p. 319.
10. These ten architects are Janet Shaw Mactavish, Blanche Lemco van Ginkel, Evanthia Zoumboulidou Caragianis, Tiuu Tammist O'Brien, Elizabeth Compton Ross, Christina Poznanska Perks, Doris Droste Steffen, Anne-Marie Balazs Pollowy, Sarina Altman Katz, and Malca Tobman Feldman. Dorice Brown Walford received her Master's from McGill and is not therefore included.
11. See E.G. Faludi and Catherine Chard, "The Prefabricated House Industry," *RAIC Journal* 22, no. 3 (March 1945), 56-62; and Catherine M. Chard, "What is an Architect?" *RAIC Journal* 19, no. 2 (February 1942), 30-33.
12. Personal letter from Balazs Pollowy, 23 August 1994.



1. Thesis project by Sarina Altman Katz for a "Music centre in Montreal", published in *Architecture-Bâtiment-Construction* (July 1960), p. 37.
2. Christina Poznanska Perks acted as Attaché and Project Deputy Director for the Canadian Embassy in Japan, which was completed in 1991.