



International Archive of Women in Architecture

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
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A Decade of Commitment

The IAWA Board Members
Assess the Past and the Future

The International Archive of Women in Architecture celebrates ten years of collaboration, support, and generous donations by its friends and members. Love for knowledge, curiosity for yet uncharted grounds, need for diverse professional models, contemporary tendencies for inclusion and wider horizons, have been motivating forces sustaining IAWA's growth. Collecting architectural documents and information about women's achievements has been and still is the indispensable foundation of the archive. On the basis of its collections, the IAWA generates a variety of activities: research, exhibitions, seminars, and symposiums. Three symposiums under the title "The Invisible Partner" were organized. The first, in 1985, took place in the College of Architecture and Urban Studies in conjunction with an exhibition of the "Pioneering Women Architects from Finland." In 1986, the symposium was linked to the exhibition "About the History of Women Architects and Designers of the Twentieth Century" prepared by the German section of the International Union of Women Architects. This exhibition is now in the IAWA collection. The exhibition, "Women Architecture in Austria, 1900-1987," was on display during the 1988 symposium and is also housed in the IAWA.

Meanwhile, women architects have

emerged from obscurity, made a substantial contribution to the profession and gained confidence and recognition. It is appropriate, therefore, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the IAWA with another symposium under the heading "A Decade for Commitment."

In comparison to literary works which are carefully preserved in libraries and art works preserved in museums and private collections, few architectural works have endured the test of time. Usually, buildings are destroyed--either by natural disasters, or by wars and fires, or to make way for new structures. Even when preserved, buildings are often modified beyond recognition. Many institutions around the world began to follow the IAWA example--to collect and preserve architectural documents. Contemporary computer technology allows us to connect all these holdings in a world web of information.

It is time to look back and trace the path of women into the design professions. A preliminary survey indicates a shift from conformity to the design principles imposed by the dominant culture to new explorations in search of pluralistic paradigms. Of course, at the end of this millennium Western cultures have arrived again at a point of re-assessment, verification of existing values, and preparation for change. Our pluralistic society asserts the recognition of diverse needs and values and demands a multitude of design responses. The pioneering women architects had to imitate even the drawing technique of their male colleagues. The Austrian architect Edith

Lassmann, for example, won the anonymous Competition for the Kaprun Dam in the late 1940s because the all male jury assumed that the crisp line drawings were produced by a man's hand. She was pressed to decline the award, and when she refused, she was subjected to numerous hostile experiences and resentment. Half a century later, the opportunities for self-expression have increased, yet few women are compelled to assert their personalities. Still, some feminine values have been incorporated in our culture. Environmental and ecological concerns, designing with "mother nature" rather than "raping its resources" are traits historically associated with women, as are expressive, emotional, intense designs. A gentler approach, as opposed to the patriarchal control, has become acceptable in architectural judgment. The future looks brighter for those who are not reluctant to handle diversity.

Milka Bliznakov
Founder of the IAWA



Architect Milka Bliznakov's living room highlights her painting and love of music.

Developing the IAWA Database

In the Spring of 1983, Milka Bliznakov came to me with the idea of creating an archive of the work of women architects. She had just returned from a conference in Europe and was very concerned about information she had gathered while on her trip. She had learned from various sources that the collections of work of older women architects were being destroyed with no thought to their historical value.

Since I was the architecture librarian in charge of the Architecture Branch Library of Virginia Tech, I was interested in hearing of the problem. I suggested to her that the Special Collections Department in the university's Newman Library might be able to handle such an archive. We began to work together to excite interest on the part of the University Libraries administration, and I commenced the formidable task of creating a database of women architects worldwide who could be possible contributors to what became known as the International Archive of Women in Architecture. Eventually, the database was transferred to Special Collections and greatly expanded.

Robert E. Stephenson

Associate Professor Emeritus
Secretary and Treasurer of the IAWA

IAWA Mission

When we initially created the IAWA, many criticized us often for different reasons. Some felt it was wrong to favor women by creating a special archive for housing their work. Some women have expressed the view that, if their work was good enough, their contributions would be preserved without being specifically designated as the work of women, and therefore, they would not contribute.

Whatever one's position on this argument, the fact remains that a large body of work associated with the history of architecture, particularly the modern movement, is being lost or destroyed. We know that many of the contributions to our profession were made by women whose work has not been acknowledged. The initial purpose of the IAWA was to preserve this work so that scholars would have an opportunity to evaluate the contributions of these many "silent partners" so as to better understand the evolution and history of ideas that has brought us to our current state. We need the help of all concerned to preserve the work of the women who have been pioneers of the profession. If we fail to act, the opportunity will be lost.

Charles W. Steger, FAIA

Vice President, Development
and University Relations

An Anniversary Tribute to the International Archive of Women Architects

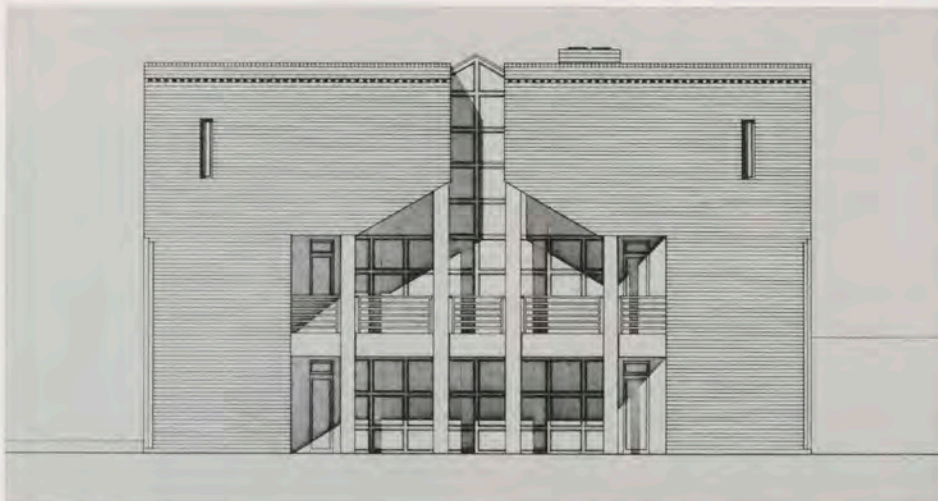
At the tenth anniversary of the founding of the International Archive of Women Architects, I must express my appreciation to Milka Bliznakov, who was responsible for its inception and to Charles Steger, who as the then dean of architecture, supported her initiative. I also should thank both of them for asking me to be a founding member of the Board.

Studying architecture in the 1940s and teaching in the 1950s, I had encountered the usual prejudices against women which pertained at the time—and was sensitive to the greater difficulties that must have been encountered by a previous generation. However, it was only in 1983, when I organized a celebration of early women architects at the University of Toronto, that I fully realized the paucity of the record. (This exercise also heightened my personal acknowledgment of a debt to these women.) Consequently, the proposal to establish the IAWA had a particular significance to me—because of my frustrating experience in searching for material on the "pioneers" in Canada.

It is unfortunate that, notwithstanding the plethora of print today, the emphasis is overwhelmingly on a "star" system—though it must be acknowledged that throughout history there have been many women and men who have made an important contribution to society which never was recognized. An institution such as the IAWA begins to redress this inequity (and inaccurate history) by preserving and making available to scholars a record of fact and performance—from which they may deduce whatever they see fit. And notwithstanding the advantages of wider dissemination of information through electronic media, additional insights and knowledge may be gleaned from the subtleties of the original drawing.

On this occasion, I pay tribute to Milka Bliznakov who has selflessly devoted

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Dr. Charles Steger's residence is situated on a hillside overlooking Ellett Valley and is constructed of concrete masonry specifically designed and manufactured for the structure.

An Anniversary Tribute . . .

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enormous time and energy to a valuable cause. May the IAWA grow and prosper in archival collection and in the hard copy of the record, and in the electronic information networks!

**Blanche Lemco van Ginkel, RCA,
FRAIC, Hon. FAIA**
Professor Emeritus
University of Toronto

A History Preserved

In 1930, H. Mae Steinmesch, Alpha Alpha Gamma, discovered as she prepared for the annual meeting of the architectural society, that she had at hand only the minutes from the Minneapolis meeting in 1923 and San Francisco in 1924. She noted sadly in a letter now preserved in the IAWA that "the loss of much important data is a source of concern and certainly should be avoided, or shortly we will have no records."

The same issues were discussed at meetings year after year, resolved and discussed again. Initiation, for example, was a contentious matter, and the ritual was revised at every annual convention. Steinmesch requested that a history be written and records kept. Early members of the association searched their memories and diaries in order to document the group's founding and from then on, its papers were kept.

One such document reveals that in 1915 four young women in the School of Architecture at Washington University, St. Louis, organized "La Confrerie Alongiv" (Vignola backwards) in order to encourage each other and initiate contact with women architecture students elsewhere.

In 1921 the Confrerie sent letters to other schools, and in 1922, there were additional chapters at the Universities of Minnesota, Texas and Berkeley, California. The organization called itself Alpha Alpha Gamma, from the first letters in the Greek phrase meaning "advancement of architecture among women." In 1934, alumnae of the undergraduate charters formed the professional Association for

Women in Architecture. Mae Steinmesch was its first president. In its first ten years, the association grew from an architectural club to a professional organization geared to promoting contact among women in architectural fields and to helping one another in the job search. In 1928 a member wrote:

Much is being done in Texas to advance women in architecture; at least we Alpha Alpha Gammas who are leaving school and are looking for jobs are finding them. We are being put on a par with men under the same circumstances, and we know that this is in part, at least, due to our affiliation with our national organization.

By 1934, Illinois, Michigan and Cornell (New York) universities had chapters of Alpha Alpha Gamma. Alumnae groups existed in Minneapolis/St. Paul, California and St. Louis, Missouri. Yearly meetings were held and the early interest in ritual trustingly organized around Ruskin's Seven Lamps gave way to activities which promoted women's work: mounting exhibitions, offering scholarships, counseling in career and job placement, lobbying for environmental responsibility and good architecture, and encouraging "appreciation of the value of women in architecture." Today the AWA exists only through its active Los Angeles chapter.

Mae Steinmesch insisted on preserving the association's records; thus we are able to reconstruct its first years. The International Archive of Women in Architecture is devoted to collecting, preserving and making available personal and institutional histories, and to this end appropriately holds Records, 1928-1992, of the Association for Women in Architecture.

Annette Burr
Head Librarian
Art and Architecture Library
Cowgill Hall

Reminiscences of the IAWA

As the American Institute of Architects began in 1984 to prepare for an exhibit to celebrate the centennial of the 1888 election of the first woman member of the AIA, Louise Blanchard Bethune of Buffalo, New York, we were faced with a formidable research task. First, we had to determine if Bethune was indeed the first woman member of the AIA, then put together a collection of materials for an exhibit celebrating 100 years of women in architecture. There was little published material we could draw upon, and we could locate no existing collection that documented women in American architecture.

With funds from the AIA College of Fellows (COF), Matilda McQuaid, a graduate student in architecture at the University of Virginia, began the task of putting together a collection at the AIA. Working first with AIA membership records, she traced women members, insofar possible—a great many members used only initials or had names that were not gender specific. We were able to come up with a list, and began to collect data from other AIA archives and from published sources. When money ran out and McQuaid had not yet completed her project, Mrs. Jefferson Patterson provided funds to allow her to continue the work. Ultimately, at least three other COF funded interns worked on the project, as did a number of volunteers. We developed a questionnaire and began a data query. Referrals from friends and respondents also played a prominent part of our collecting.

Early in our effort, I had a call from Milka Bliznakov at VPI saying that VPI's International Archive of Women in Architecture was trying to do something similar, and we needed to coordinate our efforts. After a long conversation, it was clear that we were doing things that were mutually supportive. Eventually, I let Milka talk me into serving on the IAWA Board, a decision that I have never regretted.

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Reminiscences of the IAWA . . . (continued from pg. 3)

The AIA Archive of Women in Architecture was the basic source for mounting the exhibit "That Exceptional One" which traveled for several years before coming to rest in the IAWA collection in Blacksburg. The AIA Archive was also the inspiration for the publication *Architecture: A Place For Women*, by Ellen Perry Berkeley and Matilda McQuaid, published by the Smithsonian Institution Press in 1989. Today the AIA Archive contains data on some 4,000 women in architecture and some 100 organizations of women design professionals. The AIA collection was visited last year by scholars, students and writers from Finland, England and Switzerland, in addition to users from the United States. All are routinely referred to the IAWA, as are schools that send either individual students or entire classes to work on projects involving women in architecture.

I am proud of the IAWA on its 10th anniversary and am most humble to have been able to play a small part in its success. I wish it expanded horizons and enlarged collections in the next decade.

Tony P. Wrenn, Hon. AIA, CA
Archivist
American Institute of Architects
Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

Looking Back from the 10th Anniversary of the IAWA

When Milka Bliznakov contacted me ten years ago, inviting me to become a member of the Board of Directors of the International Archive of Women Architects, I was speechless.

What a marvelously simple and compelling idea that was: to bring together works of women architects from all over the world under one roof, accessible to anyone interested in seeing them.

From the early seventies, many women architects of my generation had made profound contributions to the advancement of women in the profession in a variety of forums, such as exhibitions, books and task forces. Statistics pointing

to the dismal representation of women in the professional decision-making groups, as well as among the top ranks in academia, held only the ephemeral interest of the public and the media.

And here we have Milka Bliznakov establishing an archive which implicitly acknowledges the importance and uniqueness of our work for posterity.

Every year when the board met, quantum leaps were made—in gathering the collection, organizing the archive, and publishing the IAWA newsletter. The unwavering support given by Charles Steger and more recently of Patricia Edwards—past and current deans of the College of Architecture and Urban Studies—has been generous and timely. For me, it has always been a pleasure to come to Blacksburg and witness things that have been accomplished and to meet with the distinguished board members, faculty and staff.

This year, I decided that time was ripe for me to make my own contribution to the archive for two reasons. First, to demonstrate my complete trust in the work we have done in ten years, and second, I was tired of lugging around my work of thirty years, having moved residence and office twice in three years.

It was, however, easier said than done. Experiencing acute anguish during months

of going through papers and projects, I became physically ill—a depression that always accompanies loss and separation. I was deliberately separating myself from my work, or so it felt at the time.

For these reasons the process was slow, and I was able to afford the time only because I had taken a sabbatical leave from my university. I took the time to savor my precious victory over the paper battle for my tenure, and to re-read articles and essays I had written, some gone - unpublished. I re-examined the documentation gathered in support of the women's cause, posters of exhibits we mounted, and re-lived my trips abroad and the lectures I gave. I mustered undying affection for each and every project, those which were built and those which remained on paper.

When my husband and I drove down to Virginia with our truck full of boxes and file drawers, I had had enough time to say good-bye to my work and regain my good spirits. It was only after we left the work in Special Collections of the University Library that I became truly glad to have taken such a step. My contentment was further confirmed when we were given a demonstration of how to gain access to the collection through the "Internet." Given an address to enter, it was possible to scan the architect's work we wanted to see and even obtain pictures of the buildings by getting a copy directly from a printer or by calling the archivist and purchasing an excellent reproduction for a small fee.

Whether justified or not, I had inevitably gone through a process of mourning, but in the end, I came to the realization that while my work is not physically with me, it is still accessible. I can borrow any part of it at any time. Most importantly, it would continue to live on and be useful to others.

It is indeed comforting to know that I no longer need to have anxiety over carrying and caring for my work, since it is in the hands of experts who are doing a better job than I would do on my own.

M. Rosaria Piomelli-Ambrosi
Professor and Former Dean
City University of New York and City College



In a New York loft designed by Rosaria Piomelli in the 1970s, the kitchen is bathed in diffused sunlight.