

# The Philadelphia Architect

**Attention Interns:**

Save your Saturdays for Architectural Registration Examination Seminars and Mock Exam!

See Insert between pages 6 and 7 for seminar exam schedule.

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The award-winning newsletter of AIA Philadelphia, a Chapter of The American Institute of Architects

March 1997

## Women in Architecture: Protecting the Tower

by Bridget McQuate

Women's History Month in 1997 finds women architects in a mood of contentment and optimism, even as they remain gravely under-represented in the profession (only 11 percent of total AIA members nationally are women). The days of complaining about men and banding together for solidarity are fading. Even the notion of an article about women in architecture seemed slightly unsavory to some women, as if it would focus unwelcome attention on the fact that these successful architects are female. They would rather just be successful architects. Alice Berman, AIA, talks about joining organizations just for women, saying "It's almost calling attention to the fact that we're different. I don't want to be treated differently. That's just another form of segregating ourselves."

By gaining respect and recognition in their profession, women architects have built a fragile tower of equality. And although the tower is a thing of beauty, it is newly built and still settling. Women seem reluctant to put undue pressure on its foundation by name calling and dredging up past indiscretions committed against them. That is not to say they don't have stories to tell. But they

are told in reluctant hushed tones with requests for anonymity, as if the mere mention would set them back to another, less comfortable, time.

Women architects are choosing instead to focus on the positive men in their careers who have provided encouragement and equal partnership. They emphasize the talents of their male partners and co-workers and attempt to explain away or at least come to terms with the behavior of the men who would hold them back.

But the current state of contentment doesn't suggest that women don't need each other. All agree that women can do a tremendous amount of good by hiring female architects to work with them. Women clients have so far been the biggest supporters of women-owned firms. Women who hold leadership positions are broadening their base of recognition and earning respect among ever growing circles of business people.

The area where the quest for equality seems the most shaky is in the construction process. Daniela Holt Voith, AIA, puts it this way, "All the contractors are not necessarily happy with the situation (that I'm a woman), but once they get the idea that they need to perform or they're not going to get paid, they tow the line. Maybe that's just my personality type, in that, I won't put up with it. I can also give back as well as I get."

Again, women are being optimistic. Rachel Simmons Schade, AIA, says, "I think a lot of the battles have been fought and that we're really lucky we're entering a profession where a lot of the clients, and even a lot of the contractors, are educated. If they haven't encountered a women architect, they've encountered other women in positions of power. It all comes down to a personality thing rather than a gender thing, which is the way I've always hoped it would be."

The women highlighted below and on pages six and seven are just a few of the many architects providing leadership and role models for other women. They spoke to the editor about their experiences in architecture.

### RACHEL SIMMONS SCHADE, AIA

"In high school, I was encouraged by an art teacher to look at city planning. Her husband was an architect. I spent a lot more time in the art room rather than doing more academic things in high school. Then I attended a career discovery program after 11th grade up at Harvard. I did the course on city planning, but that was when I discovered that what I wanted to be doing was architecture.



Tom Bernard  
Addition to a House in Bryn Mawr, Rachel Schade, AIA

All along, I was getting advice from parents of friends. My parents were very exposed to architects. It was not this exotic profession for me. But people did tell me, "Oh no, you don't want to go into that! You'll never make any money." So what I did starting in high school was to get myself into as many offices as possible to see if I even liked it. I was also looking for women in architecture to see how they did it. So way back in college, I spoke to Hermine Mitchell, Hon. AIA, who was terrific and has been supportive ever since. It was hard to find women role models then.

Up until the time that I had the kids, I was working in large conventional offices, but always moonlighting doing small residential projects. When we had our first child, I went back to work on a reduced schedule. I was teaching two nights a week, easing back into the work day. The timing couldn't have been better because I got a large freelance project that was so large that it made much more sense to quit the job and work out of the house.

I work from 6:30 or 7:00 a.m. until 2:30. My husband gets the kids off to school and I pick them up. For a long time I thought this was just temporary. Now I can't imagine anything else."

### DENISE SCOTT BROWN, RIBA VENTURI, SCOTT BROWN & ASSOCIATES

"Clients tend to choose architects very much like themselves. They even look like the architects they choose. Say I go before a board or an operating unit of a corporation, and the person who would be working with the architect is a man in his mid- to late-40s. Here I am an elderly woman. I don't in any way look like him and he doesn't choose me. You can call that sexism, but if that was a woman in her mid- to late-50s, she probably would choose me.

The differences between men and women are changing enormously as we speak. The stereotyping has been so strong for so many hundreds of years that it will take 30 to 60 more years before we find out if there are any real differences between men and women, apart from biology.

In the argument between nature and nurture, the environment and heredity, I don't believe we can say that differences are inborn until we've had half a century more of change of occupations, of stereotypes, of rethinking the roles of men and women. Then there may be real differences between men and women. In the meantime, we're not in a position to know.

One of the stereotypes is that women will produce a motherly building that's all full of curves. The way things are at the moment, who's painting as artists the small, delicate canvasses? If anything, they're done by



Tom Bernard  
Concept Plan for Dartmouth College, Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates

men. Who's doing the slashed paintings full of brutal vigor? That's the women. They're trying to break the stereotypes. In architecture you find the same thing.

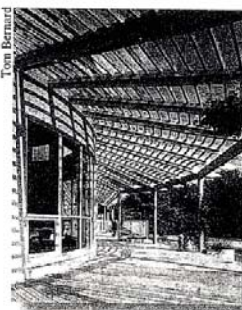
Young women often feel that the woman's movement has achieved its purpose and they don't have to worry about it. A famous quotation from Freud said, "What do women want?" And that's something that the women's movement has held against Freud. Now younger women say, "What do older women want?" They don't know what discrimination there is until they hit the glass ceiling 10 years into practice. Then they think it's their fault because they don't have a feminist awareness, and that can be very destructive. But we have to keep plugging. It's not hopeless."

### DANIELA HOLT VOITH, AIA VOITH & MACTAVISH ARCHITECTS

"When I went to architecture school, there were 35 people in my class—nine of them were women. It takes a certain amount of time to get yourself into a position where you're ready to form your own practice. If people are in school and there are 50 percent women, it might be 10 years from now that you see a major impact being made. It's a slow process. The women are just doing what they need to do. To start a practice, you have to have the right combination of design talent, ambition, business savvy, contacts and be willing to take some financial risk—and be a little bit crazy.

I think in situations in which the make-up of the board or institutional community is mostly women, it makes them comfortable to have a woman in an ownership position in the firm they hire. It has less to do with the types of buildings than it does with who's making the decisions. We do a lot of institutional work, and if there's a large representation of women on the board, it's more likely that we'll get hired than otherwise.

We designed a dormitory for the George School for 14-year-old girls. There was an issue there about whether we would have an advantage because we have the female perspective. We certainly used that as an argument. We're designing environments for the people who are going to be in them. They're going to



Tom Bernard  
The Springside School, Voith & Mactavish Architects

feel wonderful in those environments. That's a goal that we have generally for our buildings: to enhance the lives of the people who will be using them.

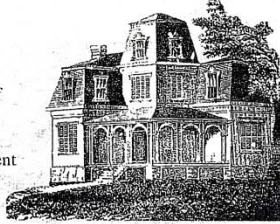
We have been looked at by selections committees because we're a WBE firm, which is fine. Let them look at us; we're going to compete."



# Women in Architecture: Historical Perspective

**1869**

Harriet Irwin of Charlotte, NC, applied for and approved a patent for a hexagonal building design that would economize space, materials and heat.



Minerva Parker Nichols takes over the practice of Frederick Thorn Jr. at 14 S. Broad Street in Philadelphia. She designs numerous homes, as well as women's clubs, factory buildings and academic institutions.

**1890**

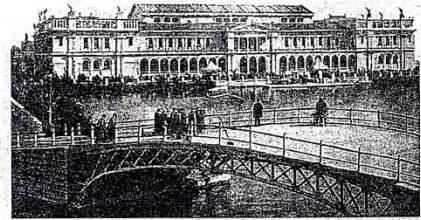
Two women graduate from MIT's two-year architecture course. Sophia Hayden graduates from MIT's four-year program.

**1890s**

University of Pennsylvania, Harvard and George Washington University found architecture departments that exclude women.

**1891**

Woman's Building competition is held for inclusion in the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago. Louise Bethune refuses to enter the competition on the grounds that the award money is not proportional to prizes awarded to male architects. Sophia Hayden wins first prize. Susan B. Anthony had pushed for the participation of women in planning the fair. Hayden suffers a nervous breakdown soon afterwards, causing



*Women's Building, Sophia Hayden, 1893*

speculation that women are too fragile to tackle the task of architecture. An architectural publication in 1892 comments, "If the building of which the women seem so proud is to mark the physical ruin of its architect, it will be a much more telling argument against the wisdom of women entering this especial profession than anything else could be." The Women's Building is the first and last built project in Hayden's career.

**1876**

Mary Nolan exhibited a prototype house of interlocking bricks at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition.

**1884**

Harriet Warner designs the Lake Geneva Seminary.

**1888**

Louise Blanchard Bethune is elected to the AIA and becomes the first female Fellow of the AIA in 1889.



*Louise Bethune, FAIA*

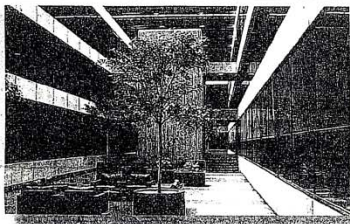
**1894**

Marion Mahony Griffin graduates as one of three women in architecture from MIT. She works with Frank Lloyd Wright (for \$10 a week) from 1895 to 1909 and contributes drawings to Wright's Wasmuth drawings.



*Marion Mahony Griffin*

## Women in Architecture (Continued from page 1)



*Union Carbide Laboratory in Tarrytown, NY, Shirley Vernon, Associate in Charge for Vincent Kling Architects*

**SHIRLEY VERNON, FAIA**

"I've worked in both big firms and my own practice and taught for 40 years. Twenty-five of those were spent at Drexel in the architecture and civil engineering departments. For 10 years, I taught construction in the interior design department.

When I went to school, I was in a class of 50. There was a quota of five women. Not that you had to have five, but that was the maximum. One year we filled that quota. But that was the only year it was reached. I think one reason for the quota was that it was shortly after World War II, and they wanted to make sure that veterans had ample educational opportunities. My class was about 50 percent veterans. Now it seems that about half the students are women. Architecture is such a time-consuming profession. I take my hat off to women who have a family and still manage to hold down a job as an architect.

When I graduated from Penn State, I went to work for Kling which was a real up-and-coming firm in the city. It was the place to be. I felt completely accepted. Vince Kling hired me. He came up to the school, saw my work and gave me a job. Very early on, I became a principal designer. Too early, I thought. I was amazed at the opportunity I had there."

**SHEP HOUSTON, AIA**

"After graduating from Swarthmore College in the 60s with a major in philosophy, I worked as an employment counselor for the Philadelphia Urban League. Investigating work places for potential good training and physical conditions was an integral part of this work. Later at DVRPC, I learned about planning and zoning and how they influence growth. These experiences convinced me that private and public spaces play an important role in social interactions and quality of life. So I went back to school.

My struggles have had more to do with contracts, fees and the state of the profession than anything else: changing climates and roles; blurring and confusion by the public about the shifting lines between architects and engineers, construction managers, interior designers and even developers.

More and more women are entering the profession. I don't think anything should be holding them back at this point. The key is the accumulation of experience. Once you have enough experience to gain respect, you're golden. Occasionally, we run into players who haven't sorted out their working relationship with women, but that's life and that's not our problem. I'm sure men run into the same thing."

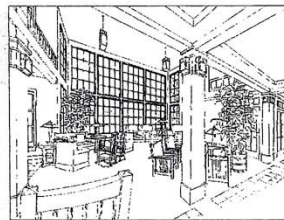
**GIANNE CONARD, AIA  
SHAPIRO PETRAUSKAS GELBER**

"I was an English Literature major at Carnegie Mellon University reading James Joyce and William Butler Yeats. I studied Irish Literature. When I got to a certain point, I decided that I didn't want to pursue an entirely academic career. I also thought I was becoming totally incoherent because of the studies I was involved in. I thought, if I go any further with this, I'm not going to be able to communicate with anyone. I fell into architecture and tried it out. I finished up my degree and went to architecture school at Cornell and got a bachelor's degree in that.

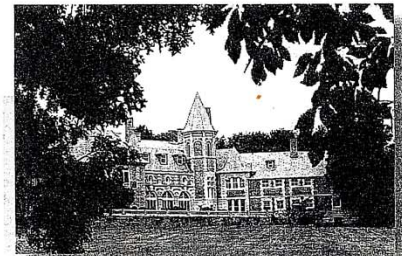
When I came to Philadelphia, I went through the network of Cornell people who were working down here. I looked through the alumni directory to find out who from Cornell was in Philadelphia. I met with a whole bunch of people, including the Matzkins and Irv Shapiro. Charlie Dagit was on my list of people, so I called him up and started working for him.

There's a general perception that women are not cut out for the construction-related stuff. But time is taking care of that perception, as more women are demonstrating that they're competent and are given the opportunity. But being given the opportunity is really the wrong way to look at it. It's *taking* the opportunity. Why should people that have been comfortable in their profession for years open the door to a whole new stock of people and say, "Here, take my job from me"? So you express an interest and take responsibility and hopefully do a good job.

A women's experience in architecture depends a lot on where she's working. I once worked in a firm where one of the partners looked at me and said quite seriously, "I just want you to know I don't think women should be architects." He meant it. You can make a big deal out of it or not. In my life, it's a lot easier not to make a big deal out of it."



*The Fieldstone Inn Hotel, Shep Houston, AIA*



*Restoration of the Cairwood Mansion, Bryn Athyn, PA, John Milner Architects*

**MARY WERNER DENADAI, AIA  
JOHN MILNER ARCHITECTS**

"When I was looking for a job, I had two children in elementary school. My first job was working for what you would call a male chauvinist pig. But he was a big exception to the rule. My daughter is 30 now, and I keep telling her what it was like in the early 60s. Women were so different then. I couldn't even go to a design studio at the university wearing slacks. I had to get special approval from the dean of women. It was a Jesuit school but that was not unusual. You just didn't attend classes in pants.

I joined John Milner in the 1970s. We had a very good rapport and partnership. I'm an equal partner. We have a great deal of mutual respect for each other. He doesn't see me as being disadvantaged in any way because I'm a female. In fact in some ways it may be an advantage. I think women clients can relate more comfortably with other women. So we have some flexibility with clients. We complement each other as male and female. We both have different interests that gives support to the other's lack of interest.

As long as you have mutual trust and respect, you have a good partnership. Our firm does 50 percent historic restoration work, and the other 50 percent highly customized residential work in traditional American design. John does more of the residential work than I do. I do more of the commercial. With residential clients, I don't think it really matters if it's a male or female architect. That's where chemistry and personality are very important. Sex doesn't enter into it. I do think leadership for women is important. One of my other hats is that I'm on the board of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Washington and am the chairman of the Board of Advisors. I'm the only female architect serving on the board. It's important to serve in those positions and have some recognition. It's going to help to rub off on everybody's opinions of females and architects and leadership.

I think as long as you're competent and do the job, you earn respect regardless of your sex or race. In the beginning there was some prejudice on the construction site, but that's all changed. From the beginning of the construction process to the end, if you've done your job well, you can see the respect and attention from the male contractors changing. There are a lot of female contractors also coming on board. That is helping to change the whole industry."

"Women in Architecture" continued on next page



## 1902

Julia Morgan graduates as the first woman in architecture from the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. During the next 50 years, she designs some 800 buildings, including San Simeon in California. One of her early bosses, John Galen Howard, boasts about her as "the best and most talented designer, whom I have to pay almost nothing, as it is a woman."



Julia Morgan

## 1910

Cornell University states its policy on women in the Architecture Department: "Owing to the lack of suitable accommodations, women who desire to enter this school are advised to do the work of design elsewhere."

## 1917

The first women's architecture school opens, the Cambridge School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture.



Theodate Riddle, FAIA

## 1926

Theodate Pope Riddle becomes a Fellow of the AIA.

## 1934

Elizabeth Fleisher is the fourth woman to become a registered architect in Pennsylvania. She comments later that when she started in 1934, "A woman looking for a job was told, 'We couldn't have you in the drafting room. It would be too embarrassing when talking about plumbing fixtures.'" An AIA member, she goes on to design such Philadelphia projects as the Parkway House apartments, the Nurses' Home at the Medical College of Pennsylvania and the Queen Lane Housing Project, which receives an AIA award in 1958. She passes away in 1975 at the age of 83.



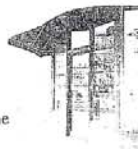
Elizabeth Fleisher, AIA

## 1958

Rose Connor, AIA, compiles a survey finding only 320 registered women architects in the country, 1 percent of the total. One percent of AIA members nationally are women. Only three women are named Fellows.

## 1976

Hermine Mitchell, Hon. AIA, heads a team of AIA volunteers in organizing a temporary Resource Center for attendees of the national AIA Convention in Philadelphia. The Resource Center evolves into the AIA Bookstore & Design Center.



Parkway House Apartments, Philadelphia

## 1982

The Architecture in Education program in Philadelphia is conceived of and established by Hermine Mitchell, Hon. AIA; Minna Novick; and Rolaine Copeland, FAIA.

## 1989

Elizabeth Lawson, AIA, becomes the first woman president of AIA Philadelphia.

## 1993

Susan Maxman, FAIA, is the first woman to serve as president of AIA National.

## 1994

Daniela Holt Voith, AIA, becomes the second woman president of AIA Philadelphia.

## 1997

Eleven percent of total AIA members nationally are women. Women make up 10 percent of the total AIA Philadelphia membership.

Data for the Historical Perspective comes from "Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective," edited by Susana Torre and published by the Whitney Library of Design. Thanks also to the Philadelphia Historical Commission.

### SABRINA SOONG, AIA SOONG ASSOCIATES INC.

"I got my undergraduate degree in architectural engineering in Taiwan. Then I came here and went to the University of Florida. There were very few women in the program at that time. I was an odd person anyway because I'm different. Nobody knew exactly what to do with me.

I got a job as a draftsman. I had an incident in my first year of working in Dayton, OH. A client walked in and started screaming at me because the furniture was too small on the plan. What had happened was somebody in the office had drawn 1/8-scale furniture on a four-inch floor plan by mistake. But the man had assumed that I drew everything smaller because I'm Asian. I wanted to curse this guy back but I could only do it in Chinese because it was such a shock. I think the whole thing happened because I was a female and a foreigner.

Starting my own firm was an accident. I was home having my son. I got work from people asking me to do drawings at home. I started working on the kitchen table and grew from there. Starting a business and raising a child is chaotic. I pulled through with a lot of sacrifices on the family side. Success is hard work.

I have my office in Chinatown with five permanent people. We are generalists here. I have a lot of Asian clients, so we do small commercial jobs and specialize in restaurants. We are now finishing a daycare center at the YMCA on Broad Street.

A lot of my Asian clients are not familiar with the system in this country. Sometimes the fees aren't that big but it's rewarding in a way that goes beyond that. With your help, you see people who can start a business. I have been a long-standing board member of the Chinatown Development Corporation. I'm also active in the Asian American Women's Association.

In the end, I think we have to change the perception of the public about architects in general. By providing the needed services, we'll be able to demand higher fees."

### ALICE BERMAN, AIA HELLYER, SCHNEIDER & COMPANY

"Because there are more women in the profession, you don't get the reaction you used to. I think contractors are used to dealing with women and so are the clients. I've been practicing for almost 15 years. I've definitely seen a change in that time.

In Philadelphia, one thing women are working against is a good old boy's network that we can probably never break into. There are probably circles that we're never going to break into, especially in the conservative, older generation. So we have to develop other networks for developing contacts. There are several women's organizations, but a lot of it happens by referral and unofficial contacts.

I don't feel like I've been turned down for a project because I'm a woman. But if we think there's a particular client who's going to hit it off better with a man, we send our partner who's a man. A big part of getting work is the chemistry between people.

Another positive thing that women can do is volunteer for community projects. I'm on the Board of Directors of the Community Design Collaborative of AIA Philadelphia. The Collaborative has done a number of projects that have directly benefited women. In my office, there are a lot of women who volunteer. More so than not, they're active professionals interested in communities, for example, the education process in schools, community development and landscape tie-ins."



(Above and Below)  
Learning Garden at Black Lutheran CDC in North Philadelphia, Community Design Collaborative of AIA Philadelphia

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