



Entangled Histories. Architecture, Women, 1968

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ENTANGLED HISTORIES: ARCHITECTURE, WOMEN, 1968

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Writing entangled accounts of resistant architecture after May 1968 creates opportunities to include also the various ways in which women have contributed to the design, conceptualization, and realization of the built environment. Writing about such contributions can expand our understanding of the transformative roles and the diverse capacities through which architects can contribute to society; preoccupations that were at the heart of discussions in architecture after 1968. In showing the diversity of ways in which architects contributed to the built environment, entangled accounts—in Sweden and beyond—can potentially generate also more diversified role models for architecture. While such diversifying work is important, it has several hurdles to overcome.

Entangled Accounts of Architecture

In the years following May 1968, many students and young graduates of architecture questioned the social and political relevance of their profession and education. Rather than preoccupied with the design of singular architectural objects—often commissioned by the economic and cultural elite and powerful—students now asked how they could contribute to a more socially just and sustainable world and how architects could contribute to the urban question. Energized by May 1968 but also, among others, by the American countercultures, civil rights movements,

and environmental activism of the 1960s, architectural work now emerged not just through (signature) buildings but also through live projects, community work, grassroots urban activism, ephemeral projects, and theoretical counter-proposals. But the 1970s was also a time when, at the least in many West-European cities, the thrills of 1968 and the countercultural effort of the 1960s would meet important socio-economic and political challenges.¹ While many forms of activism that emerged during that time, today, seem politically distinct, they often shared common causes.² For example, cultural heritage and urban conservation groups shared concerns around reuse and recycling with countercultural ecological activists.

Because throughout the 1970s all kinds of resistant yet ideologically divergent architectures existed side by side, it seems productive to provide entangled (hi)stories. Entangled accounts are productive because they embrace rather than dismiss, architecture's multiple interpretations of politics and resistance during that time, and because they invite studying countercultures, environmental activism, and radical pedagogies alongside preservation practices and the struggle for the (historic) city. Such efforts can be found, for example, in the 2018 exhibition *Mai 68: L'architecture aussi!* at the Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine in Paris, where a wide range of projects and approaches are included, and in the travelling exhibition *Now what?!*

1. See Caroline Maniaque-Benton, *French Encounters with the American Counterculture 1960–1980* (London: Routledge, 2011); Kjell Östberg, "Sweden and the long 1968: break or continuity?," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 33, no. 4 (2008): 339–352; Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002); Tahl Kaminer, *The Efficacy of Architecture. Political Contestation and Agency* (London: Routledge, 2016); Isabelle Doucet, *The Practice Turn in Architecture. Brussels after 1968* (London: Routledge, 2016 [2015]).
2. For example Daniel M. Abramson encourages us to connect such practices through the lens of obsolescence. See Daniel M. Abramson, *Obsolescence. An Architectural History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2016).

Advocacy, Activism & Alliances in American Architecture since 1968 that began in 2018, curated by ArchiteXX, a non-profit organization for gender equity in architecture, co-founded by Lori Brown and Nina Freedman.³

Entangled histories also encourage looking into the long-term effects of resistant practices in an effort to broaden the discussion on the emancipatory capacities of such architectures. One can think of urban activists straddling grassroots community action with a more cultural and conservationist activism that would sometimes unwittingly result in the gradual regeneration of inner-city neighborhoods, ultimately pushing out precisely the residents these activists had originally advocated for. Entangled histories can moreover help to resist ideological bias informed by contemporary romanticisms or irritations with the impact of 1968, a legacy that we are still inhabiting.⁴

Overlooked Histories

Entangled accounts of architecture after 1968 also prompt greater attentiveness to the overlooked elements of that history. To conceptualize the importance of such attentiveness inspiration can be found with scholars writing outside of architecture. In her book *Hope in the Dark. Untold Histories. Wild Possibilities*, Rebecca Solnit argues: “Though hope is about the future, grounds for hope lie in the records and recollections of the past.”⁵ Solnit argues that hope for

3. See also the exhibition catalogue *Mai 68: L'architecture aussi!* (Paris: Éditions B2, 2018) and <https://www.nowwhat-architexx.org>.
4. See Reinhold Martin, *Utopia's Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010); Helena Mattsson, “Revisiting Swedish Postmodernism: Gendered Architecture and Other Stories,” *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History* 85, no. 1 (2016): 109–125.
5. Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark. Untold Histories. Wild Possibilities* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2016 [2004]), xvii.

change is already anchored in signs of hope found in the past. For architecture, Solnit's work invites to recover overlooked or forgotten stories as a way of expanding the understanding of the past, and in doing so also complicating, and thickening present examinations. In her book *Reports from a Wild Country. Ethics for Decolonization*, Australian ethnographer Deborah Bird Rose calls for recovering stories that offer "radical and challenging alternatives to the modernity that underlies so much of contemporary social and ecological violence"; what she calls stories of "countermodernity."⁶ Rose's work of decolonizing is also a work of recuperation; bringing back a multitude of stories about our past. The recovery of such stories can help to complicate singular or dominant historical narratives in the present, which in architecture, a discipline that is also connected to a profession, can prove particularly productive for developing design solutions that are capable of challenging the status quo. The recently published volume *Critical Care, Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet*, for example, provides such "extended architectural histories" that offer alternative and persistent critiques of capitalism and its associated power.⁷

When considering such work of recuperation for architecture, we have to acknowledge also the struggles Rose identified with such effort. A first challenge is posed by the periodization, and closure, of history. Rose warns that defining what is in the past can offer "a label to be applied to that which we wish to finish and forget, or from which we wish to differentiate ourselves and thus

6. Deborah Bird Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country. Ethics for Decolonization* (Sydney: Univ. of New South Wales Press, 2004), 7.
7. *Critical Care. Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet*, eds. Angelika Fitz and Elke Krasny (Vienna: Architekturzentrum Wien, 2019), 15.

to absolve ourselves from responsibility.”⁸ Secondly, Rose warns against narratives that treat as ‘other’ anything that is not mastered by reason or through treating parts of the world as absent.⁹ Rose’s observations, and warnings, can speak also to architectural studies. Recollecting the history of architecture through the lens of prolific designers, the canon, and masterworks offers a way of defining, and also restricting, what is considered worthy of recollection; and what is considered a contribution to architecture and the built environment. Recovering alternative stories of architecture can help to expand such understanding;¹⁰ it can offer messy rather than purified narratives of architecture. But, as feminist theorists have shown, such messy stories are always threatened to become singular. The authors of the recent manifesto titled *Feminism for the 99%*, Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, and before them, feminist thinkers including bell hooks and others, have warned how the feminism that, today, made it most prominently into the mainstream, is often a legacy of just one kind of feminism, such as the liberal feminism or ‘power feminism’ that empowered some but not all women, and has sometimes even been at the expense of other women.¹¹ Such feminists remind us that bringing to the fore other, resistant, or multiple stories is not enough, but that the pluralism and diversity of those histories—of women, of architecture—is to be continuously protected.

8. Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country*, 18.

9. *Ibid.*, 19–20.

10. Hence the calls for counter-histories, alternative histories, micro histories and critical historiography. See Helena Mattsson, “A Critical Historiography, Again: Sounds from a Mute History,” in *After Effects: Theories and Methodologies in Architectural Research*, eds. Hélène Frichot et al. (New York: Actar, 2018); Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen, *Exhibit A: Exhibitions that Transformed Architecture, 1948–2000* (London: Phaidon, 2018).

11. Cinzia Arruzza et al., *Feminism for the 99%. A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2019); bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody. Passionate Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

Women Architects and 1968

When turning to Sweden, a historiographical territory that I have only recently begun to explore, the 1970s seem, similar to other contexts I studied, to offer fascinating co-existences of critiques of functionalist urban planning, countercultural ideas, and urban conservation efforts whereby transitions can be observed toward architectural and urban postmodernism.¹² In Gothenburg this was exemplified by the struggle for the Haga neighborhood where countercultures, squatters and urban grassroots struggles coexisted and would eventually lead to urban conservation of the area.¹³ Such multiple activisms offer an excellent *terrain* for researching the diversification of architecture after 1968.

One perspective for narrating the complexities of 1968 is through the contributions of women. Women were of course not absent from the architectural counter movements. And yet they risk becoming what Kristin Ross in her book *May '68 and Its Afterlives* calls the “forgotten militants” of 1968.¹⁴ Ross refers to, among others, the forgotten farmers and factory workers across France who, through extended strikes and other actions, contributed significantly to the disruptions and turmoil of May 1968

12. Thordis Arrhenius, “Preservation and Protest: Counterculture and Heritage in 1970s Sweden,” *Future Anterior* 7, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 106–123; Claes Caldenby and Britt-Inger Johansson, “Historiography of Swedish Architecture,” *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History* 85, no. 1 (2016): 1–7; Sweden *20th-Century Architecture*, eds. Claes Caldenby et al. (Munich: Prestel, 1998); Mattsson, “Revisiting Swedish Postmodernism”; Christina Pech, *Arkitektur och motstånd. Om sökandet efter alternativ i svensk arkitektur 1970–1980* (PhD Diss., KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Göteborg: Makadam, 2011).
13. Håkan Thörn, “Proletarians, Proggers, and Punks,” in *(Re)searching Gothenburg: Essays on a Changing City*, eds. Helena Holgersson et al. (Göteborg: Glänta produktion, 2010), 35–42; Håkan Thörn, “In between Social Engineering and Gentrification: Urban Restructuring, Social Movements and the Place Politics of Open Space,” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 34, no. 2 (2012): 153–168.
14. Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, 9.

but are not always duly acknowledged in historical accounts. In architecture we can consider also women as “forgotten militants” in that they often do not prominently figure in accounts of 1968. Looking more closely into the contributions by women can point us to ways in which architects (of all genders but oftentimes women) have adopted alternative roles to the dominant figure of the prolific designer and beyond conventional professional practice, such as in heritage conservation, housing associations, planning administrations, collective living experiments, and grassroots movements. By focusing on the careers of women graduates we can complement and thicken the existing scholarship on Swedish architecture after 1968, where only few historical anthologies exist that focus on women in the construction sector,¹⁵ and anthologies dedicated to Swedish architecture of the 1970s provide few direct references to women.¹⁶

‘Finding’ Women Architects

Where to ‘find’ the women architects that risk to disappear from the historiography of 1968? How to find traces of those architects, of all genders, who developed careers outside the conventional places of architectural production (the architectural office; the design studio) and took on different

15. E.g. Annika von Schéele, *Bygga på kvinnors kunskap* (Stockholm: Kvinnors byggforum/ Svensk Byggtjänst, 2004); *Kvinnorum: Porträtt av arkitekter*, ed. Gunilla Lundahl (Stockholm: Arkitekturmuseet, 1991); Helena Mattsson, “Shifting Gender and Acting Out History: Is there a Swedish Postmodern-Feminist Architecture?,” in *Feminist Futures of Spatial Practice: Materialisms, Activisms, Dialogues, Pedagogies, Projections*, eds. Meike Schalk et al. (Baunach: Spurbuchverlag, 2017), 289–300; and see Gunilla Linde Bjur’s ongoing research project “Kvinnor tar plats – arkitekter i 100 år: Göteborg 1920–2020.”
16. *Arkitektur i Sverige/Architecture in Sweden: 1973–83*, ed. Olof Hultin (Stockholm: Arkitektur förlag, 1983); *Recent Developments in Swedish Architecture: A Reappraisal*, ed. Gunilla Lundahl (Stockholm: Swedish Institute, 1983); *The SAR Guide to Contemporary Swedish Architecture 1968–78*, ed. The National Association of Swedish Architects/Hervor von Arndt (Stockholm: SAR, 1978).

roles to the lead designer? While efforts toward making visible such underappreciated contributions are not new, a focus on the period following 1968 may be particularly challenging.

While the historical contributions by women have been and are still being recovered in their capacity as designers, for acting as wealthy patrons, or as partners of celebrated men architects, women architects of the 1970s can be found differently. We could start by looking for women within architectural offices, where they may have been lead designers but also, often, members of design teams. This search is however complicated by these contributions often being kept anonymous. Architectural anthologies of the time, for example, rarely mention project team members; the 1978 SAR guide by the National Association of Swedish Architects being a notable exception. Another place to look for women designers is in specific manifestations of architecture. Women were for example prominent in collective housing experiments. They also developed careers as employees and leaders in public administrations, heritage societies, and cultural foundations, without necessarily attaching their individual names to architectural or urban work.¹⁷ Women would moreover become prolific writers, critical commentators, and editors; and take active roles in grassroots activism, community action, political pressuring, public speaking, and campaigning.

Giving voice to such contributions poses several challenges. It is interesting to observe that, while May 1968 was about the questioning of the architect as artist and singular author, it seems that precisely the continued obsession

17. See Meltem Ö. Gürel and Kathrynn H. Anthony, "The Canon and the Void: Gender, Race, and Architectural History Texts," *Journal of Architectural Education* 59, no. 3 (February 2006): 66–76.

with authorship risks that women, and more generally what Karen Burns, Justine Clark, and Julie Willis called, in a different context, the “salaried architect,” are being shunned from the history of 1968.¹⁸ ‘Finding’ women is also hampered by archival challenges. As feminist historiographers have pointed out, archival practices, themselves “enmeshed in histories, politics, and power structures”¹⁹ can (unwittingly) contribute to the ‘silencing’ of historical events and subjects.²⁰ In architecture, archival collections—exceptions aside—typically contain drawings, physical models, and correspondences related to the buildings designed and built by architects. Collections also contain documentation related to the activities and organization of professional bodies, such as conferences, exhibitions, design competitions, periodicals, and awards. In the context of 1968, when architectural production took the shape of leaflets, newsletters, banners, reports, posters, pamphlets, sit-ins, temporary happenings, (self-build) design manuals, and ephemeral structures, conventional architectural archives may fall short. The material necessary to recollect these stories is often tucked away in the basements, attics, and bookshelves of private homes or in the archives of citizens groupings and non-profit organizations, and it is to be seen to what extent these materials will eventually make it into archival collections.²¹

18. Karen Burns et al., “Mapping the (Invisible) Salaried Woman Architect: The Australian Parlour Research Project,” *Footprint Journal* 9, no. 2 (Autumn/Winter 2015): 143–160. Notable exceptions include recent histories with a focus on bureaucratic, administrative and employed work in the expanded field of architecture.
19. Maryanne Dever, “Archives and New Modes of Feminist Research,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 32, no. 91–92 (2017): 2.
20. Kathryn M. Hunter, “Silence in Noisy Archives: Reflections on Judith Allen’s ‘Evidence and Silence – Feminism and the Limits of History (1968)’ in the Era of Mass Digitisation,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 32, no. 91–92 (2017): 202–212; Deborah M. Withers, “Strategic Affinities: Historiography and Epistemology in Contemporary Feminist Knowledge Politics,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 22, no. 2 (2015): 129–142.
21. I am grateful for conversations around such archival challenges with colleagues and friends including Lee Stickells in Australia, Nina Gribat in Germany, Caroline Maniaque in France, and Helena Mattsson in Sweden.

History as World-Making

Entangled histories offer one route toward the patient and cautious stitching together of the multiple productions and voices that shaped the resistant architecture associated with 1968. Philosopher Didier Debaise speaks of the compelling figure of the “imaginative historian,” who offers a form of story-telling that is analytical and precise but also speculative and imaginative. I read in the “imaginative historian” a figure who does not just ‘learn’ from the past, but also is prepared to take part in a creative process of reliving and reimagining history; and therefore a figure of resistance.²² When entering the archives and oral histories on the lookout for women and alternative architectures, such imaginative work is required. Recovering the architectural productions and practices of the 1970s in this way, invites speculating about different role models for architecture today. As ArchiteXX’s co-founder Lori Brown argued, it is not enough to simply *add* women to our histories, teaching, and bibliographies, but to become sensitive to various ways in which they practice architecture.²³

Positioned as a researcher in a professional school of architecture, I feel compelled to write entangled, thick, and alternative (hi)stories not just because they can contribute to scholarship but also, importantly, because they can bring to the teaching of architecture examples of alternative ways of practicing and contributing to the built environment. Scholarship can then become a form of collective world-making, and can influence the architectures of the future.

22. “Narrate, Speculate, Fabulate: Didier Debaise and Benedikte Zitouni in Conversation with Isabelle Doucet,” *Architectural Theory Review* 22, no. 1 (2018): 9–23.

23. Cited in Mimi Zeiger, “Building Sisterhood: How Feminists Sought to Make Architecture a Truly Collective Endeavor,” *Metropolis Magazine* (8 August 2019). Accessed online.