

About *Frau Architekt*

Stéphanie Bouysse-Mesnage in conversation with Mary Pepchinski

Stéphanie Bouysse-Mesnage, Mary Pepchinski

SBM: How did the idea of creating an exhibition about the history of German women architects occur?

MP: Starting in 2011, I taught seminars at the Technical University of Dresden and the University of Applied Sciences Dresden about women architects in different historical and geographical contexts. My students took advantage of the growing body of secondary literature about these figures, and I believe they read texts in nine languages (Czech, Dutch, English, French, German, Mandarin, Polish, Slovak and Spanish). The stories about these women inspired much critical reflection. In December 2013, I told Wolfgang Voigt, who was then the deputy director of DAM (*Deutsches Architekturmuseum*), about the interest that the seminars had generated among my students. He was intrigued—and suggested we develop an exhibition. In addition, I lectured about the themes emerging from these seminars at different venues, including the inaugural Parity Talks at the ETH Zürich in 2016, and contributed a chapter about them to the British volume, *A Gendered Profession* (J. B. Brown, H. Harriss, R. Morrow, J. Soane (eds.), (2016)). All these experiences contributed to the making of *Frau Architekt*.

SBM: What was your initial idea for the exhibition?

MP: The original concept included the biographies in addition to cross-cutting themes, like women architects in institutions (such as the Bauhaus) or their contributions to building exhibitions. However, time was limited. In the end we—Christina Budde, who was then public education curator at DAM,

Wolfgang Voigt and me—decided to concentrate on the biographies. Nonetheless, if you read the short biographical texts and inspected the displays, you would have discovered supplemental information, such as the impact of the feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s in the Federal Republic of Germany or the nature of architectural practice during Socialism in the German Democratic Republic.

SBM: The exhibition presented 22 portraits of German female architects who represent different social backgrounds, diverse individual situations (single/married/with children; women working alone/women with partners), and attitudes about architecture and politics. How did you choose these women?

MP: Basically, we wanted to show a history of 20th century architecture in Germany, but with female protagonists. (Figure 1) By alternate narrative I do not mean one all-encompassing, linear argument, but a collection of disparate stories about issues that are normally considered marginal, namely the lives of women and their buildings. By presenting these stories in DAM—the most important venue to put forth ideas about architecture in Germany today—, we proposed that the marginal was a radical proposition with the potential to transform how we perceive architecture and the architectural professional. Needless to say, our alternate narrative starkly contrasts with the manner in which architectural history is taught in Germany, where there is a focus on a few masculine protagonists and, most importantly, an emphasis on the physical attributes of buildings, such as form and construction.

Geographical diversity was imperative as was the need to shed light on different kinds of protagonists and their contexts. On the one hand, we wanted to take advantage of the excellent new research on figures like Gerdy Troost (1904-2003), who was Hitler's confidant and interior designer; or Lotte Cohn (1893-1983), who hailed from Berlin and became first woman architect in Mandatory Palestine; or Lotte Stam-Beese (1903-1988), who briefly trained at the Bauhaus, worked in Berlin, Brno, Kharkov and Amsterdam in addition to overseeing large urban planning projects in Rotterdam after 1945. On the other, it was important to showcase less well-known women architects, whose lives and oeuvre merit further attention. These include: Therese Moger (1875-1956), an architect, project developer and writer, who was active in



Figure 1. Frau Architekt, Deutsches Architekturmuseum (DAM), Frankfurt-am-Main, 2017-18. Source: DAM/Moritz Bernoulli.

Düsseldorf and Bavaria; Princess Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt (1887-1961), who built rural architecture and restored historic buildings on her family's estates in North-Rhine Westphalia and Bavaria; Verena Dietrich (1941-2004), a Cologne-based educator and a feminist, who designed striking steel structures; and Gertrud Schille (1940-), who developed sophisticated planetaria that were constructed around the world by the Carl Zeiss Company, located in the German Democratic Republic.

In the first decades of the 20th century, women architects sometimes trained in related areas, like the fine and applied arts. For this reason, we included Marlène Moeschke Poelzig (1894-1985), a sculptor, and Lilly Reich (1885-1947), an interior and exhibition designer. In the 1920s and 1930s, these women worked independently and in collaboration with a male architect, such as Hans Poelzig or Mies van der Rohe, respectively. We included them to illustrate what it means to “put women back into history”: when we insert them into the story, we do not simply fill up the holes but are forced to write a whole new narrative. In the case of Moeschke Poelzig and Reich, we demonstrated that seminal projects which have been ascribed to a famous man were either designed by a woman or were the result of a collaborative process that engaged the unique talents of both contributors.

As DAM is located in Frankfurt-am-Main, we included the Austrian Grete Schütte-Lihotzky (1897-2000). During the 1920s she worked for Ernst May's New Frankfurt building program, and she remains a compelling figure in this city's historical memory. Although she is associated with the eponymous Frankfurt Kitchen, it was important to demonstrate the contribution

of women architects beyond the domestic sphere. Other women in the exhibition—Wera Meyer-Waldeck (1906-1964), Karola Bloch (1905-1994), Lucy Hillebrand (1906-1997), Grit Bauer-Revellio (1924-2013) and Ingeborg Kuhler (1943)—realized public architecture and Sigrid Kressmann-Zschach (1929-1990), Iris Dullin-Grund (1933-) and Merete Mattern (1930-2007) developed large urban and landscape projects.

And last but not least: We had roughly one year to produce the exhibition and catalogue! As the papers and supplemental professional materials, like models, drawings and letters, of women architects are rarely preserved in archives or, when they do exist, are sometimes attributed to a man, it was necessary to select women whose documents survive and are readily accessible. Luckily the DAM archive contains extensive materials from the estates of Lucy Hillebrand and Verena Dietrich. There were less obvious exhibits there too, like the delicately colored drawings of the expressive interior columns of the *Grosses Schauspielhaus* (1919) in Berlin that had been attributed to Hans Poelzig. Recent scholarship has revealed that several were drawn by Marlene Moeschke Poelzig or were worked on by both Hans and Marlene. We exhibited these drawings—and gave Marlene her long overdue recognition. DAM also owned a portfolio containing drawings of projects from the 1920s by the office of Richard Kauffmann, the Frankfurt-born architect who migrated to Mandate Palestine after the First World War. Lotte Cohn was an early employee of Kauffmann, and fortunately she signed her name—Charlotte Cohn—on several of her designs in this portfolio. These made their way to the walls of the exhibition. Other materials were found in private archives, public collections—or on Ebay and the *Zentralverzeichnis Antiquarischer Bücher* (Central Register of Antiquarian Books). Colleagues at the Technical University of Dresden also directed seminars with students, who researched and built the seven models of architecture by women. These models were on display too.

SBM: I was really interested in reading your article in the exhibition catalogue, “Desire and Reality: A Century of Women Architects in Germany.” It enables us to learn about the general context of female contributions to architecture in Germany. I wonder why this analysis and contextualization was not presented in the exhibition? Did you want to present those portraits as an “extract”? Or did you have to restrict exhibition spaces because of technical or budget constraints?



Figure 2. *Frau Architekt*, Museum der Arbeit, Hamburg, 2019. Local curator: Sandra Schürmann. Source: Mary Pepchinski.

MP: Generally, we felt there was adequate supplemental information in the individual biographies. Also, we did not want the exhibition to have too much textual information—the danger is that one is reading a great deal and not looking at the items on display. Finally, at the center of the first-floor gallery at DAM, where *Frau Architekt* was exhibited, a room was converted into a small cinema showing 7 short films about 9 living women architects, who were born between 1933 and the early 1990s. We hope that you read the catalogue, perused the exhibition and watched the films because the different experiences are intended to be complementary.

SBM: In the past DAM hosted five exhibitions about women architects: Eileen Gray in 1996, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky in 1997, Verena Dietrich in 2007, Galina Balashova in 2015 and Zaha Hadid 2017. Have there been previous exhibitions about the history of German women architects? In the editors'

foreword, you mentioned an exhibition held in the 1980s, organized by Helga Schmidt-Thomsen and Christine Jachmann. Was it the first one? Could you tell me more about this exhibition?

MP: Technically there were only four exhibitions with catalogues about women architects at DAM. In actuality, the Zaha Hadid “exhibition” was a small display of several prints by this architect that are in the DAM archive. They were hung in a very small gallery in conjunction with *Frau Architekt*.

To my knowledge, in 1984 in West Berlin, Helga Schmidt-Thomsen, Christine Jachmann along with the West German section of the *L'Union Internationale des Femmes Architectes* (UIFA), organized the first historical exhibition after the Second World War about women architects in Germany. In 1985-86, an English-language version was shown in the USA for the UIFA meeting in Seattle. These exhibitions produced catalogs that have served as the basis for subsequent historical research. Because the organizers were based in West Berlin, the post-war era focused on women who were active in that city and the Federal Republic of Germany.

In 1912, the first known exhibition of German women architects was included in the mammoth event, *Die Frau im Haus und Beruf* (The Woman in her Home and her Profession), which presented the cultural, professional and charitable endeavors of middle-class and aristocratic German women. It occupied the capacious exhibition halls at the *Zoologischer Garten* in Berlin. Lilly Reich, in addition to two other leading applied artists, Else Oppler-Legband (1875-1965) and Fia Wille (1868-1920), oversaw the planning. Although it was only open for a month, it attracted a half-million visitors. Museums today can only dream of such resonance! It also contained a small display of work by women architects, featuring projects by Emilie Winkelmann (1875-1951), Elisabeth von Knobelsdorff (1877-1959) and Therese Mogger. Shortly thereafter, in 1914, two temporary pavilions for the display of fine and applied arts by middle-class women were erected at trade fairs in Germany: the *Haus der Frau* (Woman's Building) at the Cologne Werkbund Exhibition and the *Haus der Frau* at the Book and Graphic Exhibition in Leipzig. These were a milestone, as women architects designed both pavilions—Margarete Knüppelholz-Roeser (1886-1949) in Cologne and Emilie Winkelmann in Leipzig. Each also housed an exhibit of work by women architects. This practice was

revived in the Weimar period with exhibitions such as *Die gestaltende Frau* (The designing Woman) at the Wertheim Department Store in Berlin in 1930.

SBM: To prepare this exhibition, have you been inspired by exhibitions that have been held in other countries about this theme?

MP: When I was studying for my bachelor's degree in art history at Barnard College (the women's college of Columbia University in New York City), Susana Torre curated the exhibition *Women in American Architecture* (1977) at the Brooklyn Museum, also in New York City. At the time, the second wave feminist movement was a force in New York, and women in academia were questioning the canons of art and architectural history. We read the iconic text by Linda Nochlin, "Why have there been no famous women artists?" (1971), which encouraged us to probe the machinations of institutional power to understand women's marginalization in the arts, along with the feminist art criticism of Lucy Lippard. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, when I attended the Graduate School of Architecture Planning Preservation (GSAPP) at Columbia University, I befriended Susana Torre, who was teaching there at the time. Her exhibition was certainly lodged in the back of my mind.

Like the 1977 exhibition, *Frau Architekt* uses a collection of tables as an architectural device. But where Susana Torre's exhibition asked the question, "How did women shape the built environment in the USA?" and included women who played other roles, like critics, *Frau Architekt* focused narrowly on women who had realized buildings or made designs. Nevertheless, it is crucial to keep in mind that *Women in American Architecture* was a product of second wave feminism in the USA. In its striving for exemplary buildings and protagonists, it sometimes turned a blind eye to other meanings and interpretations. One was the uncritical championing of the monumental Women's Building at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, designed by Sophia Hayden, one of the first female graduates in architecture from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the USA. Left unsaid was the vigorous exclusion of the contributions of people of color to the 1893 Chicago World's Fair and the Woman's Building in particular, a reflection of the brutal politics of



Figure 3. Frau Architekt, Zentrum Architektur Zürich (ZAZ), Zürich, 2020. Local curator: Evelyn Steiner. Source: Mary Pepchinski.

racial separation in the United States at that time.¹ So, what might appear as a proud symbol of professional success for white, native-born Anglo-American, middle-class women, was a bitter expression of suppression, oppression and discrimination against women of color, immigrant women and other marginalized groups.

¹ The Pavilion of Haiti was one exception at the 1893 World's Fair. The pamphlet, "The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition" by Ida B. Wells was available here. Although there were other instances of African American participation at the fair, such as the six African American women who contributed lectures about developments after emancipation to the World's Congress of Representative Women at the Woman's Building, the overall presence of African Americans was severely restricted. See: Hautzinger (2018); <https://worldsfairchicago1893.com/tag/frederick-douglass/>, accessed on March 12, 2021; and the discussion of the 1893 Haiti Pavilion in: St. Hubert (2018).

For this reason, *Frau Architekt* also broached politics and social concerns. For example, we show that Lilly Reich not only produced seminal exhibition designs and furniture with Mies van der Rohe, but also marshalled her talents in service of Nazi propaganda. Others, like Lotte Cohn, chose migration; Marie Frommer and Karola Bloch went into exile; Gertrud Schille and Iris Dullin-Grund found unique professional opportunities under East German socialism; and Verena Dietrich discovered her voice through engagement with the feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s. We did not want to see women as being all the same but elected to present their differences and the circumstances that shaped their professional lives. And perhaps this is one approach that distinguished *Frau Architekt* from the 1977 exhibition in New York.

Susana Torre has also talked about how the giant field of red drawing tables, which formed the main element of the 1977 New York exhibition, was like a giant art object that was inserted into the grand space of the Beaux-Arts exhibition hall at the Brooklyn Museum. Unlike a typical exhibition, artifacts and information were displayed on the red drawing tables. According to Torre, this approach was necessary because if examples of women's work were hung on the walls of this vast gallery, they would appear small and pathetic—and give critics a reason to denigrate the historical contributions of women. Furthermore, Torre emphasizes that the tables represent individual yet *anonymous* women architects. In contrast, I see the tables that we used for *Frau Architekt* as being generic elements that anchor a small depository of documents about *one particular woman*—a mini-retrospective of her life and her work, if you will. Like Torre's tables, they have a spatial purpose, but it is about locating the individual, and not creating one big gesture.

Finally, the adaptability of *Frau Architekt* is worth noting. This exhibition is not an immutable *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as the tables, exhibits and films are meant to be flexible components that can be added to, subtracted from or supplemented to suit a particular context. So far, this concept has proved successful as *Frau Architekt* was adapted for display in Hamburg (Museum der Arbeit, 2019); Zürich (Zentrum Architektur Zürich, 2020) and Düsseldorf (Haus der Architekten, 2020). (Figures 2–4) In addition, under the auspices of Goethe-Institut, a version of *Frau Architekt* has been shown in conjunction with exhibitions of local women architects in several Asian and European cities.²

² Goethe-Institut Mumbai (2020); Goethe-Institut Izmir (2021); Goethe-Institut Athens (2021); Goethe-Institut Nikosia (2021–22); and Goethe-Institut Bucharest (2022).



Figure 4. *Frau Architekt*, Haus der Architekt, Düsseldorf, 2020. Local curator: Ursula Kleefisch-Jobst. Source: Ursula Kleefisch-Jobst.

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