Politics, Privilege and Architecture

Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt (1887-1961), a pioneering woman architect in the tradition of the European high nobility during the 1930s and the 1940s

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For the most part, the recent interest in women architects has turned to historical figures who correspond to the present-day notion of an architect, that is, a person directing or laboring in a private or public office for remuneration. Assumptions regarding class and power are inscribed in this figure, considered to be a someone with sufficient resources and status to acquire an education; gain the trust of clients to carry out their commissions; and engage with the public sphere to disseminate their ideas. How gender complicates this claim to knowledge, practice and representation is at the heart of many investigations. Yet there are—and have been—other modes of engaging with architecture production that are intimately bound to one's status in a given society. When considered from the perspective of a gender analysis, these overlooked approaches shed light on the opportunities that women have found in other contexts. This chapter examines this topic from the perspective of Princess Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt (1887-1961), a woman architect who practiced from a uniquely privileged stance. During the first half of the 20th century in Germany, she labored largely outside the parameters that defined traditional architectural practice and—one can argue—the political currents that violently upended everyday life and professional activity in Germany.

A pioneering woman architect: Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt

Until the end of the millennium, Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt belonged to the ranks of those women architects who had been lost to history. In connection with her 1999 dissertation, Despina Stratigakos discovered her name in the files of the Technical University of Berlin and then located her surviving drawings and the photographs of her buildings that were preserved in the archives of the Counts zu Bentheim und Steinfurt in the castle of Burgsteinfurt in northwestern Germany. She also produced the first scientific assessment of this architect's work, focusing on her activities prior to 1920.[1] For the catalogue of the exhibition *Frau Architekt*, I authored the first survey of the entire life and architecture of Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt,[2] relying upon the materials in the aforementioned archive. This chapter builds upon my catalogue entry to focus on Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt's life and architecture during the 1930s and 1940s and her engagement with politics during these years.

First, I would like to explain how I understand the word "politics." As the feminist writer, Kate Millett, noted in the introduction to her 1969 book, *Sexual Politics*, politics is not "that relatively narrow and exclusive world of meetings, chairmen, and parties. The term 'politics' shall refer to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another."[3] Or, one might add, as in the case of Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt, how one group either has control over another or can exist outside the rules and structures of the normative "power-structured relationships, arrangements" and other methods of social control. In other words, politics is not only the result of being subordinated, but also the ability to control others or to exist independently of "power-structured" relationships.

This definition helps us to understand the life and professional accomplishments of Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt, who was a woman architect *and* an aristocrat. As a member of the European high nobility, she had

1 Stratigakos (1999), especially 354–380 and Appendix 1, 389–390.

2 Kiem (2017), 95-104. Unless otherwise noted, the biographical information about Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt is taken from this publication and the sources cited there.

3 Millett (orig. 196; 1980), 31–32.

Figure 1: Princess Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt, late 1930s. Source: Fürstliches Archiv, Burgsteinfurt.

power over people and was not required to conform exclusively to the prevailing mores of modern bourgeois society. Her class status also shielded her from the usual prejudices about gender roles, which limited the opportunities that were available to her bourgeois sisters. (Figure 1)

Architects of the European aristocracy

The modern architect emerged in the 19th century. He was a middle-class man, who studied at a technical university, underwent an apprenticeship in an architectural office and then either worked as an employee, ran his own practice or labored in a public bureaucracy.[4] Needless to say, women were excluded from this professional ideal. But as a member of the high nobility, Victoria could look to another, much longer, tradition to affirm her desire to become an architect. And this tradition included both women and men.

4 See Pfammatter (1997).

The ability on the part of the European high nobility to wield influence, exert power and control vast amounts of wealth has its roots in the Middle Ages. During this period, their ancestors constructed castles, defended themselves from attack, ruled the surrounding countryside and lived off the tributes that were paid to them by their subjects. Victoria's ancestors, the Counts zu Bentheim und Steinfurt, for example, occupied the two basic types of medieval castles, one built on a mountain, a hill castle, in the village of Bad Bentheim, and the other surrounded by a moat, a water castle, next to the town of Burgsteinfurt. In return for their privileges, the nobles were obliged to go to war as knights when the emperor demanded their support. As the techniques of war evolved, notably with the introduction of firearms, the nobles were no longer required to serve as warrior knights to protect their subjects. For this reason, during the Baroque period, their political influence decreased. At the same time, their administrative and representative obligations became more important, and it was necessary for their children to master a range of skills including foreign languages, poetry, drawing, painting and music, as well as to have a basic understanding of architectural and engineering concepts. Depending on the status and wealth of the noble family, tutors could be renowned scientists or famous artists. As women of the nobility could also become rulers, some received excellent educations. And these powerful women could act as role models for younger women as well.[5]

During the Baroque period, many nobles were engaged in building activities. On the one hand, their palace architecture and grounds had to adequately reflect their wealth and status. On the other, their income increased when their subjects resided in decent houses, built by using cost-saving methods. Thus, they were very concerned about architecture because it enabled them to affirm their status and to exert control over other people.

The nobility was educated to become well-informed clients, who were able to communicate what a proposed building should look like and how it should function. They hired architects to develop their ideas, produce construction drawings and manage a building site. And if the completed edifice did not meet the expectations of their aristocratic clients, it could be a disaster for the architect! In this manner, several noble women undertook the role of the client-architect. Sophie von Hannover, born Sophie von der

5 Malinowski (orig. 2003; 2004), passim.

Pfalz (1630-1714), spent three decades overseeing the planning of the *Große Garten* of Herrenhausen in Hannover[6] and Wilhelmina of Prussia (1709-1758), as the Markgravine of Brandenburg-Bayreuth, directed a building program that included gardens and monuments in Bayreuth.[7] In the 19th century, the Empress Friedrich, born Victoria of Great Britain and Ireland (1840-1901), had "English type" sanitary rooms installed in her palaces and castles in Germany and introduced British horticultural practices to the Sanssouci Park in Potsdam. As a widow, she supervised the building of Castle Friedrichshof and its gardens in Kronberg.[8]

Sometimes wealthy nobles became obsessed with architecture. One such figure was an ancestor of Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt, namely Count Karl Paul Ernst von Bentheim-Steinfurt. In 1765, he created a French park on land adjacent to the Steinfurt castle and populated it with pavilions and monuments. His son, Ludwig Wilhelm Geldricus, inherited this obsession. In 1791 he documented this architecture which included a Chinese palace; Greek, Roman and Moorish temples; pyramidal towers; ruins; waterworks and farmhouses. At its high point the park had 93 structures. During the winter months, the count often traveled anonymously with his architect to foreign countries to study new buildings. After the Napoleonic Wars the park went into decline. A local researcher documented the history of this park[9] and published his findings in 1907 and 1909, which may have also inspired Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt to study architecture. Along with her older sister Elisabeth, who became an accomplished painter, she received an excellent education from private tutors.

Although Victoria initially encountered resistance among the nobility when she expressed an interest in acquiring a university education, she received support from her aunt, Queen Sofia of Sweden, who quashed the objections of her relatives and championed her cause.[10] Combined with her

6 https://www.hannover.de/Herrenhausen/Museum-Schloss-Herrenhausen/Historische-Persönlichkeiten/Sophie-von-Hannover, accessed on October 7, 2020.

7 https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilhelmine_von_Preußen_(1709–1758), accessed on October 7, 2020.

8 Siemer (1997), 131–133; 137–139.

9 Döhmann (1907, 1909).

10 Schock (1961).

intelligence and self-confidence, Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt was well equipped to become a successful architect.

The Royal Bentheim Building Authority

As previously mentioned, the nobility descended from medieval warriors, and in the modern period they adapted this role to assume positions of leadership in the military. For example, Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt's grandfather, Ludwig, was a major general in the Prussian army and her father, Alexis, was also a major general and had fought in the 1870-71 Franco-Prussian War.[11] Educated by private tutors, she took her *Abitur* (academic high school completion examination) at the *Gymnasium* in Osnabrück and enrolled at the Technical University of Berlin-Charlottenburg in 1913. This institution had developed out of the Prussian *Bauakademie* (Building Academy) where architects had been trained to serve in the construction authorities of the Prussian king, and later, the emperor.[12] During the First World War, her close friend, Elisabeth von Knobelsdorff, the first woman in Germany to receive the Diploma Engineer degree in architecture and also the daughter of a Prussian general, worked as an architect for the Prussian military. On two occasions, Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt interrupted her studies to join her friend as an architectural apprentice, first at the military headquarters in Döberitz near Berlin and later in occupied northern France, where she produced measured drawings of historic monuments.[13] Victoria graduated in 1919 and, following in the footsteps of Elisabeth von Knobelsdorff, applied to and was accepted as a member of the prestigious Architects and Engineers Society (AIV) in Berlin.

She then returned to Burgsteinfurt and, for roughly a decade and a half, took up the building practices associated with past generations of the nobility. Having heavily invested in war bonds, her family endured large financial

11 https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ludwig_zu_Bentheim_und_Steinfurt, accessed on October 8, 2020; https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexis_zu_Bentheim_und_Steinfurt, accessed on October 8, 2020.

12 Strecke/Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz/Kunstbibliothek Berlin (eds.) (2000), 161–66.

13 Stratigakos (2007).

losses and was intent on improving conditions on their estates to make them more productive. The newly established Royal Bentheim Building Authority was created for this purpose. As its sole architect, Victoria designed agricultural structures; additional buildings for the castle; furniture; housing; monuments to the fallen in the First World War; and planned pastures for grazing cattle. Her family had inherited estates in Gaildorf in Bavaria, and her activities extended to this location as well. (Figure 2) Within a few years she had produced an impressive oeuvre; upon at least two occasions, she exhibited drawings and photographs documenting the work of the Royal Bentheim Building Authority at meetings of the German Agricultural Society.[14] (Figure 3)

Although Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt was active as an architect into the early 1940s, starting in the mid 1930s her productivity declined. Her brother, Count Victor Adolf, who had become head of the family in 1919, had been widowed in 1925. He remarried in 1931, and this new arrangement may have given her cause to leave Burgsteinfurt. For whatever reason, in 1935, she relocated to Mittenwald, a small town in the Bavarian Alps on the border to Austria. In 1937, she purchased a large house there which she sometimes ran as a pension. Her professional activity now resembled that of an architect in private practice. Drawings for residential work and a few public buildings from this time exist, but it is not known to what extent these projects were realized.

Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt in the 1930s and 1940s

In 1933 Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt joined the Nazi party, yet there is no evidence that she built for them. Stephan Malinowski notes that many of Germany's high nobility were attracted to the Nazi party because they were encouraged to believe that this organization would restore their status and rule. They turned a blind eye to this party's extreme programmatic intentions.[15] Victoria does not appear to have been an enthusiastic follower.

14 Photographs and sketches documenting exhibitions in 1925 and 1930 at the *DLG – Deutsche Landwirtschafts-Gesellschaft* (German Agricultural Society) are found in the Victoria zu Bentheim Papers, Burg Steinfurt.

15 Malinowski (orig. 2003; 2004), 583.

Figure 2: Guardhouse. Schloss Gaildorf, Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt, 1920. Source: Mary Pepchinski.

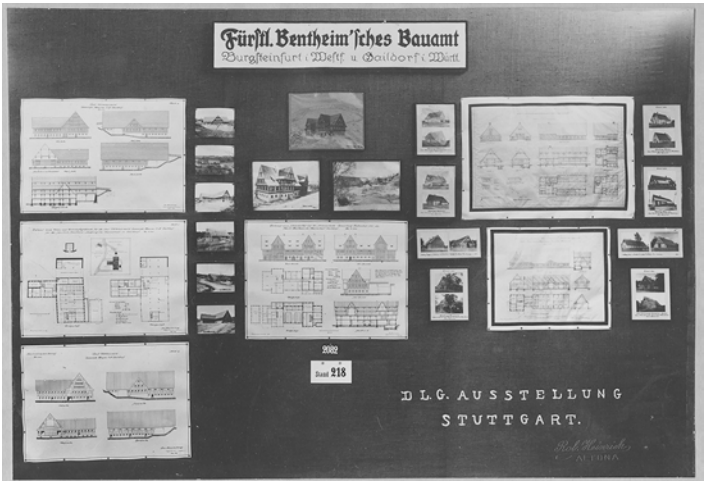

Figure 3: Exhibition of the Royal Bentheim Building Authority at the German Agricultural Society or DLG (Deutsche Landwirtschafts-Gesellschaft), Exhibition, Stuttgart 1925. Source: Fürstliches Archiv, Burgsteinfurt.

In 1941, due to her inactivity, she was given a formal warning and her membership in the *Reichskulturkammer* (German Chamber of Culture), which also licensed the work of professional architects, was revoked in 1941.[16]

It is also possible that Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt was not concerned about or aware of the potential repercussions that political engagement might entail, and she never renounced her membership in the Nazi party. According to Stefan Malinowski, this stance may also have reflected a "double misunderstanding": whereas the Nazis never intended the nobility to regain the power that it had previously wielded, the nobility, who had been accustomed to asserting their authority on their ancestral lands, often failed to conform to the dictates set down by this political organization.[17] With this disparity in mind, it is worth noting that during the war she did not care much about Nazi politics. Testimonials written after 1945 state that she hid ritual artifacts and books used by the anthroposophically-oriented Christian congregation in Mittenwald, which the Nazis had banned, and aided Jewish families on two occasions.[18]

Having been a member of the Nazi party, Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt worked hard to clear her name after World War Two. In her denazification process, her first petition resulted in a judgement against her, declaring that she was a *Mitläufer* (nominal party member). Although the case would have been closed if she had accepted the judgement and paid a fine and the court fees, it was important for her to have this decision rescinded. She hired a lawyer who was able to have her exonerated in 1949. Her appeal included sworn statements from those she had actively helped in addition to her mention of powerful persons in British diplomacy who would testify to her innocence.[19] Due to her extremely well-connected, extended noble family, she could rely on the aid of influential persons to support her cause if need be.

16 Garmisch-Partenkirchen Tribunal, file number A8-127/1285/47, carton 4234, SpkA K 4234 Bentheim & Steinfurt, Meldebogen, State Archive Munich.

17 See Kiem (2017) footnote 2, especially 102–103 and footnote 55.

18 Grossmann (orig. 1959; 1961), 103–7, especially 106–7.

19 Garmisch-Partenkirchen Tribunal, file number A8-127/1285/47, carton 4234, SpkA K 4234 Bentheim & Steinfurt, State Archive Munich.

Gender and architecture, power and privilege

Viewed with the framework of this publication—namely gender, architecture and politics—Victoria zu Bentheim und Steinfurt should be understood as a cross-over figure. She bridged the spheres inhabited by two distinct classes, the nobility and the bourgeois. Her practice of architecture was very much rooted in the tradition of the noble-architect who built on her family's estate to uphold their status, enrich their wealth and control those who were her subjects or employees. In choosing to study, earn the Diploma Engineer degree and even to participate in what we today call *Baukultur* (architecture culture), like organizing exhibitions of her work for the Royal Bentheim Building Authority or joining a professional organization, she affiliated herself with that handful of pioneering women, largely from the middle class, who sought a role for themselves in public life. Despite these activities, she remained free of the typical day-to-day struggles that architects endure to maintain and please clients as well as to earn a living from their work. Being a member of the nobility also shielded her, to a large degree, from the prevailing bourgeois gender prejudices that a non-noble woman architect would have encountered during her lifetime.

Unlike middle class women, when her actions in modern society were chastised or when she ran the risk of losing status, she could rely on her membership in the nobility to restore her position. Following Kate Millett at the start of this chapter, by the fact of her noble birth, she exerted authority or controlled people through her architecture and also enjoyed exceptional privileges outside of the system of normative bourgeois "power-structured relationships and arrangements."

Translated by Mary Pepchinski

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