

Frau Architekt

Two reasons and a résumé

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For all intents and purposes there were two reasons to organize the exhibition *Frau Architekt*. One was a result of in-house discussions which acknowledged that we, as the *Deutsches Architekturmuseum* (German Architecture Museum or DAM), a major architectural institution in Frankfurt-am-Main, were a part of the problem. Given the fact that there is a broad consensus about architecture being a masculine domain, it has the tendency to remain male-dominated where it is appreciated, debated and exhibited. As is well known, the perceived state of being of any given thing determines not only how we regard it, but also the themes we choose to discuss as much as those we would rather ignore. Up until today this is particularly true for architecture museums.

The masculine habitus

Since it was established in 1984, DAM has shown approximately 400 exhibitions. Whereas roughly 100 focused on a male architect, only 4 were dedicated to a female architect: the Irish-French designer Eileen Gray (1996); Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, the first woman architect in Austria and a collaborator on Ernst May's "New Frankfurt" team (1997); the architect and feminist Verena Dietrich (2006); and Galina Balaschowa, the architect and interior designer for the Russian aerospace industry (2014). Even where it would have been appropriate to include a female partner, she was either not mentioned or only referred to in passing. Such was the fate of Ray Eames in the exhibition about Charles Eames (1991) or Marlene Moeschke-Poelzig in the one dedicated to Hans Poelzig (2008). This was by no means malicious

intent or particularly misogynist, but historically and culturally the *state of the art*. And DAM, too, was formed by a masculine habitus in architecture which marginalizes women. Therefore, it is not surprising that the architecture museum of the Technical University of Munich has even more room for improvement: its highly regarded exhibition about Lina Bo Bardi (2014) remains the only show dedicated solely to a woman architect since it was founded in 1977.

In 1991, the American architect Robert Venturi received the Pritzker Prize in acknowledgment of his life's work, for, among other things, the influential 1972 publication about Post Modernism, *Learning from Las Vegas*. His longstanding partner, the urbanist Denise Scott Brown, who was actually the main author of this study, came away empty-handed. Even a petition that was set in motion in 2013 and signed by numerous highly regarded colleagues and experts to retroactively award the prize to Denise Scott Brown has so far remained unsuccessful. Established in 1979, the Pritzker Prize was given exclusively to male architects for twenty-five years, until the first woman, Zaha Hadid, was honored in 2004. The German practice of awarding prizes does not look any different. In 2013, Matthias Sauerbruch, of the Berlin-based office Sauerbruch Hutton, received the Gottfried Semper Prize of the Saxon Academy of the Arts, while his partner, Louisa Hutton, was ignored. The prize was only conferred on her after a sustained outcry.

The dry statistics

The flagrant marginalization of women architects, of which DAM has been a willing participant, was one reason for the *Frau Architekt* exhibition. The other, namely the dry statistics, was equally disquieting: since 2006, female and male students have been studying architecture in equal numbers.¹ Since 2016, women, at 58%, are now overtaking the men,² a tendency that is steadily increasing. Nonetheless, in spite of a remarkably low dropout rate and, for the most part, outstanding qualifications, according to the most recent statistics of the Federal Chamber of Architects, barely 36% of female

1 Kaufmann/Ihsen/Braslavsky (2019), 5.

2 Ibid.

graduates actually start practicing and become licensed.³ Many do not even enter the profession and others leave after a short time. There is a “missing group” of more than 20%. What happens to these women and where are they? Even those who carry on rarely make the jump to the top tiers of professional practice. Shaped by the star system, the image of the genius, the alpha animal in a black suit wearing a distinctive pair of designer eyeglasses, architecture remains a masculine domain. In a *New York Times* interview, Yen Ha, the founder of the New York architecture office Front Studio, succinctly described this situation: “I’m not white, wearing black, funky glasses, tall or male. I’m none of the preconceptions of what an architect might be, and that means that every time I introduce myself as an architect, I have to push through the initial assumptions.”⁴ Reason enough for DAM to tackle the project *Frau Architekt. Over 100 years of women in the profession of architecture* and to finally examine the root causes of this masculine habitus, particularly in our own ranks. It is a matter of nothing less than the commitment to stop being the problem, and to start becoming the solution. (Figures 1–2)

***Frau Architekt*: Catalogue, exhibition, films**

The catalogue and exhibition of *Frau Architekt* presented 22 women architects who were active in the 20th century; as a group, they embraced modernity, discarded conventions and entered a profession that previously had been closed to them. The lives of these women played out against the tumultuous decades of recent German history, starting around 1900 when the first female architects emerged, and continued through empire, republic and dictatorship; the years of German division, reunification and the first decades of the 21st century. Taken together, this collection attempts to write architecture history in a new manner, namely from the perspective of female protagonists. The biographical approach is the concept; history does not exist exclusively in the collective singular, but is always a construction of many personal, individual and subjective stories. Since the student uprisings of

3 <https://www.bak.de/architekten/wirtschaft-arbeitsmarkt/ausbildung/> accessed on February 20, 2021.

4 Quoted in Pogrebin (2016).

1968 and the emergence of the “second wave” women’s movement at the very latest, the notion that the private is always political has become mainstream.

The 22 women architects that were portrayed were chosen according to the best curatorial knowledge and convictions, but even the most careful selection cannot compensate for the omissions that nonetheless exist in a limited and subjective collection of stories. Because it would have been possible to write a similar history using the lives of other women, the exhibition was expanded to include nine interviews that were captured in seven films, in order to render “architecture histories” more comprehensible and to give other women architects, especially those who are active in the here and now, a forum. The films could be seen in our *Frauenzimmer*⁵, that is, the transformed “house in house,” that the Cologne architect Oswald Mathias Ungers inserted into the upper-floor galleries as the programmatic centerpiece of DAM. (Figure 3)

These short films introduce contemporary witnesses as they examine questions that concern women in architecture in recent history and up until the present day. Cutting across different generations, the selection affords a personal, utterly subjective impression of the past century, its different political systems, everyday realities and the kinds of careers that were available. Born between 1930 and 1995, these women recount their lives in in West Germany or in East Germany; during the years immediately after reunification; and today. Their stories recall decades of professional and personal experiences in the male-dominated profession of architecture and give insight into their accomplishments in a wide spectrum of specializations.

In 1960, Iris Dullin-Grund won the competition for the *Haus der Kultur und Bildung* (House of Culture and Education) in Neubrandenburg in East Germany. Ten years later she became this municipality’s chief city architect—the most important position that an architect could attain in East Germany—and worked in this capacity until the change of the political system in 1989/90. In 1982, a jury selected the design by Ingeborg Kuhler over those submitted by a large number her colleagues, overwhelmingly male, for the *Landesmuseum für Technik und Arbeit* (State Museum for Technology and Work)⁶ and

5 In this context, the German word *Frauenzimmer* is a wordplay. Originally *Frauenzimmer* denoted a domestic room for use by noble women in the early modern times. Later it also meant a wench or a loose woman but can also refer to a woman in general.

6 Today it is known as the *Technoseum*.



Figure 1: Poster, *Frau Architekt* (DAM). Source: DAM.



Figure 2: Catalogue, *Frau Architekt* (DAM). Source: Wasmuth & Zohlen/DAM.

the neighboring building for the *Süddeutsche Rundfunk* (Southern German Radio Broadcasting Service). In 1984 she became the first tenured female professor for architectural design at a West German architecture faculty at the university level, namely at the *Hochschule der Künste* (College of the Arts or HdK⁷) in West Berlin, where she taught until her retirement in 2008. As a single mother and an independent practitioner, the architect Marie-Theres Deutsch, based in Frankfurt-am-Main, has left numerous architectural traces in this city, notably the Portikus, the exhibition hall of the *Städelschule* (Staedel School or Academy of Fine Arts) and various measures to revitalize the banks along the Main River. In 2001, Susanne Hofmann established an office, the *Baupiloten*⁸ in Berlin, focusing on educational and cultural facilities. To foster the participation of users in the design process and to communicate with them on an equal level, she developed sophisticated methods that are adapted to age or other aspects of personal identity. Since she completed her architectural degree in 2004, the Bavarian architect Anna Heringer builds chiefly in Bangladesh, always taking into consideration traditional building forms and materials. She has received many prizes for her work, among others the Aga Khan Award in 2007. Cathrin Schultz and Kathrin Sievers are the youngest architects in this series. Since they established their office in 2009 in Bremerhaven, far away from the large metropolitan centers, they have worked successfully as a two-woman team. In 2014 they received the local BDA (*Bund Deutscher Architekten* or Association of German Architects) prize for the greater area of Bremen. Aylin Akgöz and Meike Kimmel, students at the Technical University of Darmstadt and the Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences, respectively, both almost finished with their education, reflect upon this stage of their lives and what they expect from their future careers.

A young female filmmaker, Sophia Edschmid,⁹ who is based in Frankfurt-am-Main, was hired to produce and direct these films. As she did not have close proximity to the subject matter, she was able to interview the women with a trained “view from the outside.” As a result, very personal portraits

7 Today it is known as the *Universität der Künste* or University of the Arts (UdK).

8 *Baupiloten* is a made-up word meaning “building pilots” or “architecture navigators”.

9 Sophia Edschmid, Director; Holger Priedemuth, Camera; Philipp Kehm, Sound. Film portraits of: Iris Dullin-Grund, Ingeborg Kuhler, Marie-Theres Deutsch, Susanne Hofmann, Anna Heringer, Cathrin Schultz & Kathrin Sievers, Aylin Akgöz & Meike Kimmel.

emerged, which blended reflections about their work, life, memories and anecdotes in a distinctive manner that are well worth seeing. For example, when asked about their experiences with inequality in everyday professional life, all recounted extreme instances of discrimination and their self-confident means of dealing with it. The older the woman the more intensely she was affected by such aggressive behavior, regardless if she worked in East or West Germany. The grand old lady of East German architecture, Iris Dullin-Grund, recalled the opening ceremony for her cultural and social center in Neubrandenburg, which took place in front of the assembled political *Nomenklatura* including the East German head of state, Walter Ulbricht, but not with her—they had forgotten to invite the architect.

Ingeborg Kuhler lamented that the media cared little about her architectural accomplishments and more about her gender, with statements like: “she looked like Caesar” or “a woman won the race.” At the same time, she emphasized the freedom that women have because there are no strongly established expectations about “how a woman [architect] should be.” In a similar way, Marie-Theres Deutsch talked about her conscious attempts to appear like a man (“Of course I smoked the cigar that was offered”), but also about the benefit of being the exotic female on the building site. She also observed that for women today, the need to prove themselves is much greater than in the 1980s when she started her career. Anna Heringer, approximately twenty years younger, is committed to sustainable building with mud brick. She meanwhile refuses to submit to the unspoken rule of proving herself by participating in “aggressive” competitions, which require long hours of hard work through the night and on weekends and are incompatible with family life. In doing so, she has consciously renounced the expectation that it is necessary to pursue prestigious, large-scale commissions in this manner.

It is striking that all the interviewees point out that women in architecture, as soon as they are professionally active, always must accomplish more than their male colleagues in order to survive the fierce competition. This inequality does not appear to exist during their studies. Aylin Akgöz and Meike Kimmel emphasize that women students are now in the majority at departments of architecture—in the university context they are an accepted fact.

***Frau Architekt*: Engaging the public sphere**

Both the necessity for and the implicit mission of *Frau Architekt*—namely to render women in architecture more visible—led to a discourse that was further developed in a variety of events that took place at DAM and other locations. Two large symposia, lasting several days, with academics and architects from Austria, Belgium, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Israel, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States, addressed the current state of gender-research and provided insight into recent projects undertaken by women architects who are professionally active world-wide.

A comprehensive program with highly differentiated formats and equally heterogeneous partners provided an extension of the exhibition and gave many additional women architects a platform—through lectures, seminars, podium discussions, film evenings, a Pecha-Kucha night organized by students attending the universities in the Rhine-Main area and a national meeting to foster networking among women architects that was organized by the n-nails group in Berlin—to name but a few. As expected, the majority of the events focused on women architects and dealt with issues like finding solutions to make family and professional life more compatible; identifying the habitus and methods of exclusion that determine architectural professionalism; or defining the conditions that are needed for the better representation of women in leadership positions and as tenured professors at universities.

Others took a more macrosocial view of the situation and participated in lively and engaged debates about power, dominance and the gender-specific pre-conditions for a more equitable society. The lectures series *Stadtplus* (City plus), that DAM has presented once a month for many years, provided one outlet for these reflections. For example, with her topic “The City and Feminism—How the Women’s Movement changed/changes Frankfurt,”¹⁰ Dörthe Jung, the sociologist and co-founder of the Frankfurt *Weiberrat*,¹¹ focused on the second women’s movement in West Germany, whose starting point was the legendary “tomato throwing incident.” In September 1968, only male members of the *Sozialistischer Deutschen Studentenbundes* (SDS or Socialist German Students Federation) were chosen to address a delegate

10 Lecture by Dörthe Jung in the DAM series „Stadtplus“: „Die Stadt + der Feminismus – Wie die Frauenbewegung Frankfurt bewegt(e),“ October 4, 2017, DAM Auditorium.

11 *Rat* means council and *Weiber* is slang for old hags, women, wives, broads, etc.

conference at the Frankfurt Student House. They declared that the social oppression of women was at most a peripheral issue, irrelevant to the greater revolutionary struggle. In reaction, a visibly pregnant female delegate from Berlin, expressing the outrage of the other women in the audience, threw tomatoes at the speaker's platform, one meeting the chief theoretician of the federation.¹²

The film director Heike Sander spoke about the role of women in the SDS, who typed leaflets and cared for their children and household in private, while the decision-making lay in the hands of men outside the home. Issues about the private sphere, as it were, had been marginalized, but now were emerging, for the first time, as political themes. In the wake of the profound silence that followed the "tomato throwing incident," she launched her own activism. Two decades of political work in autonomous initiatives as well as the fight to end the prohibition on abortion culminated in the creation of the Frankfurt *Frauenreferat* (Frankfurt Department of Women's Affairs).

Among the many visitors, there were women activists of this era, who aligned themselves with the notion of solidarity with all women and, once again, articulated the need for political agendas rooted in feminism. The podium discussion, "The cowardice of women,"¹³ with Bascha Mika, the author of the eponymous book and the editor-in-chief of the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and Tanja Paulitz, Professor of Cultural Sociology and the Sociology of Knowledge at the Technical University of Darmstadt, was an evening of controversy. "The cowardice of women" is a provocative accusation aimed at well-educated women, who do not leave their "comfort zones" and all too often fall into old role models. In both of these extremely well attended events, the willingness of the audience, who came from a wide spectrum of society, to engage with the issues at hand, was clearly palpable.

Many actors in urban society willingly cooperated in these events, and it was suspiciously easy to recruit local institutions to become satellites or extended venues for *Frau Architekt*. In our view, this was a clear indication that the new edition of an old theme came at the right time and was not only (finally!) a burning issue at DAM.

12 Lecture by Dörthe Jung in the DAM series „Stadtplus“: „Die Stadt + der Feminismus – Wie die Frauenbewegung Frankfurt bewegt(e)“, October 4, 2017, DAM auditorium.

13 Podium discussion with Bascha Mika and Tanja Paulitz, moderated by Uta Zybell, February 2, 2018, DAM Auditorium. See also Mika (2011).

The resonance was impressive. All told, there were approximately 35 events, organized in cooperation with universities, professional organizations, local initiatives, museums, the German Film Institute and the adult education center in Frankfurt. This diverse program attracted over 2000 participants, who by no means hailed from the same academic peer group. For many, *Frau Architekt* exemplifies the fundamental struggles that women must fight in a man's world. In doing so, these events apparently touched a nerve in society—perhaps ignited indirectly by the emerging #MeToo debate—and continue to do so. During the 2019 Hamburg Architecture Sommer, *Frau Architekt* was presented with great success at the local *Museum der Arbeit* (Museum of Work), a museum that does not have a direct connection to architectural issues.¹⁴ Parallel to *Frau Architekt* in Hamburg, exhibitions at two other local venues, the *Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe* (Museum for Art and Industry) and the *Medizinhistorisches Museum* (Medical Historical Museum), were organized. Both also addressed women who challenged traditional gender roles and the construction of professional identity, in the applied arts and in medicine, respectively.

At the beginning of 2020, a digitalized version of the exhibition was created to accompany an international conference, “Women in Design 2020+” in Mumbai at the local Goethe Institute.¹⁵ Towards the end of February 2020, an extraordinarily well attended opening ceremony took place at the *Zentrum Architektur Zürich* (ZAZ or Center Architecture Zürich) in Switzerland.¹⁶ Part of the *Frau Architekt* concept strongly encouraged the local venues that displayed the exhibition to be flexible with the selection and presentation of the 22 portraits, and they were invited to add figures who played a role in their regional or national context. For the ZAZ it made sense to slightly modify the exhibition and to add a “SAFFA Room”, dedicated to the pioneering Swiss women architects and organizers of the two earlier SAFFAs (Swiss Exhibitions of Women's Work), organized in Bern (1928) and Zürich (1958). As in

14 *Frau Architekt. Seit mehr als 100 Jahren: Frauen im Architekturberuf*, Museum der Arbeit Hamburg, June 15–September 8, 2019.

15 *Frau Architekt. For more than 100 years: Women in the Profession of Architecture*, Goethe-Institut Max Mueller Bhavan, Mumbai, January 7–February 20, 2020

16 *Frau Architekt. Seit mehr als 100 Jahren: Frauen im Architekturberuf*, Zentrum Architektur Zürich (ZAZ), February 28–July 19, 2020.

Frankfurt, an extensive and ambitious program of events accompanied the Zürich exhibition and continued well after it had closed in December 2020.¹⁷

In late summer 2020 *Frau Architekt* was displayed in a reduced form at the *Architektenkammer NRW* (Chamber of Architects of the Federal State of North-Rhine Westphalia or NRW) in Düsseldorf. It was supplemented by a second exhibition, organized by the *Museum für Baukultur NRW* (Museum for Architecture Culture NRW), which presented contemporary projects by women in areas such as urban planning, landscape and interior design, as well as historical building research.¹⁸ Despite the restrictions imposed upon public life due to the pandemic, other venues devised strategies to show *Frau Architekt* in 2021 and 2022 as well.¹⁹

The response in the media has been huge and, for the most part, positive; throughout Germany, the press—by no means limited to the typical architectural publications or the serious newspapers—embraced the subject. Even mass-market publications devoted coverage to it, signaling a clear indication of its impact and the interest in the issues that it raised. One absolute premiere for DAM: the exhibition *Frau Architekt* was even mentioned in *GALA*, the German life-style magazine.

Inspiring debate

Nevertheless: Gender is a complex theme and provokes controversial reactions. After viewing the 2017-18 exhibition held at DAM, visitors were encouraged to submit their reactions on slips of paper and then hang them anonymously on a wall by the exit. (Figure 4) Comments ranged from: “I am female, have hands to work with and a head for thinking. What is the

17 See: <https://www.zaz-bellerive.ch/programm/archiv>, accessed on September 29, 2020.

18 *Frau Architekt. Seit mehr als 100 Jahren: Frauen im Architekturberuf, Haus der Architekten und Architektinnen*, August 12–October 2, 2020; curated and supplemented by the *Museum der Baukultur NRW*.

19 To adapt to conditions during the pandemic, a virtual version of *Frau Architekt* was shown at Goethe-Institut in Izmir in May 2021. Titled *Kadın Mimar. Türkiye ve Almanya'da mimarlık mesleğinde kadınlar*, it featured portraits of nine German women architects and nine Turkish women architects along with diverse virtual events. See: <https://www.goethe.de/ins/tr/de/kul/sup/ekt.html>, accessed on April 26, 2021. An adapted version of *Frau Architekt* was shown at Goethe-Institut in Athens (2021); Nikosia (2021-22); and Bucharest (2022).



Figure 3: Entrance (left) and the Frauenzimmer (right), Frau Architekt (DAM). Source: Moritz Bernoulli/DAM.



Figure 4: Message wall, Frau Architekt (DAM). Source: Moritz Bernoulli/DAM.

difference? And what is really your problem?” to “After five years in the profession I have quit, listened to endless misogynist chit-chat in Cologne and London, and experienced a boss who, in reaction to it, said to me: ‘Toughen up, buttercup! Really now?!’” (Figure 5)

Some wandered through the *Frau Architekt* exhibition and felt offended, misunderstood or overwhelmed by feminist ideology. They complained that the special treatment of women was deeply discriminatory. Others, and there were considerably more, felt that they had finally been taken seriously and were encouraged. They more or less represented an opposing argument, that it is not the definition of inequality that is the problem, but inequality in and of itself. Concerning these exchanges, Despina Stratigakos, a Canadian-American architecture historian from State University at Buffalo, New York, USA wrote: “I am glad to hear that the exhibition is provoking debate. That is so much better than silence. And, as Freud said, ‘If the patient is not resisting, the cure is not working’.”²⁰

Despite or precisely because of the polarization: Whether they agreed with it or not, all who came in contact with it had the feeling that *Frau Architekt* was one of the most successful exhibitions that DAM had staged in recent years.

Finally, instead of a few closing words, I leave you with a remark from Anna Heringer. In her 2017 film portrait she declared: “Earlier I was not a feminist, but now I am—architecture has made me one.”

Translated by Mary Pepchinski

20 Email, Despina Stratigakos to Christina Budde, October 2018.

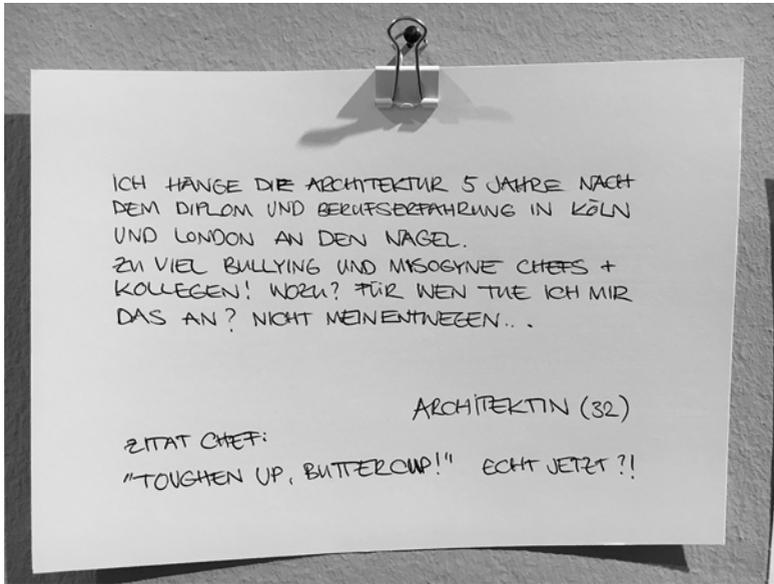


Figure 5: “After five years in the profession I have quit. ...” Message wall, Frau Architekt (DAM). Source: Mary Pechinski.

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Films

Frau Architekt: Portraits of Women Architects. Director: Sophia Edschmid; Camera: Holger Priedemuth; Sound: Philipp Kehm. (2017). Film portraits of: Iris Dullin-Grund; Ingeborg Kuhler; Marie-Theres Deutsch; Susanne Hofmann; Anna Heringer; Cathrin Schultz und Kathrin Sievers; Aylin Akgöz und Meike Kimmel.

