Beyond What Is Right

EDITORIAL

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Architecture has been historically a male dominated profession and field of inquiry. Even during Modernism, when the promise of a freer, more liberated and more emancipated humanity was the premise for an aesthetic and ethical revolution, architecture was hostage to historically consolidated gender-biased preconceptions and stereotypes, in blatant contradiction to declared and embraced principles of social and cultural progress. Corbu's disparaging comments to young graduate Charlotte Perriand interviewing for an internship with her most admired architect ("we don't embroider cushions here"), or his violent interventions on the walls of the E-1027 house by Eileen Gray (an act tantamount to an "architectural rape"), or Walter Gropius' embarrassing comments on the "intellectual preparedness" of women to embark on the Bauhaus course of study - the famous photograph of the thirteen Bauhaus faculty, only one of whom being a woman, Gunta Stölzl, tellingly relegated to the weaving workshop, is still an iconic stain on the history of Modern architecture – are only a few famous anecdotes.

Such a discriminating mentality did not fade away with the evolution of Modernity and has somehow lingered until contemporary times. As aptly put by Ned Cramer: "Never forget: social equity remains one of the great moral struggles of our age. Numerous forces are bringing about unprecedented and sometimes acrimonious relations among the genders, not to mention among different cultures, races, and classes, and the architecture profession must do everything possible to smooth the way for everyone." ¹

Fortunately, things are changing. In recent times, a long overdue claim for more equitable opportunities in the architectural and design professions has been growing and, even though we are still far from actual equity, progress

has been made in the right direction. However, gender equity should be only part of the response, as sacrosanct as it is, to a history of professional and cultural discrimination. Gender biases have actually shaped design ideas, strategies, theories, mentalities and practices. Scholars and authors have been engaged, in the last couple of decades, to unearth layers of conceptual stereotypes that have dominated centuries of architectural discourse. Yet, more needs to be done in terms of new perspectives on the issues, new lines of inquiry on themes and figures, new appraisals of the multifaceted contributions that have enriched the cultural, artistic and intellectual tradition of our field. Gender “matters” also in the very definition of the ends and means of our artistic-intellectual practice, whose richness relies on the multiple perspectives and sensibilities offered outside of a gender-biased profession.

The last 2019 Chicago Architecture Biennial offered, within its various programming and events, an interesting series of interventions at the headquarters of the Graham Foundation (the turn-of-the-century Prairie style Madlener House), curated by Tatiana Bilbao Estudio, “Unraveling Modern Living.” Through furniture designs, exhibition of sketches, notes and studies, curated collections of books, and art (micro)installations that spilled over their narration outside on the adjacent public space of the mansion, Tatiana Bilbao created a fabric of atmospheres that invited the visitor to reflect on the meaning of “modern living” in this day and age.

Evoking the concept of the commons and rooted in storied examples of shared space—including the Greek polis, Renaissance architecture, the feminist movement, community structures, cohousing, public institutions, and appropriation architecture—the exhibition reconfigures the existing architecture to create a garden, a space for knowledge, a space for dialog, and a space for gathering. (...)

Bilbao’s interest in activating public space through this contemporary lens stems from her belief in the basic human necessity of community and the important role that these spaces serve to foster collectivity. She envisions these critical spaces as places that nurture, serve as refuge, inspire, and aid in developing identity. (...) This installation provides space to nurture basic human needs, grounding this experience with opportunities to connect with nature.²

I surmise that the outcome of such a subtle, rich, articulated, ecologically committed and artistically sophisticated design is not independent from the gender-influenced perspective of the author and that this is just a recent example of how gender “matters” in design. A diversity of perspectives and sensibilities should not be simply claimed as a right, but embraced, experimented and critically appreciated for its still untapped potential towards more emotionally fulfilling and intellectually stimulating habitats. It is with this ambition (that we are committed to model also within our

Tatiana Bilbao Estudio, “Unraveling Modern Living,” installation at the Graham Foundation Headquarters, Madlener House, Chicago, for the 2019 Chicago Architecture Biennial (September 16, 2019 – January 11, 2020). Above: both photos by © Maurizio Sabini; left, students from Drury University on a field trip to Chicago and the Biennial. Below: both photos by © Nathan Keay, through the courtesy of the © Graham Foundation.

teamwork here at the *TPJ*, of exploring gender matters beyond the rightful call for equity – which still needs to be discussed, analyzed and advocated for – that we present this themed issue of the journal. Relevance and timeliness have been among the main criteria for identifying the topics of focus and certainly gender studies emerged as a compelling choice. Due to the particular nature of the theme, we asked Dörte Kuhlmann, a recognized scholar on the subject, to serve as Guest-Editor. We truly appreciated our collaborative endeavor and we thank her for her vision, insights and commitment. It is our hope that this themed issue of the *TPJ* will contribute in a meaningful way to the ongoing discourse in architecture, design and urbanism, on gender equity and beyond.

Notes

1. Ned Cramer, “Men of Architecture,” *Architect*, editorial, posted on: March 21, 2018: https://www.architectmagazine.com/design/editorial/men-of-architecture_o.
2. From the Graham Foundation web-site and exhibition flyer: http://www.grahamfoundation.org/public_exhibitions/6033-tatiana-bilbao-estudio-unraveling-modern-living.