

CALENDAR

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ARCHITECTURE

New perspective,
new aesthetic in a
room of their own

Whether breaking down old hierarchies or creating new collaborative ventures, women are reshaping architecture, though few have reached its top tier. Even clichés about feminine and masculine sensibilities are being dismantled.

By NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF
Times Staff Writer

TO understand the role of women in architecture today, one could do worse than visit Morphosis, the Santa Monica-based architectural firm that is considered among the country's most cutting-edge.

On a typical afternoon, one young female architect discusses a project with a contractor at a table piled high with mechanical drawings, while another negotiates over the telephone with her baby-sitter. A third designer, a man, is away on paternity leave. Several of the firm's top designers have had babies within the past two years, and until recently the office refrigerator was packed with bottles of breast milk. Above the shelf was a small sign that read "not for coffee."

Yet the aura of a feminist paradise is somewhat misleading. The firm's identity remains fixed to one man, Thom Mayne, a 59-year-old architect who is a leading figure of architecture's international vanguard. In what seems like a throwback to an earlier era, Mayne's wife, Blythe, plays the role of supportive muse, running the business end of things from a small room at the back of the office.

"Before I worked here, I worked in fashion," she says. "I traveled a lot, and one day, I was coming back from Japan and Thom was leaving for Hong Kong. He called me and said, 'Let's meet at Bradley terminal so you can take the kids.' So we decided it would be a good idea if I came to work for Morphosis for a while." In some sense, the scene at Morphosis is no different from that at most professional offices. Women are now a ubiquitous sight in the world of architecture, from the design office to the construction site. At the same time, the number of women who have been able to break through to the profession's upper tier — the pantheon of high-profile architectural celebrities who garner the majority of the world's most sought-after commissions — remains low.

But architecture is a social art. And the rise of women through its professional ranks has transformed many offices into laboratories of social experimentation. Women are not only rethinking conventional gender roles, they are reshaping the ways in which architecture is [See Women, Page E42]



GRAHAM BRANLEY
For The Times



Zaha Hadid
Architects / Alessi



JENNIFER S. ALTMAN For The Times

A New Architecture

Whether breaking down old hierarchies or creating new collaborative ventures, women such as Linda Roy are reshaping architecture, and clichés about feminine and masculine sensibilities are being dismantled. **E1**

RISEING: Zaha Hadid's ideas include the concept design of a Biennale Tower, right, and the boomerang-shaped Price Tower Museum in Bartlesville, Okla.

Female architects redesign a profession

[Women, from Page E1] practiced — from breaking down old hierarchical structures to creating new collaborative ventures.

Such shifts are also beginning to affect the very language of the art form. The once-firm boundaries that separated architecture, landscape and interior design are blurring. Clichés about feminine and masculine aesthetics are being slowly dismantled. The phallus is retro, curved, free-form sensual landscapes are in. And although it would be absurd to argue that such themes are exclusively their domain, women have played a central role in pushing them to the forefront of architectural debate.

"There is still the idea in some circles that women should be designing fabrics," says Sylvia Lavín, the dean of UCLA's graduate school of architecture.

"Now I think women are redefining these categories. That doesn't mean that the standard hierarchies will instantly disappear. But it may lead to a new model, maybe a model of a certain kind of tolerance. And ultimately, these things have a formal expression."

AN ERA OF DISDAIN

In architecture, talented women have been on the rise since the turn of the last century, but they were marginal figures. A pioneer like Julia Morgan, the designer of Hearst Castle, could be dismissed for her eclectic architectural style, or as someone who simply pandered to the tastes of wealthy clients. But even on the more radical fringes of the creative avant-garde, women were usually treated with disdain.

The self-taught architect and furniture designer Eileen Gray was a fixture of the Parisian cultural scene in the 1920s and '30s. Her E. 1027 House, which overlooks the Mediterranean in Cap Martin, France, is one of the seminal works of 20th-century design. Completed in 1926, the house blends classical Modernist aesthetic with a subtle sensuality. Its white horizontal forms seem to float along the edge of its mountain-side site, while a series of terraces evokes the decks of a ship.

Some might point to such subliminal eroticism as evidence of a feminine sensibility. But architects such as Richard Neutra and Oscar Neimeyer were also known for exploring Modernism's hedonistic side. If anything, their work was a direct outgrowth of a semitropical climate. In Gray's case, the single, playful reference to her gender is a sign near the front door that reads, "Entrez lentement" — Enter slowly.

But in the days of Man Ray, a beautiful woman could inspire the creative mind; a talented one was apt to breed resentment. Gray's accomplishments were ignored. Most critics attributed the house's design to her companion, the influential architectural editor Jean Badovici, who had played only a peripheral role in its creation. Meanwhile, Gray's career as an architect flourished, and today she is best known as the designer of a chrome-and-glass

end table.

Such was the position of women in architecture until the late 1950s. When women did begin to break into the professional mainstream, they usually did so as half of a husband-and-wife team — Charles and Ray Eames in Los Angeles, for instance, or Philadelphia's Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

But even these women tended to play a secondary role in the perception of the public at large. Charles Eames may have treated his wife as an equal, but many architects at the time dismissed her as the lesser of two creative minds. In the case of Venturi and Scott Brown, the division of labor was harder to define. Venturi is usually considered the real architect; Scott Brown, who was trained as an academic, is regarded as a more conceptual thinker. Yet their firm — Venturi Scott Brown and Associates — carries both names. And in 1991, when it was honored with a Pritzker Prize — the profession's highest accolade — the jurors awarded the prize to Venturi; Scott Brown wasn't even mentioned in the jury citations.

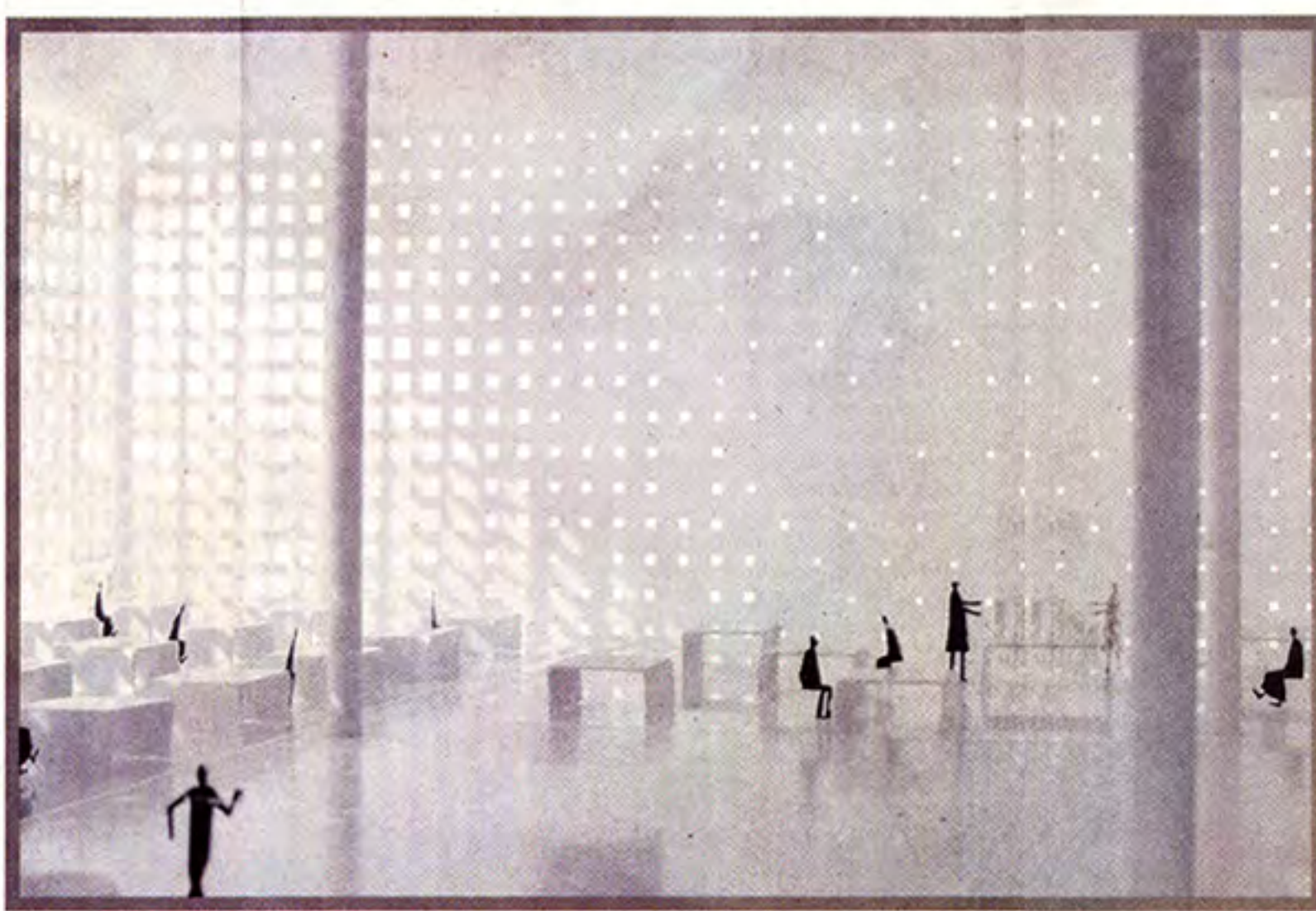
That kind of blatant sexism has faded in the culture as a whole. Women now make up roughly 35% of architecture school graduates in the U.S., compared with 12% in 1977, according to the Assn. of Collegiate Schools of Architecture.

Meanwhile, a handful of women have begun to establish high-profile firms, and increasingly, they are landing big commissions. Projects such as the 1999 O Museum in Nagano, Japan, with its taut, translucent surfaces, have made 47-year-old Kazuyo Sejima a major star in Japanese architecture. (Sejima works in partnership with a man, Ryue Nishizawa, but she tends to take the creative lead.)

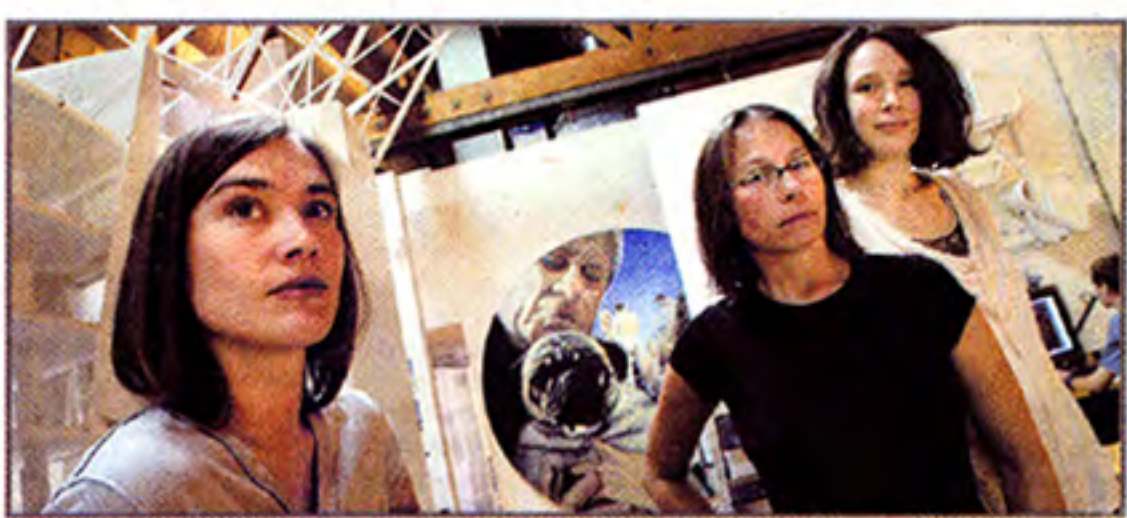
At 49, Carmé Pinos recently completed the sleek new Ses Estaciones Park in Palma de Mallorca, Spain, and is a well-known figure among architects' international set. And this year, the 53-year-old Zaha Hadid completed the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati, the first major art museum designed by a woman in the United States. Hadid is working on Rome's Contemporary Art Center, a science center in Wolfsburg, Germany, and on the sleek, boomerang-shaped Pritzker Tower Museum in Bartlesville, Okla.

Given such prominent role models, some young female architects see their future as rosy. At 39, Lindy Roy is considered a rising presence in New York architecture circles. She recently completed a sleek new showroom for the furniture designer Vitra in Manhattan's downtown meatpacking district; her Wind River Lodge, a compact hotel and spa in Alaska that is reached by helicopter and evokes a high-tech military installation, is scheduled to start construction next summer. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is holding the first major show of her work.

"I don't want to sound Pollyanna-ish about it," she says, "but generally, I don't think it has been a disadvantage to be a woman at all. I never feel I have to act like a man. If a man looks at me funny, they usually get over it once they see that I know



KAZUYO SEJIMA



ANNE CUBACK Los Angeles Times

WORKING MOTHERS: Kristina Looek, left, Kim Groves and Silvia Kuhle design and manage projects for Morphosis, a Santa Monica firm.

what I'm talking about."

"The current climate evokes more skepticism in others. Anabel Selldorf's New York office, in a downtown TriBeCa loft, can seem like a feminist utopia. Most of the designers are women. The work, too, is marked by a restrained elegance. A partial model of Selldorf's design for the Neue Gallery, the first major museum built in Manhattan in more than two decades, rests on a table. Designers are at work on a private residence in a ghost town at the edge of the Dolores River in Colorado.

"There is always an undercurrent of sexism," Selldorf says, speaking of the world outside her idyllic downtown sanctuary. "If you look nice and are relatively articulate, for example, everyone thinks of you as the pretty young thing. You get a lot of attention for a little showroom. But then the real world kicks in, and it's about whether or not someone is willing to commit \$55 million for a new building. Then it gets more difficult."

SACRIFICES NEEDED

ROY and Selldorf can agree on one thing: The greatest disparity between men and women who are striving to reach the highest levels of the profession today is in the personal sacrifices they are often forced to make to get there. Such sacrifices are a fact of life in many professions, but the particular demands of architecture can make them seem especially brutal. Young architects tend to work long hours for little pay. To become competent at their craft, they must master a daunting range of skills — from issues of composition and context to the subtleties of structure and material — something that can take decades. Consequently, they rarely reach the peak of their careers until their 50s, a time when other professionals are sending their kids off to college.

Under the circumstances, it should not be sur-

prising that so many successful male architects come equipped with a supportive female muse. Daniel Libeskind is a case in point. The winner of one of the world's most sought-after commissions — the master plan for Manhattan's ground zero — Libeskind has had a career largely shaped by his wife, Nina. She raises the children, runs his office and acts as a buffer between the creative genius and his clients or the press.

It is in this context that Hadid's career functions as a sort of morality tale for the younger generation. Her talent is indisputable. But it is her stubborn sense of independence that makes her a heroic figure to so many female architects. Whatever Hadid has achieved she has achieved without the help of a nurturing spouse. She has never been married and has no children.

"It is a great disadvantage," Hadid says. "Even if I had a husband, he would not do what these women do. They are there to help, take care of babies or whatever. I was on my own. I don't think that has changed."

Not all female architects choose the path of independence. Some continue to seek their emancipation within the boundaries of the traditional

male-female partnership. In doing so, they have forced the profession to reconsider what defines the act of creative collaboration. The result is a profession in which the balance — creative, personal, professional — struck between two partners can be as varied as their personalities. Architectural teams such as Liz Diller and Rick Scodico, or Henry Smith Miller and Laurie Hawkenson, have been part of New York's architectural scene for more than a decade. Neither team could be said to have a dominant creative voice.

Of such firms, the team of Sejima and Nishizawa has perhaps gone the furthest, turning the cliché of the subservient female partner on its head. By most accounts, Sejima is the firm's main creative voice. She founded Kazuyo Sejima & Associates in 1987. And although her partnership with Nishizawa began in 1995, both have maintained independent offices. The nature of their partnership thus remains unusually flexible. Sejima still accepts commissions on her own. Among her most recent is the House in a Plum Grove, scheduled for completion in Tokyo in September.

Still other architects have rejected the cult of the celebrity architect. They view it as an extension of a narcissistic culture, one in which the notion of a single creative genius — whether Filippo Brunelleschi or Frank Gehry — still predominates.

"I remember at 16, I made this calculation," explains Sylvia Kuhle, a project manager at Morphosis. "In the year 2000, I thought, 'I will have a baby.' I knew I wanted to do something else with my life first. Since then, I realized I don't need my face on the cover of a magazine. Watching people push all that steel around a site and knowing you are in charge, that this whole machine is working for you — that is pretty powerful stuff."

Perhaps the most radical change in how architects function today, however, has been the appearance of new kinds of collaborative ventures. This is especially true among the younger generation of architects fluent in new computer technologies.

One of the most successful of the new collaborations is United Architects, a firm that was formed a year ago to compete for the World Trade Center commission and includes the Los Angeles-



ANDY RAIN For The Times

KAZUYO SEJIMA

This prominent figure in Japanese architecture, right, takes a creative lead in her partnership with Ryue Nishizawa — continues to accept projects on her own, work in which she frequently plays with gender stereotypes. One of the partners' designs is at left.



Zaha Hadid Architects



GRAHAM BARCLAY For The Times

ZAHA HADID

Her career includes designs such as that of the Cincinnati Contemporary Art Center and, left, a science center in Wolfsburg, Germany. But it also functions as a sort of morality tale for female architects, in that she has achieved it without the presence of a nurturing spouse.

complexity it wouldn't have had otherwise.

"It is all part of an emancipation of the profession as a whole," Blaisse says. "It may be that traditionally women are more used to collaboration. It is a cliché — we like to collaborate. But it is also about men and women together. When men are alone, the tone is different. They speak in code; there are short cuts. It is very clear and very quick. With women there, the code is not there so there is a need for slightly more tolerance. People take more time to put their finger on the exact meaning of what is being said. I am sure that influences what you produce."

FEMININE SIDE

THE exact effect this emerging feminist sensibility is having on architectural form is hard to define, but it is real nonetheless. Roy, for example, describes her own work as "very macho," and the tough, mechanized look of a project like her design for the Wind River Lodge seems to support that appraisal. The main lobby of Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, by comparison, may be one of the most feminine spaces ever built. Its soft, undulating walls wrap snugly around you; light spills down from above. "I've seen student work that was obviously designed by a woman — pink walls, circular forms," says Morphosis' Kim Groves. "It is embarrassing. A good designer would never be so obvious. But in Sejima's work, or Hadid's, there is a lot of transparency and color. Maybe that is the feminine side of the work, and maybe that is what is so attractive. It fills a hole that was missing."

Sejima, in fact, has often played with conventional gender stereotypes in her work. In a recent design for the Venice Biennale she placed a series of pregnant mannequins in a room paved with white gravel.

"No man would design that," Groves says. "There is a confidence about it, a control that makes it powerful." That play on sexual stereotypes can also be in-

entionally humorous. Hadid's most recent work, for example, is often marked by dynamic concrete forms that fuse seamlessly with their urban surroundings. But in a design commissioned by Alessi for last year's Venice Biennale, she created a cluster of slender undulating towers that touched gently as they rise like intertwining legs — a feminine interpretation of the old masculine phallus.

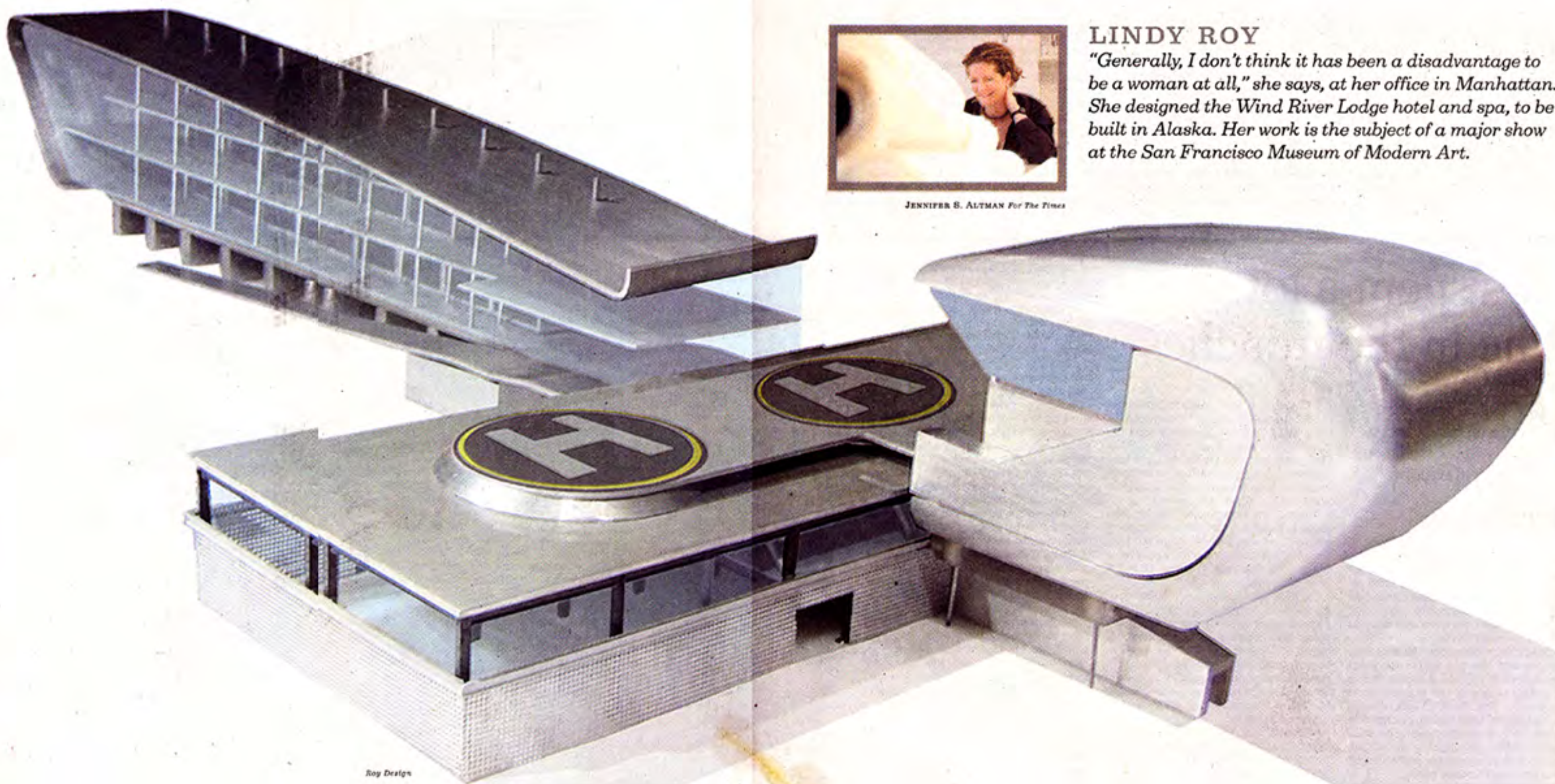
Blaisse, meanwhile, could easily be dismissed as a throwback to an earlier generation. She works with fabrics and plants — media that have traditionally been the domain of women. But like Sejima's, Blaisse's work is also a form of social commentary, one that uses such stereotypes to question our assumptions about the world.

"For me, what used to be a curtain in the old-fashioned sense — 'Oh, how pretty, how bourgeois' — has become a piece of architecture," she says. "Intellectually, the distance between the two has shrunk. Architecture has become more weak. More and more, it has the illusion of softness — it is less durable, it is designed to last 40 years, not centuries. At the same time, a human being can take a curtain and lead it across a track and create new space, cut off space, multiply space — all these things. The two have become virtually the same."

Such attitudes reflect a deepening shift in the contemporary cultural landscape — the emergence of a more adaptable, and open, view of life. In effect, they represent a rejection of the kinds of rigid categorizations that have defined Western society since the birth of the Enlightenment four centuries ago. What is more, as these attitudes begin to seep into the cultural mainstream, they promise to reshape our physical environment in ways we have yet to imagine.

"Someone like Zaha, we still don't have many examples of her complexity," Lavín says. "And I think one of the things that is going to have to happen if the world isn't going to come apart at the seams is a real acceptance of otherness. I really think that one of the most difficult things for people is to open up to things they don't know. If that happens, we will really be getting somewhere."

Nicolai Ouroussoff is The Times' architecture critic.



JENNIFER B. ALTMAN For The Times

LINDY ROY

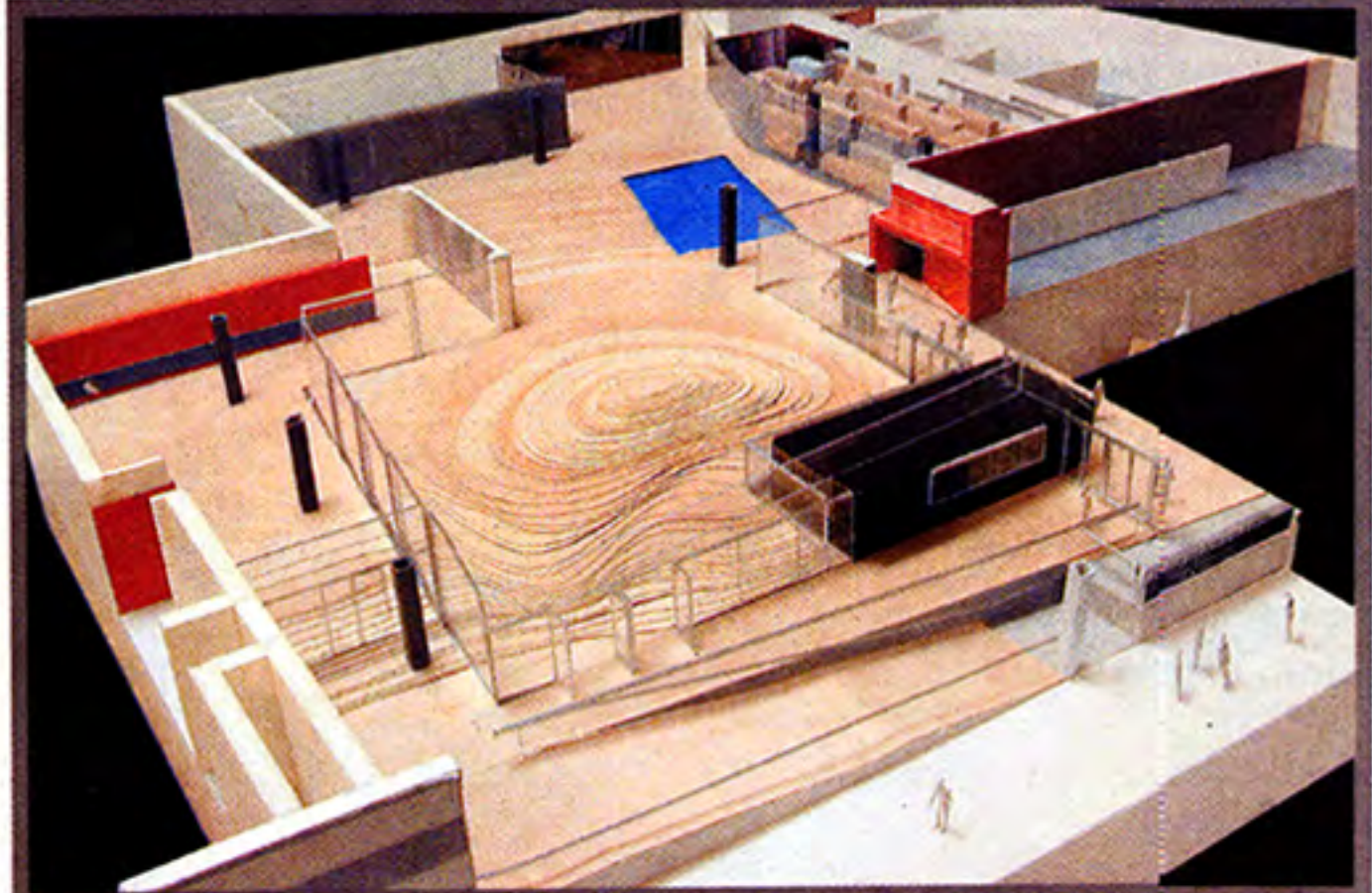
"Generally, I don't think it has been a disadvantage to be a woman at all," she says, at her office in Manhattan. She designed the Wind River Lodge hotel and spa, to be built in Alaska. Her work is the subject of a major show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



PATRICK BALLYENT

PETRA BLAISSE

The Dutch landscape architect has been working on an expansion for the UCLA Hammer Museum.



LEHMANN HENNING Gallery

Roy Design