

Keeping Houses, Not Building Them

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Most female architects have heard the horror stories: Mies van der Rohe's elevation to the pantheon of Modernist masters, as Lilly Reich dies in poverty and anonymity. Le Corbusier vandalizing House E-1027, Eileen Gray's masterwork in the South of France. Robert Venturi's acceptance of the 1991 Pritzker Prize as his wife and partner, Denise Scott Brown, went all but unrecognized.

"Women in Modernism," a colloquium held on Thursday night at the Museum of Modern Art, sought to take a more positive look at the role women have played in architectural history. In a discussion led by the Columbia University architectural historian Gwendolyn Wright, panelists focused on women who have had a profound impact on Modernist history, even while working on the periphery of the profession.

They include neglected figures like Esther McCoy, whose writings introduced Los Angeles Modernism to a generation who couldn't see beyond the palm trees and starlets; Elizabeth Mock, a curator and early proponent of linking architecture and environmentalism; and the architect Eleanor Raymond, who, with the inventor Maria Telkes, designed the country's first solar-powered house in the late 1940s.

Female pioneers in architecture: include the Irish-born Eileen Grey, above, and the German Lilly Reich, below. B. Abbott/Commerce Graphics

In recent years, of course, women have become more visible in the profession. Their ascent has had a subtle impact on architectural practice, including a new emphasis on collaboration and a breakdown of traditional boundaries between architects, landscape specialists, fabric designers and graphic artists.

But whatever optimism the panelists tried to muster about the future, we should all be appalled by the pace of progress. A recent study by the [Beverly Willis Architecture Foundation](#), a sponsor of Thursday night's panel, underscores the various setbacks women have suffered in their climb through the professional ranks.

In an interview after the colloquium, Ms. Wright described it as a pattern of advance and retreat. "The two major feminist movements in American history — the 1910s and the late '60s and early '70s — obviously opened a lot of opportunities for women," she said. "But in both cases they were also followed by a backlash, and the numbers drop again. When male authority is under threat, for example, or there's an economic downturn, women lose their jobs first."

The MoMA panelists, in fact, never addressed one of the most glaring questions: Why are there still so few women at the very top of the profession?

Women make up roughly half of all students in American graduate schools of architecture. Yet according to the American Institute of Architects, the professional association for practitioners, women accounted for only 13.3 percent of its members last year, an improvement from 1.2 percent in 1975 but a depressing figure nonetheless. And the number who have entered the ranks of international stars is minuscule.

One reason is the sexism that women encounter day to day in almost any profession. And any schoolgirl will tell you that the balance between work and family life is still skewed in favor of men. But the rarefied and strangely macho precincts of architecture can be particularly treacherous.

A young architect with serious creative ambition is routinely expected to work endless hours for little pay. Recognition and high-profile commissions, if they materialize at all, typically arrive in an architect's 50s — well past the typical age for starting a family. Not surprisingly, many of the most famous men in architecture today — now in their 60s and 70s — depended heavily on the support of their wives as they rose through the ranks. The wives ran their offices, raised their children and loyally bolstered their egos. But you won't find their names on the front door.

And if it's true that this cliché has now been mostly supplanted by another — the husband-and-wife team, working side by side at the computer screen — how does this help a woman striving to make it on her own? Who are her role models? In New York Lindy Roy, Annabelle Selldorf and Winka Dubbeldam are all important architects who are just starting to leave a mark on the city — without, I should add, husbands to balance their books and stroke their egos. But such examples are few and far between — and even they are still relatively unknown.

Sadly, there is little reason to expect the situation to improve anytime soon. The overwhelming financial and time pressures for architects haven't changed much, nor has the chauvinism that women must navigate, from the developer's office to the construction site.

Despite its image as a bastion of progressivism, architecture is a profession in which the glass ceiling has yet to be scratched, must less shattered.

A correction was made on November 12, 2007: An article in The Arts on Oct. 31 about the challenges facing female architects misspelled the surname of an architect who designed and furnished a 1929 house whose décor was later altered by the architect Le Corbusier. She was Eileen Gray, not Grey.