

S h a r o n V a t t a y

“Designing Women”: Gender and the Architectural Profession

ANMARIE ADAMS and PETA TANCRED (2000)

(Toronto: University of Toronto Press), ISBN 0802044174, 190 p., \$ 50.

Spiro Kostof's 1977 book, *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession*, was the first attempt to fully explore the issue of the architectural profession. While Kostof notes that most modern scholarship tends to focus on the product of architecture rather than on the profession, this collection of essays by Kostof and a number of contributing authors charts the progress of architects over the ages. Gwendolyn Wright's contribution, a chapter entitled "On the Fringe of the Profession: Women in American Architecture," is one of the earliest accounts of the position of women in the field. Like the contemporary book by architect Susana Torre, *Women in American Architecture: A Historical and Contemporary Perspective* (1977), Wright's central argument is that women have been discriminated against in this male-dominated world of architecture. Both Wright and Torre discuss the relatively small numbers of women architects and their apparent limited contributions to the profession. In each case, women are portrayed as victims or martyrs.

These early feminist readings of women in architecture are the very counterpoint to the argument put forth by Annmarie Adams and Peta Tancred in *“Designing Women”: Gender and the Architectural Profession* (2000). Adams and Tancred instead show that women are “active agents in their own careers,” and that they are not “mute victims of an uncaring profession.” (p. 11) Women “design” their own careers and thus they transcend the

narrow definition in a gendered substructure that is the architectural profession.

In this book, women are not seen as being excluded, rather we find out how they are included. Ultimately the authors seek to redefine the term “professional architect” which is developed from the perspective of the males who dominate the field. The definition is thus based on registration with a professional association. As the authors tell us, they want to reveal “the extent to which the profession’s own definitions and priorities have ignored both women’s presence and their widespread contributions.” (p. 3)

The reader is made immediately aware of the complexity of the definition of architect in chapter two. Indeed, we learn that the greatest obstacle in studying women in the field is the constraint of inserting the female roles into, what Tancred has previously coined, “male containers.” For this reason, Adams (an architectural historian) and Tancred (a sociologist) find the current association definition to be an inadequate instrument for their inquiry into women’s contributions. Many women go ignored simply because they function in a wide range of alternative employment which is outside of the male-defined boundaries of the associations. That is, if a woman is not registered with a professional association, not only is her measure of competence called into question, but she is often lost to us in the historical record.

This study thus takes a unique approach by focusing on the women architects who have followed less traditional career paths, that is, women who are unregistered professionals or de-registered architects. The authors, in a lexicon appended to the study, define these terms respectively as architects who have not registered with provincial associations and all those who have been members of a provincial association, but who have discontinued their membership. Remarkably, the extensive statistical research compiled by Adams and Tancred over a number of years reveals that hundreds of Canadian women function outside of the male-defined boundaries of architecture, and “unregistered” professionals actually equal over one-third of those employed in the broader field. As one of the many statistical tables in the book reveals, the occupational destinations of “de-registered” architects includes teaching (in architecture and related fields), urban planning, construction and the arts. By taking this revised approach to the study of women, the authors begin to locate the profession within a new female-extended discourse.

This desired focus accounts for the complex methodological framework used in this study. The combination of historical and sociological research methods (as are outlined in one of three

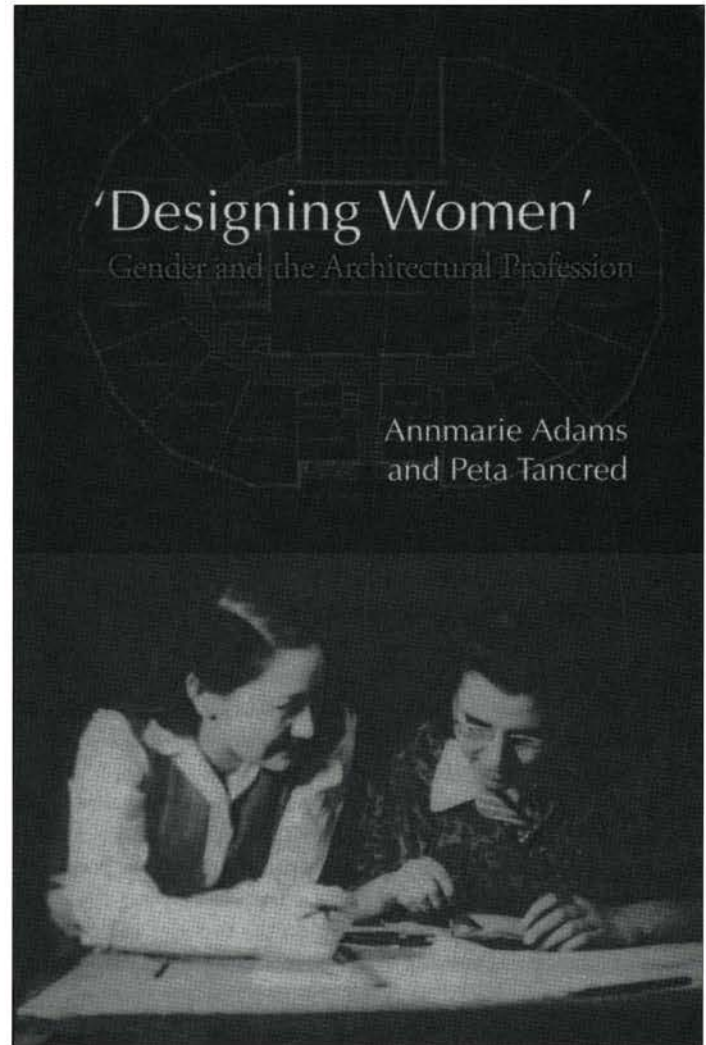
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appendices—Appendix A) includes statistical sources, archival records and personal interviews. This combination of research methods follows in the pattern of many current sociological writings. The results of the data collection are presented to the reader through a number of tables (29 in total), most found in Appendix B, suggesting the sociological emphasis of this work.

Each source revealed its own shortcomings. For example, the archival material on women in the profession was remarkably scant. As for the statistical data (which includes census material (from 1921 to 1991) and information compiled through individual provincial architectural associations), the numbers gleaned at times seemed conflicting. For example, in order to answer what appears to be a straightforward question such as when did women enter the profession, results for the census conclude 1921, while the provincial association records show 1925. This discordance is a direct result of the problematic definition of architect. In the census data the definition is inclusive, that is, it is the respondent who determines the label architect on the census form. Yet these people may very well be unrecognized by the professional association which is exclusive in its definition (i.e. they are unregistered or de-registered). For this reason, Adams and Tancred see the census definition (the non-association definition), while not perfect, to be “the preferable container.” (p. 35) Their methodology is in fact in keeping with the current changing views of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada which began in 1994 to recognize unregistered architects, and have accordingly modified their by-laws to include all people with the relevant educational qualifications. But one realizes that the war has not been won when Adams and Tancred remind us that the provincial licensing bodies are not following the RAIC’s lead of taking a more flexible stance on the definition.

Chapter three introduces another methodological approach, one that is often used in the discipline of material culture. Non-textual, or visual, sources become the key to Adams’ examination of the profession’s own view of women in the field. Presented previously in *Resources for Feminist Research* (1994) as “Building Barriers: Images of Women in the *RAIC Journal*, 1924-73,” this chapter focuses on the depiction of women in the influential, professional press, more specifically the *RAIC* [Royal Architectural Institute of Canada] *Journal*. These images are seen by Adams as the mechanism through which women were channelled into professionally approved spaces. The subtle references in the press (as interpreted by Adams) then reinforced the exclusivity (read: maleness) of the profession.

By marginalizing women’s contribution to the design process, identifying women as users of architecture rather than creators, and subtly suggesting the “manliness” of the profession,



the *RAIC Journal* basically imbedded in the minds of their professional subscribers a certain perception of women in the field. From Adams’ reading of the images, women are seen predominantly in complementary roles, such as interior design. Women act as consultants, men make decisions. Of course, we cannot fully appreciate comments like this in isolation from the social framework, and one is reminded that the role of consultant has not been unusual for women throughout history (take for example the medical profession and the female-dominated field of nursing). Could these images, which channelled women into the supplementary roles, have been man’s way of diminishing the threat of female competition? Ultimately the image of the architect, as projected from the pages of *RAIC*, was one of the man who was completely in control of the design process. He was powerful, virile and masculine. Women’s lack of such “manly” qualities denied them easy access into the profession.

Chapter four follows as the authors’ attempt to demonstrate the inaccuracy of this visual portrayal of women in the professional journal. Using factual material such as archival documents and personal interviews, the authors seek to show that despite all the barriers previously discussed women did indeed develop expertise in the field and have contributed to

Canadian architecture. The study begins to take a definite turn towards architects in Quebec—the authors acknowledging that they would like to show how distinct that practice was from the rest of Canada. In this chapter we learn that the Quebec situation was atypical (a topic further explored in chapter six). The province was slow to accept women as architectural students and they were admitted to the provincial association much later than elsewhere in the country. Nevertheless, these women excelled in their field. The authors attribute this to the time period of the 1960s and 70s, which marks a building boom. Ontario, on the other hand, was shown to be more typical of the Canadian situation. Their early struggles to enter the profession (in the lean years of the 1930s and 40s) forced women to choose a path of least resistance, which meant a career in public service, historical preservation and housing.

Knowing that women have extended beyond the core areas of architectural practice, Adams and Tancred set out in chapter five to explore the influences that propel women beyond the boundaries of the profession. This chapter is by far the most challenging as it focuses even more on the broader sociological issues of labour and gender. Although Adams and Tancred sum up their findings throughout the chapter, the quantitative data can nevertheless be overwhelming. Given that the authors were determined to set their study into a complex societal model, so many variables have to be introduced. In this chapter a good deal of emphasis is given to women's own thoughts of their careers and place in the profession, this taken from personal interviews.

The final chapter deals exclusively with Quebec. Both the quantitative and qualitative data indicate that the women architects in Quebec are unique from women in other provinces and chapter six attempts to explain the difference—the so-called Quebec question. As with the preceding chapter, the ideas here extend well beyond an investigation into architectural issues and considers the broader societal implications. Indeed the ideas enunciated here take into account various other disciplines that also seek to understand the specificity of this mainly francophone province.

This study forcefully pulls architectural history into a new type of scholarship. But the combination of disciplines proves to sometimes be difficult, and at times the book addresses an audience from one discipline more clearly than that from the other. Due to the extent of the quantitative data, the study can appear somewhat clinical. And, in its use of specific statistics, one can begin to question some conclusions. For example, for the male perspective, ten men from Quebec were interviewed. Is ten enough? Is it suitable to interview only men from this one

province? Another example is found on page 92 where the authors write "Thus, on the basis of a modest amount of quantitative data, it appears that our de-registered women are seeking out new career trajectories in order to combine fairly heavy domestic responsibilities with a continuing career." This remark is appended with a comment that unfortunately no parallel data was available for registered architects for comparative purposes.

But these are minor issues in a book as substantial as *Designing Women*. Perhaps the most impressive accomplishment is the amount of data compiled by the authors themselves. It is relevant to note that the provincial architectural associations did not have information on women at hand, and in many cases this research team had to pay for the collection of that data. The information Adams and Tancred collected from the individual associations has resulted in the most complete set of national data on architects in Canada. This may well serve as an excellent source for future research, and since the statistical tables are provided in this publication, the numbers (and not only the interpretations) can easily be used by other researchers. The authors also tell us that they have created an extensive biographical file on hundreds of women architects—another great achievement which should be published in the future. They feel that there are many reasons to be optimistic about future scholarship on women architects as archives in both the United States and Canada have begun to increase their minimal collections on women. (The Canadian Centre for Architecture has acquired drawings by Blanche Lemco van Ginkel and Catherine Chard Wisnicki). And, with Adams and Tancred's redefinition of "professional architect" one would hope that the field can only become more inclusive.

This book is consonant with the new direction architectural history has taken, which proves that the field can be something other than names and dates. But Adams and Tancred's examination of the issue of gender and its relation to the larger dynamics of status and power extends well beyond architectural history, and this study can especially appeal to the specialist in sociological issues. The authors acknowledge that building bridges between the two disciplines is the core to any feminist research and the gender issues revealed in this book on the architectural profession can be seen as characteristic of, and thus useful for, the study of many male-dominated professions.