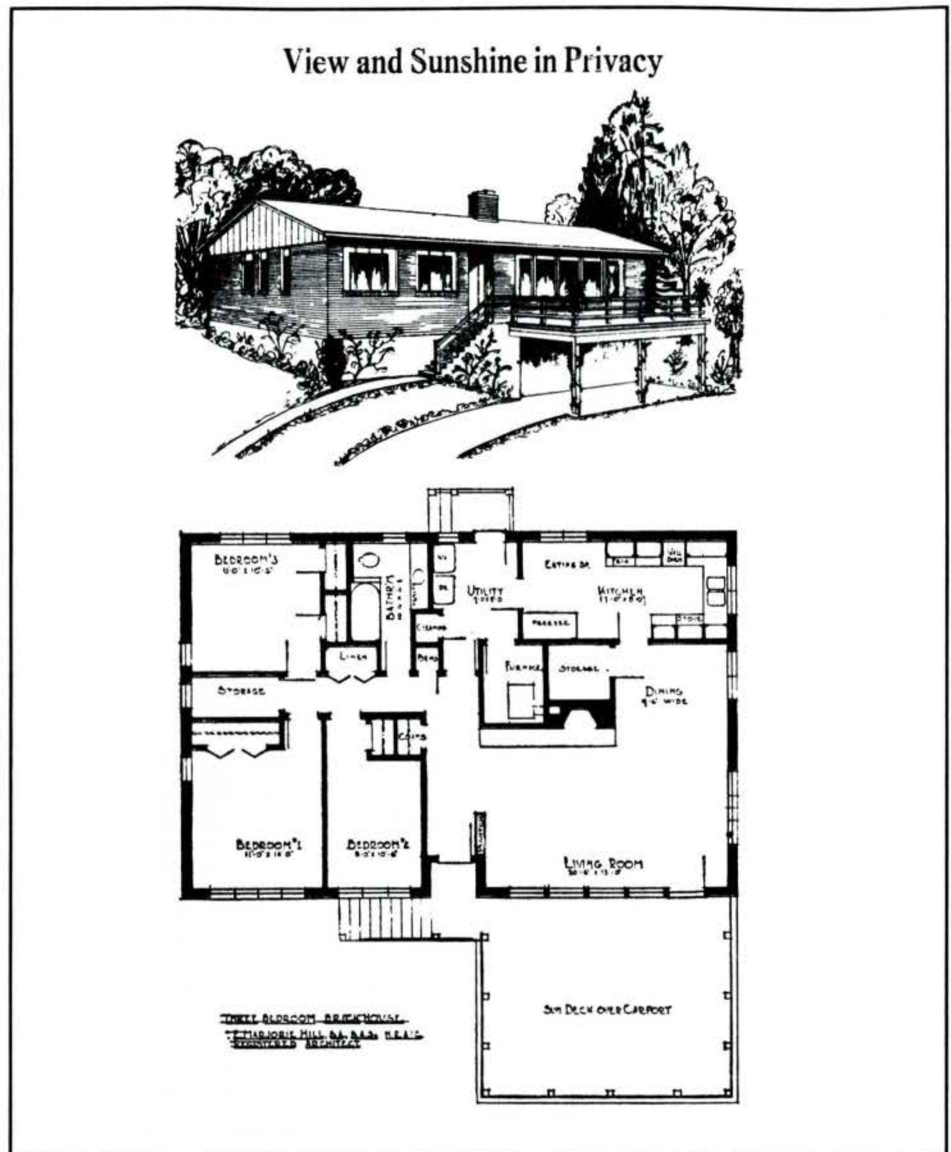
Slowly and Surely (and Somewhat Painfully): More or Less the History of Women in Architecture in Canada

CANADA'S FIRST WOMAN ARCHITECT.
Miss E. M. Hill, of Toronto, who received the Degree of B.A.Sc. from the University of Toronto, at the recent special Convocation.

Figure 1. E. Marjorie Hill, "Canada's First Woman Architect." (Saturday Night, *12 June 1920, p. 31 [University of Toronto Archives])*

By Blanche Lemco van Ginkel

Figure 2. A three bedroom brick house designed by Marjorie Hill. (Victoria Daily Colonist, 1952 [University of Toronto Archives])



Women entered the profession of architecture in Canada very slowly and with great difficulty. As a student in architecture at McGill in the 1940s, I knew that women had not been admitted to the program until 1939. I attributed this resistance to admitting women to architecture to the social climate of Quebec, where my mother could not sign a contract, and where women had been disenfranchised until 1940. These, of course, were much more fundamental issues. Women of previous generations had distinguished themselves as architects in England and the United States: Sophia Hayden had graduated from the Massachussets Institute of Technology in 1890; Ethel Charles had been admitted to the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1898, albeit with difficulty; and Julia Morgan had established a prestigious practice in California in 1920. So I assumed that Quebec was the anomaly in Canada. I discovered, only much later, that although women had received a Canadian degree in architecture since 1920, they experienced great difficulty in entering the profession in Canada, and their numbers were negligible (only five women were registered in 1939).

Until the late nineteenth century, an architect learned his craft by apprenticeship and there was no licensing of architects by an authorized body. I can find no record of a woman working as an architect in Canada in the nineteenth century, though undoubtably there were women designing and supervising the construction of buildings on their own account. And, of course, pioneering women in Canada, particularly in the new West, worked on the construction of their own homes.

The first formal education in architecture in Canada was offered in 1890 at McGill University and the University of Toronto. In the same year, the associations of architects in

Figure 3. An apartment house on Fort Street in Victoria, designed by Marjorie Hill in 1952. (University of Toronto Archives)

Ontario and Quebec were the first to register architects. It was not until 1916 (by which time there were five schools)[1] that a woman was admitted to a programme of architecture. In that year, Mary Anne Kentner was admitted to the programme at the University of Toronto and Marjorie Hill[2] to the University of Alberta. The former withdrew after two years for reasons of ill-health.[3] The latter transferred to the University of Toronto in 1918 and received the degree of B.A.Sc. in Architecture in 1920 (**figure 1**).

A cursory examination of Marjorie Hill's career reveals much about the position of women in the early twentieth century in Canada. After graduation, Miss Hill worked for the Eaton's Department Store in Toronto in the interior decorating department. In January 1921 she moved back to Edmonton, where her parents lived, and applied for registration with the Alberta Association of Architects. She was denied. It appears that a Mr. Burgess, who had been her teacher at the University of Alberta and who "did not approve of women in architecture," was also one of her examiners.[3] She taught at an "ungraded Country School" until the spring of 1922, when she gained employment as a draughtsman in the office of MacDonald & Magoon, Architects. The projects on which she worked included the Edmonton Public Library.

In the fall of 1922, Hill decided to extend her knowledge in the field, and returned to the University of Toronto for a post-graduate year in town planning. It is evident from Miss Hill's accounts of her career that she experienced discrimination not only when attempting to work in her chosen profession, but also in her studies. In 1984 she wrote:

> When I went back to University of Toronto in the fall of 1922 to study town planning I was under a worse cloud, mostly on account of the enormous applause given me when I went to kneel before the Chancellor and partly because the Alberta Architects Association did not want to register me and the then Minister of Education in Alberta, also University of Toronto alumnus, was so annoyed over it he put through the Legislature an amendment to the Professional Architects' Act to the effect that "any graduate of any school of architecture in His Majesty's Dominion shall be admitted." It was a *woman* who spiked that by adding "after a year's experience in an architect's office." Naturally, all this did not go down well with [Chairman of Architecture] C.H.C. Wright[4] who was already prejudiced. He didn't even come to Convocation 1920 when he had 4 students graduating in architecture and it was left to Dean Mitchell to shake my hand and congratulate me before I left the platform![5]

During the summer of 1923 Hill attended a course at Columbia University in New York. She remained in New York, working for architect Marcia Mead until December 1924, when she returned to Edmonton. She reapplied to the Alberta association and was accepted as a registered architect in 1925. But she must have found the social climate for a woman in architecture less inimical in New York than in Toronto and Edmonton, for in September 1925 she returned to New York to work for architect Kathryn C. Budd.

Miss Hill returned to the Edmonton office of MacDonald & Magoon in April 1928 but, as was the case throughout North America, the Depression severely curtailed architectural work, and she left the office in 1930. Since it was impossible to find work as an architect, and being a resourceful and independent woman, she applied her design skills to other enterprises. She became a prize-winning weaver, taught glove-making, and produced greeting cards for sale on a hand-press inherited from her father.

When her parents retired in 1936, Hill moved with them to Victoria. It was there, during the spate of building which followed the Second World War, that her practice finally flourished. Her work included several houses (**figure 2**), a motel addition, Fellowship Hall, apartment buildings (**figure 3**), and a convalescent hospital for seniors. She was not

1 University of Toronto, McGill University, École Polytechnique, University of Alberta, and University of Manitoba.

2 Esther Marjorie Hill was born 29 May 1895 in Guelph, Ontario, and died 7 January 1985 in Victoria, B.C.

3 E.M. Hill to Anne Ford, 23 March 1984.

4 C.H.C. Wright was the first professor of architecture in the School of Practical Science at the University of Toronto, and Chairman of Architecture.

5 E.M. Hill to Blanche L. van Ginkel, 3 July 1984.

Figure 4. E. Marjorie Hill (1895-1985), in later life.

registered in British Columbia until 1952;[6] either her Alberta registration sufficed, or the value of her commissions was not great before that time. She practiced as an architect until 1963, when she was 68 (**figure 4**), but continued with great energy to weave, make woodcuts, and produce various design works for sale until shortly before her death at the age of 89.

Notwithstanding that Marjorie Hill spent much of the early years of her career outside the practice of architecture, she must have remained strongly engaged. Her academic training was at a time when the University of Toronto remained immersed in the teachings derived from the École des Beaux-Arts and when practice relied on a pastiche of borrowed forms and decoration. Nevertheless, contrary to many of her contemporaries who continued to design in this mode, Hill applied a social sensibility to her work and extolled the virtues of sun, light, air, and space. Her modest apartment buildings are well-proportioned with a straightforward grace and clarity of detail.

One might have assumed that with Marjorie Hill the barricades had been breached, and that other women would have followed in swift succession. But by the end of the 1920s only two more women had graduated in architecture, both from the University of Toronto. In the 1930s there were 16 women graduates, representing 5.7 percent of the total of 282 graduates in architecture from Canadian schools. These numbers should be seen in the context of a sparsely-populated country whose architects had no recognition internationally and little at home. During the era of great railway building and western expansion most major buildings were designed by architects from Britain or the United States, and this tendency continued, if to a diminishing degree, until the 1960s.

Resistance to women entering architecture was both overt and covert. Once admitted to a school, women were subjected to subtle and not-so-subtle discrimination: there were unfunny jokes and derogatory remarks in the classroom; their presence was ignored in the studio, where instruction is frequently on an individual basis. Ramsay Traquair, the head of the school at McGill, actively opposed admission of women as late as 1930 because of "the very insufficient accommodation of our present classes." Furthermore, in a report to Principal Sir Arthur Currie, Traquair gave the following reasons why it was "impracticable to admit women":

1. Women are not admitted to the Faculty of Applied Science and the School of Architecture is an integral part of that Faculty.
2. There are not provisions in the Engineering Building for the accommodation of women students, and it would be an expensive matter to provide these.
3. At present the School of Architecture has a registration of forty, and there is no accommodation available for additional students.
4. Much architectural draughting is done at night, the main drawing room being open until ten o'clock. The responsibility for the maintenance of discipline in the evening is assumed by the students themselves. If women students were admitted, it would be necessary to provide staff supervision during these evening drawing periods and such supervision would require additional members of staff and put the School to extra expense for which it has no funds.[7]

As was noted at the time, none of these problems was insurmountable, particularly (given the expertise of the Engineering faculty) the plumbing shortcomings delicately referred to in the second statement. It is surprising that Professor Traquair did not enunciate the reasons most often cited for the exclusion of women: a lack of intellectual capacity and physical strength. In any event, the admission of women was not seriously considered until 1937, when enrolment in the McGill school had fallen from 40 to 27 due to the Depression. Women were finally admitted in 1939, the first being Catherine Chard and Arlene Scott.

Given the obstacles and general ill-will, it is perhaps to be expected that women entering a school of architecture in these early years were unusually committed to their course of study. At the University of Toronto, Beatrice Centner was awarded the Toronto Architectural Guild Medal on graduation in 1930, and Pegeen Synge the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada Medal in 1945. In the decade from 1980 to 1989 at the University of Toronto, the proportion of major awards earned by women on graduation was marginally higher than their 29 percent presence in the classes.

Architecture was one of the last professional programmes to which women were admitted in Canadian universities, probably because the earliest programmes were in schools of engineering (though enrolment did not increase substantially when architecture was transferred from the École Polytechnique in Montreal to the École des Beaux-Arts in 1923). Women were accepted in medicine at Queen's University in 1880, and even McGill admitted women to medicine in 1918, having already admitted women to the law faculty in 1911.

But schooling was only one of the hurdles on the licensing track. Prior to the "registration examination," work experience or internship in the office of a registered ar-

6 During an interview by David Hambleton, FRAIC, on 26 May 1984, Hill remarked: "the AIBC solicitor was not at all nice and asked, 'how did you come to be here?'" She also said that Fred Lasserre, director of the School of Architecture at the University of British Columbia, was on the examination committee. Lasserre had written to me (about 1950) that he was opposed to women teaching in the school.

7 Margaret Gillett, *We Walked Very Warily* (Montreal: Eden Press, 1981), 319.

chitect was required. Apprenticeship without schooling, although lengthy, was and still is a possible route to licensing as an architect. But finding a position in an architect's office and gaining the required professional experience either as an apprentice or intern was at least as difficult, if not more, as securing a place in a school. Until the late 1960s, the term "discrimination" had limited currency and was seldom applied to women. The refusal of an office to even entertain the idea of employing a woman could not be contested. Many women fully qualified by a university to take the first step into the profession were denied employment. Granted, there was very little work at all in architecture in Canada during the 1930s, but this overt discrimination against women by architects' offices persisted through the boom period of the 1950s.

There were, of course, exceptions to the prevailing attitude which excluded women from architects' offices. Like Elma Laird, a few of the earliest women to be licensed as architects did gain their credentials via the long term of apprenticeship. Nevertheless, even if hired by an office, a woman often had difficulty gaining a broad range of experience. She was frequently confined to work on domestic projects, particularly kitchens, and perhaps some small schools, but not more complex buildings that required a sophisticated knowledge of construction and engineering. And she was usually excluded from construction supervision, which is where a great deal is to be learned. She also was likely to be excluded from consultations with clients and contractors because it was assumed that they would not have confidence in a woman.

If and when a woman finally did achieve her goal and was registered as an architect, the social and political climate still placed her at a disadvantage with respect to her male peers. The daily press may represent an unduly unsophisticated view of society, but one might consider the following references to female architects — which presumably were acceptable, since no one objected to them. In one report in a Toronto newspaper about Marjorie Hill's graduation from the University of Toronto in 1920, the headline read: "New Trail Blazed by a Varsity Girl," though the accompanying photograph of her convocation clearly showed a woman of some maturity. I do not find a reference to a "boy graduate" in architecture, let alone to a "boy architect," but the Canadian newspapers frequently referred to a female architect as a "girl." Admittedly, the more sophisticated *Saturday Night* did identify Hill as "Canada's First Woman Architect."[8] Then again, the *Mail and Empire* titled an article: "Miss Marjorie's Plans."[9]

In 1951, a Toronto newspaper described Barbara Harrison, who graduated from McGill in 1947, as "up to her attractive ears, you might say, in the building business."[10] Even in 1956, a Montreal newspaper carried the heading "Local Girl Architect Wins Award at Vienna Congress,"[11] and this referred to a woman who had been working as an architect for eleven years and was an assistant professor of architecture at a university in the United States. Apart from such condescension, there remained a general perception that women were not equal to the task, at least in anything more than a single-family home. And if she did gain the confidence of a client, there remained the scepticism of the conservative construction industry, with an arsenal of weapons to undermine confidence.

It is a wonder, then, that Marjorie Hill did finally establish a practice of her own, and that she weathered the Depression and other perils.

In the decades from 1920 to 1939, of a total of 420 graduates from architecture schools in Canada, 19 were women. But by 1940, only two of these women were licensed by a provincial association of architects: apart from Marjorie Hill in 1925, the Alberta Association of Architects registered Margaret Buchanan, a graduate of the University of Alberta school, in 1939. In this same period an additional three women were licensed, two having been educated in Europe and one entering the profession via apprenticeship. Sylvia Holland, educated in England, was licensed in British Columbia in 1933, and Alexandra Biriukova, educated in St. Petersburg and Rome, was licensed in Ontario in 1931. Biriukova is credited with the well-known house for artist Lawren Harris at 2 Ava Crescent in Toronto (**figure 5**). Whether it was because of resistance to this frankly modernist house in conservative Toronto, or because of the Depression, she does not appear to have had additional commissions.[12] She trained as a nurse specialized in tuberculosis at West Park Hospital, York, graduated in 1934, and resigned from the OAA the same year. She remained at the hospital until her retirement in the 1960s, and is mentioned in *The Story of Toronto Hospital* as one of the longest serving tuberculosis nurses.[13] Apparently, few in her later profession knew she had been an architect.

Elma Laird also registered in Ontario in 1931. Having a business college education, she had worked for two contracting firms in Brantford, Ontario, before serving an apprenticeship with architect F.C. Bodley.[14] But she, too, was a victim of the Depression, and after 1934 worked as a secretary until her retirement in 1968.

8 *Saturday Night*, 12 June 1920, p. 31.

9 *Mail and Empire*, Toronto, 7 August 1920, p. 17.

10 *Globe and Mail*, Toronto, 20 January 1951, p. 12.

11 *Montreal Star*, August 1956.

12 Geoffrey Simmins, *Ontario Association of Architects: A Centennial History, 1889-1989* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for the Association, 1989), 110.

13 Godfrey L. Gale, *The Changing Years: The Story of Toronto Hospital and the Fight Against Tuberculosis* (Toronto: West Park Hospital, 1979). I am grateful to Dorothy Field for this reference.

14 Simmins, *Ontario Association of Architects*, 112.

Figure 5. Lawren Harris residence, 2 Ava Crescent, Toronto, built in 1931. The design is credited to Alexandra Biriukova. (Photo: B. L. van Ginkel, 1991)

By 1960, of the 2,400 architects registered in Canada, only 30 were women. There were only ten women among the 1,010 registered in Ontario and five women among the 669 in Quebec. However, Manitoba and Alberta each registered six women when the membership in each province was only about 160.

It was not until the 1970s that women gained a recognizable presence among graduates of the Canadian schools of architecture. From 1970 to 1979 they represented 12 percent of graduates, and from 1980 to 1985 they were 25 percent. Consequently, it was not until the 1980s that there was a meaningful increase in women's registration in the profession. In 1960 women were 1.2 percent of all registered architects in Canada; in 1985 they were 6.6 percent.

By 1990, women accounted for 7.7 percent of registered architects in Ontario, but the proportion had increased to 16 percent in Quebec. Considering that there was not a woman registered in Quebec until 1942, and the second was not registered until 1952 (by which time all but the small maritime provinces had admitted women), this indeed represents a dramatic change in the profession in Quebec. Signals of change had appeared in 1971, when the first woman was elected to the council of the Quebec association, and two years later, when the first woman to sit on the council of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada was the representative from Quebec. Only Alberta had preceded Quebec's election of a woman to a provincial association council (in 1966). In Ontario it did not happen until 1977.

Considering the high proportion of women now in public life in Quebec, it might be reasonable to assume that the apparently higher regard for women architects in the province is a function of the fundamental societal change of the "Quiet Revolution" in the 1960s. There does seem to be a concurrence between the acceptance of women in architecture and their acknowledgement as citizens. Apart from the Quebec story, one might consider that the first school of architecture to accept a female student was in Alberta; that Alberta and Manitoba in 1960 had by far the highest proportion of women among registered architects; and that these two provinces, together with Saskatchewan, were the first to enfranchise

women (in 1916). I speculate, too, on whether this more generous acceptance of women as "persons" was due to the role that pioneering women had played in a tough territory.

I am reminded of the story of women architects in Finland. I do not have recent figures, but in 1975 women represented 25 percent of the practicing architects, and in 1979, 43 percent of the students in architecture were female. The first woman received a degree in architecture from the Polytechnic Institute in Helsinki in 1890, when Finnish nationalism was gathering force. Finland had a high degree of autonomy during the period when it was a duchy of the Russian Empire (1809-1917), and the nationalist movement was as much cultural (particularly counter to 650 years of Swedish culture) as it was political. It was a movement which belonged to the entire people, not just to an elite male group. Consequently, women were enfranchised and could hold office as early as 1906, and today about one-third of the members of parliament are women. In this social climate, a woman architect, Vivi Lönn, was commissioned to design the central fire station at Tampere in 1908, and Elsa Arokallio designed the Kauhava barracks for the Finnish army in 1923.[15]

Architecture is a cultural pursuit and those who practice it — or are allowed to practice it — reflect our culture, our mores, our attitudes, in Canada as elsewhere.

But numbers are not all — and distinction in the profession is ultimately more important. It may be significant that the open competition in 1989 to design a new headquarters building for the Ontario Association of Architects was won by a woman, Ruth Cawker. Others have achieved distinction in recent years: Patricia Patkau of British Columbia, who, with her partner, won the national competition for the Clay and Glass Museum in Waterloo, Ontario, in 1982; Helga Plumb of Dubois/Plumb, who was awarded a Governor General's Medal for Architecture in 1983 for design of the Oaklands apartments in Toronto; and Brigitte Shim, whose work was featured on the cover of the prestigious *Architectural Review* in April 1991.

The only international institution in Canada devoted to architecture, the Canadian Centre for Architecture, in Montreal, was founded by Phyllis Lambert, who also received a Massey Medal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada as architect of the Saidye Bronfman Centre in Montreal. The liveliest and most innovative Canadian periodical on architecture, *SECTION a*, was founded and published by Odile Hénault. And 14 women have now been elevated to the status of Fellow of the RAIC. So, despite the painful process and slow pace, women surely are making their place in architecture in Canada, not merely in quantity but with quality.

15 *Profiles: Pioneering Women Architects from Finland* (Helsinki: Museum of Finnish Architecture, 1983).

I am grateful to Anne Ford for introducing me to Marjorie Hill; to David Hambleton, FRAIC, for interviewing her on my behalf; and to Mary Clark, MRAIC, from whose as-yet unpublished studies of women in architecture in Canada I obtained data on Canadian schools.
Data on registration is from the provincial associations of architecture. Information on the University of Toronto is from the School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, University Archives, and Faculty of Applied Science and Engineering.