

WALLBRIDGE

The Architectural Practice of Two



B Y E R N A

AND IMRIE

Edmonton Women, 1950-1979



Figure 1. The Queen Mary apartments in Edmonton, built between 1951 and 1953, were Wallbridge and Imrie's first effort in private practice. (Photo: Mary Bramley)

D O M I N E Y



Mary Imrie (standing) and Jean Wallbridge, 1947.
(Alberta Recreation, Parks and Wildlife Foundation)

Women have made great strides in the architectural profession during the course of the twentieth century. While the experience of Canadian women has certainly not been easy, their numbers in this specialized field have grown substantially in the past thirty years.¹ The few who took degrees in architecture during the first half of this century struggled first to gain entry, then acceptance into the profession. Once there, they had to fight simply to stay in business. That the situation is no longer quite so difficult is in no small way due to the efforts of those women who had the courage to enter that most un-feminine realm, the construction industry. In Alberta, two such pioneering women were Jean Wallbridge and Mary Imrie.

Wallbridge and Imrie were the third and fifth women respectively to join the Alberta Association of Architects, but the first in Edmonton to form their own architectural practice. They were in business from 1950 until 1979, when Jean died at the age of 67. By far the majority of their architectural projects were of a domestic nature: private residences and apartment buildings, as well as both tract and row housing. This was typical of the experience of women architects, as the literature on the subject makes clear. According to Gwendolyn Wright, author of one of the first studies on women and architecture in North America,

Those few women who were able to take part seldom challenged ... or competed with the men who dominated architectural practice; instead they took up the slack where they could, performing jobs and concentrating on the services which their male colleagues either put aside or treated only peripherally.²

A spattering of "women's fields," namely domestic architecture and interiors, evolved as areas of specialization where it was permissible for women to practice, since here they were dealing with other women's needs. Wallbridge and Imrie's practice did indeed conform to this pattern, as Mary Imrie herself observed in a 1954 letter to Eric Arthur, her former professor at the University of Toronto:

Our business is still providing a meagre living, although it is not so booming as last year. If only we got more bigger jobs and fewer headachy ones, we would be considerably wealthier and happier. But that is probably one of the disadvantages of being female. People will get us to do their houses, be thrilled with them and go to larger male firms for their warehouses or office buildings.³

There may be many reasons why they focused on domestic architecture, but these remain to be explored.

Jean Wallbridge was born in Edmonton in 1912. She was schooled privately in Victoria, Switzerland, and England. Before returning home, she was presented by Lady Cunliffe-Lister to King George V and Queen Mary at their Third Court on 23 June 1932.⁴ This would seem to indicate a social position that would enable her to make career choices unavailable to most women at the time.

She completed grade 12 at Edmonton's Victoria High School, then enrolled at the University of Alberta. She was one of four women to graduate with a Bachelor of Applied Sciences in Architecture in the 27-year history of the programme. Her teacher was Cecil Burgess, a Scottish architect who had come to Edmonton in 1913 via Montreal, after having been recommended by Percy Nobbs for the position of University Architect and Professor of Architecture. Burgess taught his students an Arts-and-Crafts respect for materials and a knowledge of the Classical orders.

In 1939, her graduating year, Jean was awarded a fourth in Class A of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada medals. Some of her student drawings are preserved in the University of Alberta Archives. She took a Bachelor of Arts the following year, and on 6 February 1941 she was registered with the Alberta Association of Architects.

Her first job was with Rule, Wynn and Rule, a firm established by one of her classmates, Peter Rule. Her next position was with the Town Planning Commission in Saint John, New Brunswick, during World War II. She returned to Edmonton in 1946 to work as a draughtsman in the Department of the City Architect and Inspector of Buildings, where she remained until 1949.

Mary Louise Imrie was born in Toronto in 1918. She moved to Edmonton in 1921, when her father, John Mills Imrie, became publisher of *The Edmonton Journal*. He encouraged Mary in her interest in architecture and allowed her to design the family's lakeside cottage when she was 16. Mary received her education in the Edmonton public school system, completing high school in 1936. She took a secretarial course and then worked for a year before enrolling in architecture at the University of Alberta in 1938.

Upon hearing that the architecture programme at the University of Alberta would no longer be offered after the retirement of Cecil Burgess, Mary applied to the University of Toronto and was accepted into second year architecture in 1940. The summers of 1941 and

1 Blanche Lemco van Ginkel, "Slowly and Surely (and Somewhat Painfully): More or Less the History of Women in Architecture in Canada," in this issue of the *SSAC Bulletin* (pp. 5-11).

2 Gwendolyn Wright, "On the Fringe of the Profession: Women in American Architecture," in *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession*, ed. Spiro Kostof (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 280.

3 Mary Imrie to Eric Arthur, 3 June 1954, Provincial Archives of Alberta.

4 Frank Burlington Fawcett, ed., *Their Majesties' Courts Held at Buckingham Palace 1932* (London: Grayson and Grayson, 1932), 115, 138.

1942 were spent back home in Edmonton, employed in the office of Rule, Wynn and Rule, who were on their way to becoming the most successful firm in the city. In 1944 she received her degree, but stayed in Toronto to work with architect Harold Smith on hospital projects. She then moved to Vancouver to work in the office of architect C.B.K. Van Norman. By the end of 1944 she had returned to Edmonton, joining the Alberta Association of Architects on 7 December.⁵

Back with Rule, Wynn and Rule in 1945, Mary draughted plans for schools, offices, and industrial buildings. In 1946 she entered the office of the City Architect and Inspector of Buildings, and worked there for four years. Although both she and Jean Wallbridge were registered architects, the pair accepted positions as draughtsmen on civic projects. It seems, however, that they were highly regarded by the city architect, Max Dewar. In 1947 he recommended that they be given three months' leave to take a study tour of post-war reconstruction and community planning in Europe.⁶ City commissioner D.B. Menzies authorized the leave, but did so reluctantly, insinuating that Dewar's office must be overstaffed for him to release staff at the height of the building season.

Both women kept diaries and took photographs on this, the first of their many journeys together overseas. These are now in the Provincial Archives of Alberta. Mary Imrie wrote articles on their travels, which she submitted to the *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada*.⁷ Their first contribution, "Planning in Europe," documenting the British leg of the journey, appeared in the October 1948 issue.

The two women's contribution to their employer was not lost on the city architect, who, in 1949, recommended that they be reclassified so that their wages could be increased. He suggested that Miss Wallbridge be given the title "Technical Assistant in Town Planning" and that Miss Imrie be known as "Junior Architect." In his letter to the commissioner, Dewar wrote

Both these girls, being registered architects, are much more valuable to this department than would be a draughtsman who would accept a salary of this amount. I can assure you that it would be next to impossible to replace them with experienced draughtsmen in this salary bracket.⁸

Further correspondence in the City of Edmonton Archives reveals that Dewar was unsuccessful in his bid to pay the two women the wages of experienced draughtsmen, let alone registered architects.

In the December 1949 issue of the *RAIC Journal*, it was noted in the column "News from the Institute" that the Misses Imrie and Wallbridge had resigned from their positions "to carry out private researches in South America." They took a full year to make the long drive there and back, and submitted an article on their travels, "South American Architects," to the *Journal* in 1951.

They were unable to return to their jobs with the city after their trip: Dewar had gone into private practice. Wallbridge and Imrie decided to follow suit. "The girls," as they became known, established themselves in an office in downtown Edmonton and began to look for commissions.

As a result of their years in the City Architect's office they knew projects were often submitted to the City Building Permits office without an architect's stamp. Mary Imrie found the firm's first job by going to see her former co-workers and then following up the leads they provided.⁹ The Queen Mary apartments were three medium-sized apartment buildings of ten suites each (figure 1). They were built between 1951 and 1953 for a consortium from Regina of two dentists, a contractor, and a plasterer. The site was favourable for developers, located north of Edmonton's downtown, and relatively low in price because it had originally been part of the Hudson's Bay Reserve lands. Although not markedly different in appearance than most walkups of the time, the Queen Mary apartments are spacious, convenient, and well landscaped. They have been so well kept that, after forty years, they are still commanding the highest rents in the neighbourhood.

From this beginning, the firm continued for nearly thirty years and undertook 224 projects. Of these, 67 were private residences. Most were in Edmonton, but there were a few in Calgary, Red Deer, and Lloydminster. The firm designed 23 residential additions and alterations, including garages, fireplaces, and recreation rooms — many for houses they had originally designed — as well as five lakeside cottages.

Fifty of the firm's projects were apartments, mainly walkups but also row housing and what are listed in their files as "garden apartments." These seem to have been relatively inexpensive structures, for developer clients. Most were located in Edmonton but 11 were in northern Alberta. The firm also designed tract housing for construction and lumber companies in Edmonton.¹⁰

5 Much of this biographical information on Mary Imrie was compiled by Mary Clark for the 1986 exhibition *For the Record*, which documented women graduates in architecture from the University of Toronto.

6 M.C. Dewar to the City Commissioners, 21 July 1947, City of Edmonton Archives.

7 "Les Girls en Voyage," February 1958, pp. 44-46; "Hong Kong to Chandigarh," May 1958, pp.160-63; "Khyber Pass to Canada," July 1958, pp. 278-79.

8 Max Dewar to Commissioner D.B. Menzies, 8 February 1949, City of Edmonton Archives.

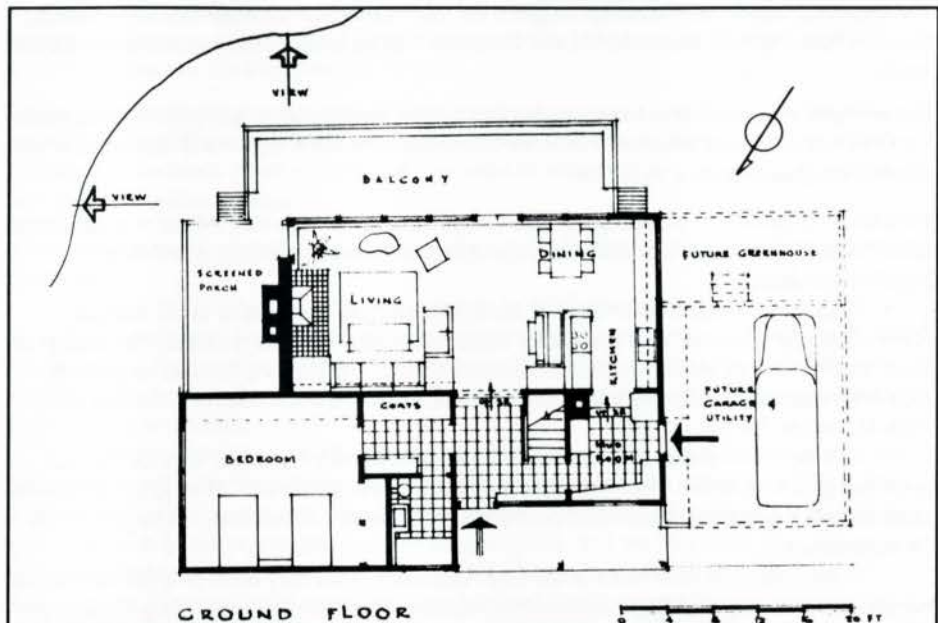
9 Mary Clark, "Architectural Scrapbook" (unpublished), prepared for the exhibition *For the Record*, University of Toronto Archives.

10 These companies included Alldritt Construction, Maclab Construction, and Imperial Lumber.

Figure 2 (above). Side view of Wallbridge and Imrie's home and office, Six Acres. The main living areas on the ground floor and the offices and spare bedroom in the basement face the ravine. (Provincial Archives of Alberta)



Figure 3 (below). Ground floor plan of Six Acres. The compact open plan with built-in furniture demonstrates the simplicity and economical use of space that is typical of their work. (Provincial Archives of Alberta)



Late in their practice the firm designed three apartments for senior citizens in small centres for the Alberta government's Alberta Housing Corporation. The only other projects done for the Alberta government were three small town telephone exchanges (two were extensions to existing buildings), and the Department of Public Welfare's Diagnostic and Receiving Centre for young offenders in Edmonton, through the Department of Public Works.

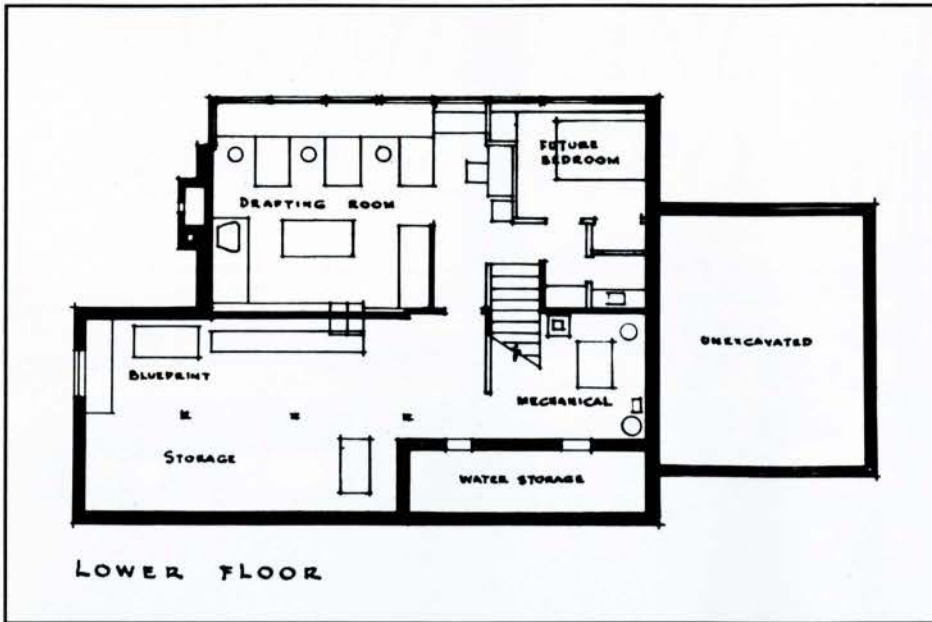
There are only 23 commercial projects listed in Wallbridge and Imrie's files. These include two small office buildings and two office alterations, a machine shop, two warehouses and an extension to one of them, the Alberta Seed Growers' plant and a later addition to it, three stores, two alterations to stores, and one small shopping centre, all in Edmonton. Their firm also designed a radio and TV station in Lloydminster, a hotel in Lac La Biche, two motels and a restaurant in Jasper, and a burger drive-in in Edmonton. There was also a Roman Catholic church, St. James, in Edmonton (with a later addition), and a small museum made of logs, the Luxton, in Banff.

According to architectural colleagues of Wallbridge and Imrie, this concentration on residential work differed markedly from the pattern of the typical architectural firm in Edmonton at the time. As Roy Gordon observed,

I would think that most firms starting out would depend on house commissions to some degree but they would

Figure 4 (above). Lower floor plan. (Provincial Archives of Alberta)

Figure 5 (below). Dining room and kitchen. The open-beamed ceiling and the horizontal window between the kitchen counter and cupboards are found in many of their houses. (Provincial Archives of Alberta)



broaden their practice very quickly because house design was not a very lucrative practice. Domestic design doesn't have to be unremunerative. It is in Edmonton because of the circumstances. The houses are small and people are not prepared to pay you what it's worth for the design.¹¹

When asked why his firm didn't do domestic work, one successful Edmonton architect stated flatly, "No money in it," and chuckled, "we couldn't charge what they were worth. They [the clients] would waste your whole afternoon talking about a kitchen and then they'd change their minds."¹² This is in direct contrast with what clients of Wallbridge and Imrie said of the pair:

I think the one thing about them that architects or all professional people would do well do emulate was their ability to combine business with pleasure. You didn't feel as if they were punching a time clock or charging you \$40 apiece for every phone call.¹³

By all accounts, "the girls" were extremely conscientious about meeting the clients' needs and designing houses that would "fit" and make them happy. Here's what another client recalled:

I didn't want any hot shot architect telling me what I wanted.... There weren't any conflicts with them, they listened and they advised ... and I was amazed at how they could produce a house that pleased us so well with so little instruction....

11 Interview with Roy Gordon of Gordon Mangold Hamilton Architects, 28 June 1991.

12 Interview with Gordon Wynn of Rule, Wynn and Rule, Architects, 27 June 1991.

13 Interview with Marnie and Sanford T. Fitch, 21 June 1991. The Fitch family took occupancy in April 1967.

Figure 6. View of the ravine and North Saskatchewan River from the dining room. (Provincial Archives of Alberta)



But it was really such a wonderful experience for us and we were so fond of them.... After 23 years, I would hate to be parted from the house.¹⁴

Wallbridge and Imrie's own home, which they began in 1954, will serve as an introduction to their architectural style. In May 1957 they moved into the combined home and office, named "Six Acres" after the size of the property. Originally just a weekend shack, they built a large part of it themselves, including the window frames, and became, in Mary Imrie's words, "half-decent carpenters."

As with many of their projects, the house was built on a river bank, taking full advantage of the beautiful view (figure 2). The compact open plan with built-in furniture demonstrates the simplicity and economical use of space that is typical of their work (figures 3, 4). The open-beamed ceiling and the long horizontal window between the kitchen counter and cupboards are found in many of their houses (figure 5). The house's front elevation is unassuming, as the main living area was located at the rear, oriented toward the view (figure 6). Their office, located in the basement, had large windows because of the drop in elevation. On her death in April 1988, Mary Imrie left Six Acres to the Alberta Recreation, Parks and Wildlife Foundation.

While their architectural practice did not conform to that of most firms in Edmonton at the time — they were hands-on, "studio" architects who specialized in domestic architecture — contemporaries agree the two were spirited, talented, capable architects and a credit to the profession in the province. In their careers Jean Wallbridge and Mary Imrie overcame the obstacles placed before Canadian women architects. Wallbridge and Imrie's 30-year practice demonstrates that success, on their own terms as well as their profession's, was possible — if not easy.

14 Interview with Mrs. Jean Ward, 20 June 1991. Mrs. Ward and her late husband Henry moved into their house in October 1968.

Erna Dominey, a graduate student in Art History at the University of Alberta, is working on a Master's thesis on the Edmonton firm of Wallbridge and Imrie, Architects. At this early stage most effort has been of a "reconnaissance" nature: reading through the firm's project files in the Provincial Archives of Alberta, identifying and locating their buildings, contacting the current owners, and photographing as many projects as possible.

Happily, many of the houses are still occupied by the original clients, many of whom have been willing to participate in an oral history project to gather more data about Wallbridge and Imrie. And many of their friends and colleagues have also co-operated, providing valuable information impossible to obtain through written sources.