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WOMEN in MODERNISM

Gwendolyn Wright

Architecture, like all professions, has its internal mechanisms of power and judgment. These are usually taken for granted, seeming venerable, uncontestable, yet up-to-date. Scientists call such premises a 'cascade' since everyone keeps repeating shared presumptions. To ask questions seems hostile, disparaging. . . and a career risk (what's called a 'reputational cascade,' generating a torrent of criticism). With this tendency in mind let us ask *why* none of the best-known 20th-century books and magazine pieces on Modern Architecture included women designers, nor were they written by women.

It's strange that modernists would be so cautious. Every form of modernism has involved a critique of the status quo, an effort to redirect, improve or at least enliven conditions in the present day. Yet challengers tend to impose their own system of order, hierarchy and orthodoxy, claiming theirs to be the sole legitimate paradigm. And bold absolutist claims fare better than quiet relativist questions.

Other modern professions have changed dramatically over the past several decades. Medicine engaged questions about the physician's absolute authority, patient rights, conflicting opinions, cultural differences, traditional medicine and alternative forms of practice. Is it coincidence that so many women entered the field and became prominent during these years, or that, refuting fears, so many innovations occurred? By contrast, architecture sustains outdated myths that sanctify 'Authority.' Museums burnish this aura. Many people still insist that European émigrés and their loyal American disciples brought modernism to this country, as if in a suitcase, with the 'International Style' exhibition of 1932 at MoMA. Likewise the Battle between the Whites and the Grays seems the major event of the 1970s. These assertions deny the validity, often the very existence, of earlier experiments and multiple expressions of modernism, then and now.

Our focus this evening is a related myth that there have been few women, and no significant women modernists in architecture. The actual statistics are rather surprising, but evidence rarely triumphs against cultural biases. So tonight we are looking closely at the systems of power that describe (and thereby define) modernism, especially judgments that determine what is 'significant' --- or not. We'll consider four kinds of institutions that make critical judgments about value: museums, schools, publications and organizations that direct research, in part through funding programs.

These institutions have been operative for over a century, with some far more potent than others. None of them has ever purposefully excluded or denigrated women. (Indeed, women have been a visible presence, past and present.) So how is it that women architects have been almost invisible over most of this time? One explanation is Americans' reluctance to analyze systems of power. To do so seems overly negative, conspiratorial, an admission that some inequalities might be structural rather than personal failings. Criticism generates countervailing examples that obscure broad-based patterns of inequality.

Americans are also notoriously indisposed to the idea that history has implications. We want to focus on the future, as if it were wide-open terrain. "Why complain?" some will say; "things have gotten so much better in recent years." The so-called 'failure of success' celebrates advances, making critiques seem like outdated harping (or 'bitching'). Criticism might set back current opportunities --- an admission that those opportunities may be tenuous. The parallel with recent enthusiasm for 'green architecture' helps make the point that favorable attention doesn't necessarily solve problems; it can even obscure them by generating complacency.

Every system of power works to maintain its authority. The machinations are principally verbal. One tactic insists on cohesion against the 'enemy' --- in this case, those who misinterpret 'true modernism' or refuse to stand for 'good architecture' --- elusive terms defined principally by disdain for what is 'Other.' Both establishment institutions and the avant-garde use criticism of modern architecture --- whether legitimate or cantankerous, within or outside the profession --- to turn against internal critics. Unity becomes essential, so anyone who crosses the line is a traitor, castigated for capitulating to mediocrity, to mass culture, to the facile simplifications of New Urbanism. This assertion of legitimate, even commendable convictions is also a sign of suppressed fears and aggression. The familiar magisterial pronoun pronounces: "*We* know what's good . . . what's significant, what's dangerous or unworthy" --- typically followed by a shared sneer at what '*they*' think. No one wants to be cast into that purgatory.

Veneration for '*the* **A**rchitect,' his intentions, formal imprint and radical inventiveness has a similar effect. The rhetoric of ineffable awe is quasi-religious, a matter of belief rather than clear analysis and judgment. Most architectural institutions focus on a handful of major designers, ignoring the rest. There are hundreds of monographs on 'great architects' and a few on 'women architects,' as if these were separate spheres. Architectural exhibitions not only celebrate singular 'masters' and their 'masterpieces'; they also suggest a precipitous drop from this ethereal realm to the nadir of mediocrity. Again, no one here would begrudge talent or deny real differences in quality and originality. But mystical reverence makes it difficult to question myths, to challenge imposed hierarchies, to explore multiple kinds of invention, exploration, intentions --- and effects.

This pattern of implication has affected everyone in the profession, especially women but also others with speculative voices, those who work collaboratively and engage public concerns. Challenges do *not* have to be aggressive. Barry Bergdoll's upcoming MoMA show on 'Prefabrication' signals an exciting new set of priorities for architectural debate. Tonight's

discussion is likewise an optimistic venture. To look closely at networks of power in the profession, and specifically to ask how women have fared in this system, is *not* to attack men or diminish respect for architecture. It's the start of a conversation that aims to clarify processes of decision-making, to challenge entrenched or archaic inequalities, to explore alternative possibilities.

That being said, let's acknowledge some entrenched difficulties. Who can dispute that universal modernism, certainly a worthy aspiration, too easily ignored ecological conditions and marginalized all sorts of people who didn't fit one template of 'modern man' --- that is, someone rational, healthy, educated, forward-looking, unconcerned about the past, conspicuously white and male. (By contrast, 'modern woman' just meant sexually liberated.) Anyone else was seen as backward, resistant, at best still unaware of how to be a true modern person.

Architectural discourse still falls back on certain verbal tropes and dichotomies. The most familiar opposition --- 'modernism v. tradition' --- rests on simplistic ideas about progress v. backwardness, creativity v. copying, good v. bad. Everyone declaims such dichotomies, of course, yet fear and rhetoric keep them omnipresent. Artificial opposites ignore the vast, diverse and dynamic spectrum in between: the broad, capacious domain sometimes called the 'excluded middle.' This is the realm of modernity as human experiences in the plural, positive and negative, innovative and adaptive, male and female.

Gender oppositions are perpetuated with dichotomies, even though women have used them too. We may disagree about whether women bring innate qualities, good or bad, to architecture. Most of us are rightly cautious about essentialism, but certain beliefs and characterizations are deep-rooted, despite our personal open-mindedness. Cultures rely on prevailing ideas or 'frames,' and the easiest ones suggest opposites. In 1911 the philosopher George Santayana used architectural tropes to contrast the modernity of the American man and the skyscraper with the conservatism of the American woman and the historical- revival home. In 1976 the historian H. Allen Brooks blamed the decline of 'progressive' architecture in the Midwest after WWI on women's undue influence. These assertions sound preposterous to everyone here, but they have not disappeared, even if they are rarely spoken aloud in public.

Fortunately there are some notable alternative analyses of modernism, especially in recent years. Some of the best include women, in part because they were written by women: Diane Ghirardo's *Architecture after Modernism*, Deborah Berke and Steven Harris's *Architecture of the Everyday*, Hilde Heynen's *Architecture and Modernity and Negotiating Domesticity*, co-edited with Gülsüm Baydar. I've been asked to speak about the strategies and findings of my new book, which builds on this legacy. It is part of a series, *Modern Architectures in History*, which looks at some 25 different nations from Austria to Turkey to mine, simply titled *USA*. This is not essentialism but a recognition that national cultures exist in good and bad ways, even in today's global world, reinforced by formal laws, informal conventions and imaginaries --- including those of people seeking to challenge norms. The parallels with gender are striking.

So I began to think about modern life as well as modern architecture, in the U.S. and

more generally. We now see the artistic variations in modernisms. Likewise, the experiences of modernity have elicited conflicting responses: heady liberation but also materialism, alienation, new kinds of inequalities, a sense of loss or foreboding. It is untenable to speak of a single modern consciousness rather than passionate, contradictory and contentious variations.

This led me to *four* sets of *questions* about modernism. Each tackles the vagueness of goals like innovation, hierarchy and unity in architecture's defining institutions. In part as a result, each has implications about the place of women, past and present, as clients, arbiters and designers.

(1) Modernism is largely considered endogenous or self-determined. At the same time modern architects supposedly 'know' just how to engage and transform the cultural, social, economic and political phenomena of modern life. In both instances their own intentions are the key, with little effort to raise questions about the well-meaning but limited understanding of complex conditions. So we might ask whether institutions have highlighted architects' supposed autonomy and their ability to represent positive modern phenomena but downplayed more ambiguous, exogenous interrelations?

Women's rights are a critical expression of modern freedoms. Yet all too often the prevailing language of modernism imposes a narrow definition of such freedoms in families, in work conditions, in public places --- and in the design of such settings. If traditionalists celebrated 'the home' as an ideal, radicals often dismissed domestic life and family as inherently oppressive (a long-term theme in modernist discourse) while insisting that all aspects or work and street-life were inherently liberatory. Well-intentioned male architects, presuming a generic condition for all women, bestowed certain freedoms but they were reluctant to acknowledge women's diverse situations, needs, desires --- and skills.

For example, given all the attention to early skyscrapers, why has no architectural historian asked how office buildings changed with the feminization of office work around 1900? The construction system was the only structure that mattered. Women architects found new opportunities during the Depression years. Yet we know very little about how changes in demography, national culture and family life affected houses and housing. Nor do we study governmental brochures and popular books like *The Modern House in America*, by James and Katherine Morrow Ford. Despite Catherine Bauer's nuanced analysis of *Modern Housing*, architects still deplore Americans' resistance to the Modern Movement.

Several women museum curators of the 1940s took up these topics with aplomb. Elizabeth Mock here at MoMA launched exhibitions on war housing, schools and a very popular show called *Built in USA—1932-1945*, soon translated, that affirmed a 'humanist' and 'regionalist' modernism. Much of this was done in collaboration with her sister, the housing activist Catherine Bauer. Grace Morley, director of the San Francisco Museum of Art, emphasized environmentalism during the New Deal; then offered a show to a fledging group of young architects, planners and landscape architects, both male and female, who called themselves *Telesis*. Their exhibition design asked questions about modern life rather

than issuing dogmatic answers. Morley's 1949 exhibition, *Domestic Architecture of the San Francisco Bay Area*, affirmed Lewis Mumford's ideas about plural modernisms (then under attack at MoMA), integrated historical and regional influences, downplayed individual names, and featured work for progressive moderate-income developers alongside custom homes. Why was that open-minded legacy then attacked and expunged, notably at MoMA? Philip Johnson not only fired Mock, he appropriated her title, *Built in USA*, for a very different 1952 exhibition and catalogue (which, needless to say, had no women architects).

(2) A shift in perspective is disorienting at first, then eye-opening. How might we rethink the usual structuring of architectural history with its myopic focus on 'breakthroughs,' on 'major' individuals, buildings, and stylistic labels --- as if these exemplars determined everything that happened?

This led me to organize each chapter in terms of major changes in work life, home life and public life (including infrastructure and site-planning), asking how architecture --- both generic types and particular buildings --- contributed or responded to those shifts (or not). The major figures and buildings did not disappear, though relatively unknown work also came to the fore, some of it by women, such as the Solar House by Eleanor Raymond and the physicist Dr. Maria Telkes, completed in 1948 with photovoltaic panels, or Marion Manley's University of Miami campus, inaugurated that same year, which many American and European magazines of the era considered 'the first modern university.'

Architecture schools are trying to respond to the surge of women students, albeit sending mixed messages. Most studio critics and other professors, including historians, still tend to be celebratory, even Whiggish, about the transcendent power of the discipline, seeking to inspire students. The rise of architecture theory in the last 20 years instead relies on criticism. Theorists tend to follow the precepts of Frankfurt School critical theory, withdrawing from contemporary society and antagonistic to existing cultural institutions --- including those of the architectural profession. Both perspectives suggest that institutions of power are fixed and intractable, whether for good or bad. (Even feminist theory sometimes falls into this resignation.) Alternatives demand both critical thought and optimistic experimentation. Incidentally, this challenge includes the related hierarchy of sub-fields. This past half-century separated architecture from landscapes, housing, historic preservation, interior design and related kinds of materials research --- all associated with women. Can their expertise and insights be reasserted as these once marginalized kinds of knowledge are now validated?

(3) We need multiple strategies and lenses for expanding the canon, not just the desire to do so. With all due respect for great architectural masters, we know too little about how other architects functioned: professional and amateur; innovators and ingenious adapters; even market-based commercial firms and the builders responsible for 90% of American architecture. This is *not* to say that anything goes. So how might we expand our definition of good modern architecture while still maintaining high standards and aspirations? Can the notion of innovation reach beyond formal pyrotechnics, even when they are exciting?

I decided to include women designers in every chapter of my survey of American modernism. In fact, it wasn't so difficult. Women architects and designers were often present in journalism of the era, even relatively visible both locally and nationally. But then historians forgot or dropped them, judging the work 'minor' and the architects 'insignificant.' This of course reinforced the impression that there have been no women architects.

That commitment also affected the kinds of buildings in the book. Let me give two examples from two different epochs of feminist reform. The 1910s were called the 'progressive' era. The country was committed to social reforms, including feminism, as well as housing, public health and education --- an approach sometimes called 'municipal housekeeping'! American 'modern housing' of the time focused on collective social spaces, inside and out, often geared to single women as well as families. It also entailed support services like public baths, kindergartens and schools. Politically active women's clubs and largely female settlement houses often sponsored the reforms. The 1960s and early-70's represent another high-point of reforms and feminism that generated new concepts and forms to enhance shared work in houses and multi-family dwellings, together with a new generation of housing and public spaces to help rebuild poor urban neighborhoods.

Both epochs saw an increase in the numbers of women architects, as well as women in other professions. But a backlash quickly set in, stirred by economic recession and cultural conservatism. The year 1968 saw a high point with 865 women active in the AIA (2.3% of the total); the numbers began a steady decline the next year, down to 634 (0.5%) in 1980. In 2007, 13.4% of the AIA are women. Yet statistical representation should always take account of broader historical patterns. This impressive increase occurred during a year that saw an astounding 34.5% increase in registered architects. Opportunities for women expanded as the profession grew larger, and the larger culture seemed more accepting of women in power. Unfortunately neither of these conditions is fixed, for history never follows a straight trajectory. Moreover, statistics are only one way of determining opportunities and discrimination. The conditions of work, salary, advancement and ambitions are equally important, and women are still at a disadvantage --- especially if they want to have families.

(4) Institutions of power rely on various forms of media to announce and broadcast their values. Professional organizations and magazines speak directly to architects, reinforcing ideas about their autonomy. A significant quantity of other media --- newspapers, ads, movies, television, practical books and 'shelter magazines,' good and bad --- is geared to diverse segments of the public. Typically dismissed as dumbed-down architectural commentary, the opinions and values are in fact varied, sometimes challenging professional architects to look beyond their own sphere. Is it surprising that most architects disdain this 'popular media' so vociferously rather than engaging in debate?

Many women have served as editors and journalists in this popular media. They have often been visible clients and designers, too, seeking to improve ---if rarely to revolutionize --- housing choices and quality. *House Beautiful* and *Ladies' Home Journal* were surprisingly progressive sources at the turn of the last century. *Cosmopolitan* was a very different magazine when it ran a 1903 article by Charlotte Perkins Gilman praising centralized cooking, laundry

and child-care services of apartment hotels! A half-century later popular magazines promoted moderate-cost modern houses, encouraging discussions between men and women as well as collaborations between architects and builders. This is not to imply a resolute feminism, only variations that included women's voices.

There are intriguing parallels with contemporary magazines like *Praxis* for architects or more popular magazines like *Metropolis* and *Dwell*, each founded by women with largely female senior-staff. All of these journals, and others as well, present a range of alternative visions --- past and present, large and small, daring and deferential --- that engage various kinds of architects, designers, clients and publics (for there is never just one in any case). Their definitions of innovative modern architecture are likewise wide-ranging. Radical forms are there, of course, usually geared toward some larger purpose. Most innovations aim for sustainability and affordability or seek to improve the quality of the larger built environment, often in collaboration with designers, environmentalists, artists, political activists and other groups. That multiplicity is an asset for us all.

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None of this is a surprise to anyone here, although every voice configures what is known in a different way, suggesting alternative perspectives. Modernism can be best understood in terms of a broad spectrum, not just singular achievements, whether canonical or neoteric. That spectrum encompasses the known and the unknown, the familiar and the surprising, rather than setting them at odds. This definition of modernism gives women architects a larger stake and more room to experiment. There is also a historical spectrum to engage, patterns of continuity and change that reveal biases while providing resources for the present. The relative clarity of historical circumstances makes it easier to discern options and limitations that may be difficult to grasp in the tumult of the present. To think historically is to see a matrix that connects changes and alternative possibilities; external pressures and internal mechanisms; conventional knowledge and innovations. That's why the U.S. Patent Office requires that all applications for an 'invention' describe 'Prior Art in the Field.' So I'll conclude with four reflections on Women in Modernism and four questions to discuss, all based on history and looking ahead to the future.

(1) The cult of individual genius and celebrity tends to denigrate anything other than that ideal. Constraints are presented as restrictions on creativity rather than challenges. The same is true of collaboration, often denigrated as 'design by committee.' Individual talent is essential, of course, yet good architectural work always proceeds through collaboration. This includes the intimacy of husband-wife teams; office practices; interactions with clients, artists, engineers; and exchanges with various public groups. Yet collaborative and adaptive processes rarely seem exciting, not only in myths about creativity but even in visual representation. How do we enhance respect for these kinds of interaction?

(2) A related issue concerns strong women designers like Zaha Hadid, the Hariri sisters and Winka Dubbeldam. These are wonderfully talented architects, now rightly appreciated, but they cannot be the only model for women since none of them have families. Does that prototype become a restrictive model for women and men? What relationships might

there be construed between these 'form-givers' and more restrained or collaborative women designers?

(3) Differences are the issue, but this term is highly ambiguous. Some differences are climactic or economic conditions and physiological, emotional or cultural patterns to respect; while others are inequalities to remedy. There is usually an amalgam rather than a clear-cut label. If it is difficult to agree upon what criteria generate change, it's equally difficult to expand definitions of 'good architecture' without seeming to abandon any discrimination about quality or simply becoming all-inclusive. Given those legitimate fears, how do we maintain judgment without being judgmental?

(4) To some extent we're still talking about language, the prime medium of institutions and decision-makers. Architects like analogies, which open creative possibilities. I'm partial to the analogy of 'constellations.' They can be read in many ways, depending on one's knowledge and one's place in the world. Constellations amalgamate physical phenomena and projected imaginaries, putting individual 'stars' in a larger context --- at once constant and contingent. This leads to my question: isn't it high time to put aside analogies about modern architecture as an 'assault,' a 'rupture,' a 'violation'? At least give them a well-deserved sabbatical, since they've been overworked! To say that the sexual implications are disturbing does *not* mean complacency, timidity, prudishness, or fantasies about happy harmony in neo-traditional settings. Those charges put all women in a tenuous position, even as they make it difficult to raise legitimate questions.

Every good discussion, including tonight's, looks seriously at historical patterns without being deterministic. Multiple perspectives and competing goals will always generate a certain amount of contention, and sometimes a great deal of conflict. Thoughtful debate encourages us to envision better futures --- neither one universal aspiration for everyone, nor simply inchoate and individualized prospects. Along the way, if possible, every group might try to find a point of commonality, agreeing on certain principles, taking up some shared action. Past and present, 'Women in Modernism' have asserted a collective goal: to make the world around us a more adventurous, more beautiful and, yes, a more equitable place. That ambition is surely worth reaffirming today.