

FEMINIST VISIONS

WOMEN AT THE ARCHITECTURAL MARGINS

by Chris Timmerman

A DAY WITH ZAHA HADID. 52 mins. Directed by Michael Blackwood. Executive Producer: Michael Blackwood. Michael Blackwood Productions (<http://www.michaelblackwoodproductions.com/>), 2004. DVD available for purchase: contact Michael Blackwood Productions, Inc., 6 W. 18th St., Suite 2B, New York, NY 10011; phone: (212) 242-1805; fax: (212) 242-1671; email: BlackwoodFilm@aol.com.

"A GIRL IS A FELLOW HERE": 100 WOMEN ARCHITECTS IN THE STUDIO OF FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT. 15 mins. Directed by Beverly Willis. Executive Producer: Beverly Willis. Beverly Willis Architecture Foundation (<http://www.bwaf.org>), 2009. DVD available for purchase, \$14.95: contact BWAf, 6 Barclay St., 6th Floor, New York, NY 10007; email: director@bwaf.org.

EILEEN GRAY: INVITATION TO A VOYAGE. 52 mins. Directed by Jörg Bundschuh. Executive Producers: Brian Walsh, Marijke Huijbregts. Kick Film GmbH (<http://www.kickfilm.de>), 2006. DVD available for purchase: contact Kick Film GmbH, Mannhardtstrasse 6, 80538 Munich, GERMANY; phone: +49-(0)89-74 71 03-0; fax: +49-(0)89-74 71 03-66; email: kickfilm@kickfilm.com.

WOMEN AND ARCHITECTURE: PUBLIC SPACE, PUBLIC WORK. 25 mins. Films for the Humanities and Sciences (<http://ffh.films.com>), 1995. DVD or VHS purchase: \$149.95, Item 29134, from Films Media Group, <http://ffh.films.com/search.aspx?q=Women+and+Architecture>.

“Of all the visual arts, architecture is the one we most rarely associate with women.” Thus begins the short film *Women and Architecture: Public Space, Public Work*. Indeed, all four of the documentaries reviewed here address a disconnect — it is widely perceived but little acknowledged that the field remains a predominantly male profession and that the image of an architect is usually male — and attempt to shed light on that reality from a variety of angles. One (*Public Space, Public Work*) focuses solely on the role of women architects in the development of the public realm; two others are biographies of women whose work has made them household names in the architectural world; and a fourth illuminates the experience of a largely unknown group of women who labored under the direction of one of the twentieth century’s most iconic practitioners, a man whose progressive attitude toward women in the profession helped launch their careers.

Women and Architecture: Public Space, Public Work opens with a brief overview of women’s roles in architecture from the seventeenth century to the present: women have acted as designers, patrons, and users, but professionally have been limited to private residential and interior work, absent from the public sphere. The film interrogates this

absence of women in public work, also putting forth several other broad questions: Do women design in any way that is particular to them? Do women consume architecture differently?

While interior and domestic projects authored by women designers are well documented, relatively few examples of public work designed by women exist. Notable exceptions in the last century included English architect Elizabeth Scott, who won a commission for England’s Shakespeare Memorial Theater through a blind competition, and American architect Julia Morgan, whose work for the Hearst publishing company included prestigious projects such as the headquarters building for the *Los Angeles Examiner*.

The filmmakers note that women have also achieved prominence in architecture through sometimes uneven collaborations with their husbands. Such women include mid-century architect Allison Smithson, who is jointly credited, along with her husband, Peter, with designing the headquarters tower for *The Economist* in central London; and Wendy Foster, whose contributions to the design of a building at the University of East Anglia have been all but ignored in favor of those made by her more famous husband, Sir Norman

Foster. Architect Denise Scott Brown, herself a founding partner in the practice she shares with her husband, Robert Venturi, admits in an interview that women in the field who practice with their husbands are often overshadowed by those husbands. She points out that this is particularly true of public work: “The more a building is a kind of plum in the society, the more the need is to make an architectural star, and the star needs to be man. The architectural prima donnas are all male.”

The film moves from this statement to a case study of a center for East Asian women in East London. Designed by Matrix, a “feminist design co-operative,” this facility is offered as evidence of an unusual outcome in which both the designers and the clients are women. In the attention paid to the unique cultural angle and educational mission of the facility, the film seems to imply that women design with a hand that is especially sensitive to the identities of the occupants. This case study appears to resolve the questions asked at the beginning of the film: Yes, women design differently than men do, and yes, women’s experience of the built environment is different from that of men.

Whether these points are pertinent, however, is another issue. The questions asked are provocative, but the sole focus on public work limits how the film can answer them. The subjects of the other documentaries under review garner only passing mention in this film’s quick historical overview of women in the profession, and the undeniably Anglo-centric angle means that women working in places other than the United Kingdom or North America are omitted completely. Aside from these issues, the low production values of the film are distracting, and the essentializing questions about how women design and experience space seem somewhat dated. (And, indeed, this is the most dated of the films under review here; it came out in 1995.¹)

A *Day with Zaha Hadid*, in contrast, virtually ignores questions about gender in the architectural profession, only indirectly referring to Hadid’s status as a woman professional. This film, which follows Hadid around an exhibition of her own work in a Vienna museum, features the world-famous designer’s convoluted stream-of-consciousness narrative describing her process and her projects; it is at times a challenge to follow, and is perhaps too long.

Hadid skirts any acknowledgment of her own exceptional position in the architectural profession and makes only oblique reference to anything personal — her roots in Iraq, her early interests in architecture, or her position within the architectural profession as a woman. Although she states at the outset her belief in the importance of be-

ing “always at the margin” in order to “achieve a shift in the status quo,” she explains that these concerns lie in the potential for “a shift in the architectural profession [and] a shift in the urban environment.” The exact nature of the “shifts” she desires to see in the mostly white and male architectural profession is unclear, though; Are they social? technological? cultural? all of the above? While offering scant detail, she indicates that architects today need to “be [themselves] on the move” in order to “expand the repertoire” of design and “shift the worldview” — again, loosely defined. This desire for dynamism appears to exist independently from gender and culture.

Interestingly, in discussing the architectural profession’s gradual embrace of her work, Hadid mentions her belief that she and her ideas were originally marginalized — not because of her gender or her background, but because of her radically distinct way of thinking. The “margin” she inhabited was intellectual, not personal. Her characteristically distorted and multi-layered perspective drawings (using a method she developed during and after the conclusion of



A film by - Ein Film von - Jörg Bundschuh

Eileen Gray

Invitation to a Voyage

Einladung zur Reise

kick!

her architectural studies at the Architectural Association in London in the 1970s and during the early years of her practice in the 1980s) were the product of her unique intellectual explorations. The acceptance of these kinds of representational methods in the architectural mainstream signaled expanding design methods, not an acknowledgment of her unusual position as a prominent female designer.

It is in part because of her design process, Hadid believes, that the architectural profession was able to move past a nebulously defined, suggestively phrased sense that “nothing was attainable” in the 1980s, into a new realm of fresh ideas that continues today. Hadid hastens to add that the job of “shifting the worldview” remains perpetually unfinished. While the “greatest projects have not been totally achieved,” they are “more possible now,” she claims. This is due in part to many other architects besides herself, “the research of many people, who did sacrifice a lot.” The viewer is left wondering about the exact nature of this “sacrifice.”

One of the professionals to whom Hadid may owe a debt is the Anglo-Irish furniture designer, architect, and Modernist pioneer Eileen Gray, whose life and career spanned from the late 1800s to her death in 1976. The film *Eileen Gray: Invitation to a Voyage* follows Gray’s extraordinary life experience from a traditional upbringing on an estate in Ireland, to her years as a sought-after furniture-maker and interior designer in Paris, to the ultimate manifestation of her efforts: two homes that she designed on the French Riviera.

Like Hadid, Gray felt an urgency toward progress in design. The film notes that “all [Gray] wanted was to create things that fit into our time” and conveys Gray’s belief that “creation was a forward-looking process, always within the present.” Both Gray’s work and her personal story demonstrate a life driven by a desire to respond to the swiftly changing experience of modernity in early twentieth-century Europe, while challenging the roles traditionally open to women in the design professions. Departing Ireland for London, and thereafter leaving London for Paris, Gray fashions a way forward that frees her to define herself on her terms and design how and what she wants. While the film touches briefly on Gray’s frustrations with breaking into the traditionally male-dominated professional world of early twentieth-century Europe, it remains faithful to her experience by focusing on her pursuit of design innovation.

Gray was a complex character, the film points out, and her story has been co-opted by champions of various causes, including feminists, who applaud Gray’s forward-looking sensibilities and her courage to construct a career that combined design at a variety of scales. The filmmakers posit that

Gray’s feminism is most visible in the passion with which she followed her muses: her love of design in general, and her explorations of material in particular. The high production and tight editing of *Invitation to a Voyage* complement the beauty of Gray’s story and the intelligence of her work.

Like *Invitation to a Voyage*, the fourth documentary under review, *“A Girl is a Fellow Here”: 100 Women Architects In the Studio of Frank Lloyd Wright*, delves into personal experiences, this time of a small group of woman architects, in order to illuminate broader historical themes about women’s entry into the architectural profession. The film is elegant, short, and direct in its storytelling, asking a central question that feels more relevant than those asked by *Public Space, Public Work*: Why has the work of these women, and so many others, been excluded from the narrative of modern architectural history?

The women of *“A Girl is a Fellow Here,”* who were contemporaries of Gray, labored under the supportive tutelage of twentieth-century master Frank Lloyd Wright during his long career. This film highlights six in particular whose eminent careers were launched after internships with Wright, either during his early years in the Chicago area or, later in his career, at Taliesin (in Spring Green, Wisconsin) or Taliesin West (in Scottsdale, Arizona).

The film emphasizes Wright’s progressive attitude toward women throughout the long arc of his professional life. Two of the women featured practiced with Wright during his early years as a professional in Oak Park, outside of Chicago: Marion Mahony, also known for being the second woman graduate of MIT’s architecture program, and the first woman to achieve architectural licensure in the United States (1897); and Isabel Roberts, who worked with Wright until the practice’s closure in 1910, after which Wright relocated back to Wisconsin.

Following the onset of the Great Depression, Wright developed a unique fellowship experience that provided design experience, income, and housing in exchange for various forms of manual labor at the architect’s retreat. Less a traditional job or educational experience and more a “way of life,” the Taliesin Fellowship gave young designers a holistic experience that combined traditional architectural practice (design, drafting, model-building) with the myriad custodial tasks required to maintain the Taliesin property, ranging from gardening and cooking to chopping wood and pouring concrete. The film notes that men and women were given equal footing in job responsibilities both in and out of the studio, and that up to 25 percent of Wright’s staff members at any given time were women.

Each of the other women featured (Lois Davidson Gottlieb, Jane Duncombe, Eleanore Pettersen, and Read Weber) was a product of this internship program and used it as a launching pad for her own career. Interviews with Gottlieb and Pettersen contribute to an overall rosy and fulfilling sense of life at Taliesin under Wright, shedding light on Wright's enlightened attitude toward women in the profession. Pettersen in particular thanks Wright and cites his encouraging attitude toward her professional development as a prime reason for her success, noting, "If I hadn't gone to Wright's, I wouldn't be sitting here, there is no question about it."

Each of the four documentaries reviewed here has its strengths. "A Girl Is a Fellow Here" and *Invitation to a Voyage* are the most useful, however, and they are easily the most enjoyable of the four to watch. Both have high production values, and their clear narratives enhance the life experiences of their subjects; questions regarding the roles of women in architecture are suggested, rather than forced, by the incredible stories of these individuals. In contrast, neither *Public Space*, *Public Work*, with its uneven quality and narrow argument, nor the rambling *A Day With Zaha Hadid* — neither of which is without merit entirely — lends itself as well to a nuanced conversation about the worthy subject of women in the architectural profession.

Note

1. *Editors' Note:* We searched in vain for a more recent film that would address broader issues concerning women and architecture. The absence may in itself be telling.

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Miriam Greenwald