

Stories of Women Architects Who Made Their Mark

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Exhibition Review / CRITICISM

Good News. Women in Architecture

MAXXI, Rome, December 16, 2021 – September 21, 2022

Curated by Pippo Ciorra, Elena Motisi, Elena Tinacci

Exhibition Design by Matilde Cassani

Catalog (forthcoming)

Good News. Women in Architecture is an exhibition curated by Pippo Ciorra, Elena Motisi, and Elena Tinacci, and designed by Matilde Cassani, which was inaugurated on December 16, 2021, at MAXXI Rome – the museum designed by Zaha Hadid which opened to the public in 2010. The intent of the exhibition (sited in Gallery 2 on the second floor of the museum) is to assess the anthropological and professional changes now happening in the world of architecture with a neutral and omnivorous approach, without stating a specific thesis – if not a tautological one – that there is a “tide” of women architects. Although the exhibition “limits” its scope to the presentation of the results of a massive, two-year-long archival, historiographic, and bibliographic research, displaying this material raises an issue that concerns architecture rather than gender. Architecture is – increasingly – a choral, hybrid, variable practice, in which a supposed single leadership reflects a fallacious narration rather than the truth. *Good News* – in Italian *Buone Nuove* – is a feminine, entirely adjectival title, a message of hope that incorporates a certain lexical ambiguity. While the fact that globally women architects have increased in numbers and prestige in recent years is in itself good “news,” the presence of women in architectural disciplines is by no means “new.”

According to the introductory text in the forthcoming exhibition catalog, “The growth of female presence in the universe of design coincides with a series of epochal changes in the relationship between architecture and society, between power structures and active subjects ‘in the field’, between community and space.” The exhibition dedicates a major space to the reconstruction of a history of buried, forgotten, or little-known stories – a history that deserves to be brought to light to demonstrate that for the last century the history of architecture has been surrounded by female figures who left tangible traces – objects, projects, manifestos, books, interviews, films – with their varied work, as varied as architecture, which is both theory and practice, thought and action, research and craft. Therefore, *Good News* resonates like a well-wishing motto for a season of architecture that no longer wants to keep these and other stories submerged and unseen, with the awareness that the major overview narrated here might encourage further digging into the past and an optimistic look to the future. And perhaps, to employ it as “the theoretical framework to extend the concept of anti-discrimination and inclusion to further issues of race, class, religion or sexual orientation,” as suggested by Dorte Kuhlmann, Guest Editor of issue 2/2019 of this journal, named *Gender Matters*.¹ After all, the curators themselves know that discussing gender today means instigating a reflection upon all forms of discrimination, within and beyond architecture. Beatriz Colomina, Professor of Architectural History at the Princeton University School of Architecture, and one of the “voices” in the exhibition raises the question of discrimination about authorship and the need to revise the myth of the author: as long as architecture is narrated as the product of a “single heroic figure,” the work, expertise, and creativity of many people involved in the process of conceiving and building architecture will remain invisible.

Although the topic of gender equity and gendered spaces has recently become central in educational environments, in debates within books, magazines, and conferences, the gender biases in working environments, professional dynamics, and places of power are still far from being overcome. From this point of view, Italy presents a significant scenario: while the number of female members in the National Register of Architects now almost matches the number of men, women are still discriminated against in terms of income and visibility.² As early as 1891, Louise Blanchard Bethune, the first woman to become a member of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), already claimed that “the complete emancipation lies in ‘equal pay for equal service’.”³ In this respect, the associations of female entrepreneurs and female architects play an increasingly important role, as they establish a culture of awareness and mutual recognition, cooperate and achieve common goals, claim participation in research, projects and debates on innovation, and enhance the female vision on the most urgent environmental and social issues. Some speak of a “women’s city,” understood as a “city of two,” namely, a city of relationships and hospitality as an alternative model to the patriarchal

“factory city.” The Vanda Group, established at the Milan Polytechnic in the 1990s, and one of the experiences presented at the exhibition, conducted research in that direction, thereby laying the foundations for a reflection that is still quite popular today.

The curators of the exhibition at MAXXI equally emphasize how crucial the female contribution is today in terms of ecological sensitivity, inclusiveness, and social sustainability. That said, rather than focusing exclusively on this thesis to prove it, the exhibition aims at critically bringing out how female architecture is as complex and plural as male architecture: it is individual and collective, “committed” and spectacular, innovation and tradition, celebrity and anonymity, study and manual skills. In short, it exceeds a single narrative, and rather requires articulation through a multiplicity of voices and representations that the exhibition documents across four sections, corresponding to four different exhibition devices. The “Stories” – eighty-five stories of female architects, from the late nineteenth century to the present day – occupy the tables, interspersed with monographic spaces (“Practices”), hosting the installations of eleven charismatic contemporary figures. The tables are flanked by screens showing the “Narrations,” namely, interviews with twelve influential “voices” of architecture – curators, editors-in-chief of magazines, and museum directors. Finally, the five video works of “Visions,” produced as part of the Future Architecture platform, are featured along the corridor leading to the exhibition’s final room, occupied by the site-specific installation “Unseen” by the Mexican architect Frida Escobedo.

The exhibition’s most substantial chapter is certainly “Stories,” a concrete response to the challenge launched by Part W, the collective founded in 2018 by Zoë Berman, exhibited in one of the previous tables – this is *The Alternative List*, a compendium of some of the many outstanding women neglected by architectural history, and one of the numerous campaigns created by the collective. We are familiar with many of these stories, spanning from Signe Hornborg, the first woman to have obtained a degree in architecture in 1890 at the Helsinki Polytechnic Institute, down to Lucy Styles, the Italian–English architect who won the Italian Architecture Prize (junior category) in 2020. Some are mainstream or reflect a season, that of the archistars, which began in the 1990s and has hopefully ended by now. Starting with the story of Zaha Hadid, the first female architect to receive the Pritzker Prize in 2004, whose legacy includes the museum hosting the exhibition as one of her most spectacular works. A museum that has caused and will continue to cause much discussion: an iconic object embedding what she used to call “confluence, interference and turbulence” as the typical features of Roman urban chaos, while at the same time conveying a contemporary interpretation of the eternal city’s Baroque spirit and magical character. Askew walls, oblique planes, curvy motions, endless intertwining spaces: setting up an exhibition here is a mighty challenge that does not always produce compelling results. Matilde Cassani’s

tenaciously balanced, sober, “diagrammatic” (her definition) installation has brilliantly negotiated this challenge. It consists of a single scenic artifice, the alternation of solids and voids, made of tables overflowing with objects, videos, and documents, and free surfaces that accommodate site-specific installations.

In this centripetal motion, which gathers the abundance of material to the center of the gallery, and leaves the museum’s “talking walls” unadorned, Cassani seems to engage in an intimate and silent dialogue with the great British–Iraqi architect who died prematurely in 2016. Indeed, the formula of an imaginary dialogue between souls of the present and the past is the key to the entire exhibition, which deliberately follows no chronological order. Cassani speaks of “laid tables” – the stylized drapery of which emphasizes their celebratory character – which simulate, as at wedding banquets or gala dinners, a reasoned meeting between people who know each other and those who do not but could be good matches due to their elective affinities. Placed at the same table for an ideal dinner, the female architects converse and discuss themes that may bring them together: not architecture issues, but themes related to their biographies, feelings, and main interests. In their being at times more meaningful, at other times more casual, these associations form a powerful exhibition device that allows viewers to interweave historical periods, and harmoniously mix very heterogeneous physical and professional geographies in the name of an idea: architecture and the city are a collective cultural product where present and past overlap seamlessly. To construct a new narrative of the architectural fact, there is a need to highlight, at least in retrospect, the legacy of the many protagonists who have preceded us. In short, biographies weigh significantly, not to shift the focus away from the work of these qualified professionals, but to signal their long-lasting common destiny of being kept under the so called ‘glass ceiling,’ that is, the invisible, yet impenetrable barrier that has hindered the careers of many female professionals.

Thus, Matilde Cassani herself banquets with design pioneers Clara Porset, Lilly Reich, Charlotte Perriand, and Eileen Gray whose Villa E-1027, a Modernist work of great importance, was desecrated by Le Corbusier with a gesture of extreme “violence,” according to Beatriz Columina. The table takes the symbolic name of “Mise en scène” [staging] because the architects and projects collected here have contributed to making the house the essential setting for “modern” life. Domestic space, the only space “accessible” to women in the first decades of the twentieth century, becomes the representative scene of a lifestyle change, the opportunity to train society to modern taste. *Die Frankfurter Küchen* [The Frankfurt Kitchen], a film by Paul Wolff from 1927 – one of the many animated devices designed to confer dynamism to the “Stories” narrative – describes Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky’s patient work on the household space, in particular on the kitchen to make it more functional. With time,

this “demonstrative” approach overflows from the home into recreational facilities, business venues (the Olivetti store in Paris designed by Franca Helg and her partner Franco Albini), places of culture and education and, more recently, landscape and urban spaces as places of representation (see the work of Catherine Mosbach).⁴

Cassani has devoted her entire research to “unnoticed phenomena” and the so-called “everyday multiculturalism” – those sacred and secular ritual practices unfolding in unexpected places, apparently devoid of aesthetic meaning; in her view the main resource for consolidating the culture of sharing. Thus she sets up the exhibition with her usual purposefulness: making the invisible Other visible. Following this associative criterion, the “First Woman” table hosts Zaha Hadid, Ada Louise Huxtable, Signe Hornborg, Sophia Hayden, Elena Luzzatto Valentin, and Maria Teresa Parpagliolo: the women architects who paved the way for the emancipation of later generations; true “game changers” in the field of female architecture. The selection draws to a close with a figure, Norma Merrick Sklarek, whose significance extends far beyond the field of architecture, as she was the first African-American woman to become an architect.

“The city of women” table gathers those professionals who put their talents at the service of the urban environment, thus helping to rethink the canons of the relationship between built and open space, as well as overturn established hierarchies – for example, between center and suburbs, human beings and nature, and the city of adults and the city of children. Personalities such as Marion Mahony Griffin, who worked with Frank Lloyd Wright for fifteen years without being acknowledged before moving with her husband Walter Burley Griffin to Australia where they worked on the design of the newly founded capital city of Canberra. Ada Bursi and Edith Girard both focused on low-cost housing in post-war Italy and post-modern France, respectively, thus consolidating the idea of a more inclusive city. Women who gave early prominence to the discipline of landscape and to the ecological approach, such as Cornelia Hahn Oberlander, a German-born landscape architect who moved to Canada where she designed the Children’s Creative Center for the 1967 Expo, starting a lifelong career in collaboration with celebrated architects, including Louis Kahn, Moshe Safdie, and Renzo Piano.⁵ Lina Malfona, the youngest of the table, has completed an “archipelago” of suburban residences over the last ten years, giving strength to the theory of a “future in the countryside,” an alternative way to the city, as recently postulated by Rem Koolhaas himself.⁶

The “Lady Managers” – the same curious name was chosen for the group of women in charge of women’s issues at the 1893 Columbian Fair in Chicago – are women who have succeeded brilliantly in managing their own lives and professional activities – namely, Gae Aulenti, Francine Houben (Mecanoo), Anna Ferrieri Castelli (Kartell), and Natalie Griffin de Blois (Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill); the epic figure of Emily Warren

Roebing, the wife of John Roebing, the engineer who designed the Brooklyn Bridge, who tirelessly continued to oversee its construction after her husband fell ill until its completion in 1883; Julia Morgan, who pioneered the aesthetic use of reinforced concrete; Stefania Filo Speziale, author of the first skyscraper in Naples, the headquarters of the Società Cattolica Assicurazioni – all long ignored by historiography.

The protagonists of the “Nomadisms” table, on the other hand, share a fate of temporary or permanent exile, and the pursuit of opportunities for success and more viable operating conditions elsewhere. A case in point is the Italian architect Lina Bo Bardi, who found personal and professional success in Brazil where, among other works, she designed masterpieces such as the Museum of Art in São Paulo and the SESC-Pompéia, a social center in São Paulo, as well as Minnette de Silva, Sri Lanka’s first Modernist architect and the first Asian to join the Royal Institute of British Architects. Some left Europe, mostly for the United States (Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, Loretta Vinciarelli). Others took a decidedly nomadic and cosmopolitan approach to their professional lives, thus leaving the Western world to find ideas and work opportunities in India, Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Near East (Jane Drew, Jaqueline Tyrwhitt).⁷

“Couplings” presents paradigmatic stories of female architects inseparable from a creative couple, small working groups cemented by personal relationships, confirming that architecture always implies the combination and complementarity of different skills and attitudes. Famous examples include Aino and Alvar Aalto, Ray and Charles Eames, Blanche Lemco and Daniel van Ginkel, Alison and Peter Smithson, Patty and Michael Hopkins, Laura Thermes and Franco Purini, as well as Helena and Szymon Syrku, Polish architects and members of the CIAM; and Lin Huiyin and Liang Sicheng, who founded modern architectural culture in China. These personalities are joined by younger professionals such as Sandy Attia and Matteo Scagnol (MoDus Architects); Sofía Von Ellrichshausen (Pezo Von Ellrichshausen); Sevince Bairak and Oral Goktas, founder of the Istanbul-based studio SO?. Although the list might continue, the curators selected a limited number of offices to give a “taste” of a widespread phenomenon at all latitudes, with increasingly frequent cultural crossbreeding.

For a long time, women have been “denied” professional leadership roles and have been intentionally “driven” to choose theoretical, informational, and teaching activities. “Voices” tells the stories of women and women’s collectives – such as the British MATRIX and the above-mentioned Italian Gruppo Vanda – who have used words as a powerful tool for criticism and propaganda, a form of political and social intervention on the condition of women and other “forgotten” communities. Jane Jacobs, Denise Scott Brown, and Susana Torre are obvious members of this group, along with less well-known personalities such as Anne Griswold Tyng, author of *Toward a Visible Creative Identity* (1989), an early study of the

development of female creative roles within architecture.⁸ Finally, “Traces” gathers women who work on the traces of history, and gives new life to the memories of a distant past, thus establishing strong connections between contemporary projects and local traditions. It is no coincidence that many Italian female architects from different generations sit at this table.⁹

With their “placeholders” shaping long biographic captions, the tables provide a support for archive materials that were not always easy to find. Interviews, recordings, panels, drawings, physical models, books, magazines, original design products, and photographs at least partially reflect the richness and variety of these women architects’ work. If the tables are the *basso continuo* that accompanies the journey across this unique history of modern and contemporary women’s architecture, the “islands” hosting the installations act as *coups de théâtre* that display diversity rather than continuity. The curators intentionally draw from a wide variety of geographical and cultural contexts, seeking to depict both conformist and non-conformist professional models, individual and mixed forms of association, and disparate attitudes to design. In this sense, the eleven selected architects form an exemplary sample that “shows” where we are now and where we may head to: the peaks of fame, as well as at the heart of the most pressing issues concerning political, social, material, and technological sustainability.



In this sequence, we first meet the founder of SANAA studio, Kazuyo Sejima, who presents a preview of the project for the Design Event Center in Puyan, China. The hanging roof study model highlights the philosophy of the Japanese architect who for over three decades has conceived her architecture as fragile, trembling diaphragms where the boundary between architecture and nature dissolves up to the point of almost disappearing. Benedetta Tagliabue, head of the EMBT studio in Barcelona, presents the design of the Spanish Pavilion for Expo 2010 in Shanghai, with a fragment of the iconic woven wicker structure made by local craftsmen. Jeanne Gang, who runs her own large office in Chicago, presents the pavilion-size 1:10 scale model of the Gilder Center for Science, Education, and Innovation at the American Museum of Natural History, currently under construction, whose advanced smooth, porous structure is revealed on display.

Elizabeth Diller presents the model for the metropolitan-scale cultural space *The Shed* and the famous installation *Bad Press: Dissident Ironing*, first exhibited as *Dysfunctionalisme* in 1993. Almost thirty years after its creation, *Bad Press* is still an ironically radical work that effectively subverts the stereotypes of architecture and society. The author describes it in these words:

The project divorced the task of ironing from the aesthetics of efficiency by exploring labour-intensive patterns that resulted in unexpected alternatives for folding, buttoning, and pressing a man's shirt; this produced shirts in a state that could not be stacked or packed. *Bad Press* scrutinizes ironing as one of the forms of domestic labour whose principles of motion economy were designed by efficiency engineers in late 19th century factory production culture.

Grafton Architects, a studio founded in Dublin in 1978 by Yvonne Farrel and Shelley McNamara, presents the design of the Faculty of Economics in Toulouse on pedestals made from the same local bricks used for the building's façades. Handcrafted techniques, technological experimentation, and vernacular expressionism are the ingredients of the *Stone Garden* by Lina Ghotmeh, a young Lebanese architect who has already received several awards and international acknowledgments. Exhibited at the Venice Biennale 2021, the 1:30 scale model of the skyscraper is a miniature world capable of evoking the atmosphere of Beirut, the Lebanese capital ravaged by the huge explosion in its harbor in August 2020. With this project, Ghotmeh wants to optimistically affirm the ability of architecture to act as a tool of conciliation and resilience in times of crisis. Through the *fenêtres de vie* [windows of life] that pierce the beautifully crafted stone envelope, she invites nature into the heart of the houses and the city. Lu Wenyu, founder of Amateur Architecture Studio with her partner Pritzker laureate Wang Shu – among the first Chinese firms to 'rediscover' local traditions, building techniques, and materials – presents the prototype of the bird's-

wing pitched wooden roof of the Lin'an History Museum. Dorte Mandrup, leader of a large studio in Copenhagen, exhibits the renowned steel model of the Icefjord Center in Greenland, a highly evocative project conceived as a didactic device, a “privileged” observation point from which the effects of climate change can be witnessed.



The Indian architect Anupama Kundoo presents a summary of her research focused on environmental and economic sustainability, particularly the use of ferrocement for its potential to offer a lightweight, fast-to-erect, and affordable construction. “Easy WC” is a full-scale prototype where a double cubicle on either side of a covered platform forms the envelope of a flexible system that combines a toilet and a shower with a central washbasin. Her whole philosophy shines through this concise description: “My work begins with and remains close to the deep human need to have purpose, refuge, and social engagement.” Mariam Kamara, a Nigerian architect and the founder of atelier masōmī, recently nominated by the *New York Times* as one of the “15 Creative Women of Our Time,” has designed the *Room For Introspection*, a quiet, introverted, black room (Islam considers black the color of power, wisdom and knowledge), with the Niamey Cultural Center model at its center. The photographs and objects from the Tuareg and Sahel culture hanging from the walls depict an affective world and celebrate the power of mastery, skills, and indigenous knowledge against colonization harassment. Finally, the London-based multidisciplinary collective Assemble presents *The Voice of Children*, a collage of videos exploring the spaces of “adult-free” play.



The exhibition journey through the tables and installations is accompanied by the *Narrations*, video interviews by the international collective “Mies. TV,” which actually would deserve a dedicated review. The list of interviewees includes direct witnesses such as Phyllis Lambert; important scholars such as Sylvia Lavin, Beatriz Colomina, Maristella Casciato, and Mary McLeod; curators such as Paola Antonelli and Mariana Pestana; young designers such as Liz Ogbu or Marwa Al-Sabouni; and heads of institutions and reviews like Giovanna Borasi, Martha Thorne, and Manon Mollard. This “élite of visionary brains” drives the discussion toward topics ranging from spatial and racial justice to the conflict and polarization generated by global capitalism, to the formation of participative communities in war-torn countries, to the need for unpacking reductive feminist approaches. Among other things, their narratives help to “dismantle myths,” as Maristella Casciato puts it: there is no “peculiar” link between women and architecture, instead, it is time to move away from binary thinking toward a more radical, inclusive, transformative vision.



With the “Visions” chapter, the exhibition aims to catch up with this more radical vision, witnessed by very young scholars, artists, and designers. Resulting from MAXXI’s participation in the *Future Architecture Platform*, a network of twenty-seven European institutions dedicated to the promotion of young talents, the Architecture Film Summer School aimed at creating video artworks on different aspects of design. In the context of *Good News*, the five teams selected for the workshop address the specific issue of the relationship between gender and space, in an attempt to answer the question: can gender identity be a way to define, perceive, and design the space we live in? *Chorus* by Mattyrootd, Meghan Ho-Tong, and Lucienne Bestall from Cape Town offers an evocative sound rereading of places. *Lavastories* by the Berlin-based collective fem_arc takes us into public restrooms and forces us to critically question the very notion of “minimal” public space. *Message (Acts 1, 2, & 3)* by Regner Ramos takes the viewer through a non-binary body multi-scalar journey. *Laundry Day* by the Collective Edit is a manifesto against valuing productive work over reproductive work. *(In) Mura* by artist Emma Hirsk represents iterative sculptural, performative sonic, and film responses to the contested “architectural intimacies” of a women’s prison in Stockholm.

Good News closes with an eloquent and symbolic work, also born from a dialogue between two women, the designer Anni Albers – one of the most important textile artists of the twentieth century and one of the few women in the Bauhaus – and Frida Escobedo, a contemporary architect and designer from Mexico City. *Unseen* is a project that speaks not only of forgotten, humiliated women, kept on the margins of criticism, but also of entire practices, art forms, and professions that have been submerged because

they are considered predominantly female features. The patchwork tapestry by Anni had disappeared and was found at last in the Camino Real's warehouse in 2019. Escobedo's project is the result of the symbolic and material unraveling of the design that Anni Albers created for the Camino Real hotel in Mexico City, on the occasion of the 1968 Olympic Games. As the author herself declared, "It is by 'unraveling' what is left of the past that we can rethink the relationship between progress and development, craftsmanship and industrial production, identity and differentiation." In such an intimate, "spiritual" atmosphere, we bid farewell to the figurative hubbub of the exhibition, carrying with us many additional pieces of evidence on female architecture and several open questions about the future of architecture.

Notes

1. Dörte Kuhlmann, "Gender Matters. The Grand Architectural Revolution," *The Plan Journal* 4, no. 2 (2019): 274.
2. Source: CNAPPC, National Council of Architects, Planners, Landscapers and Conservators.
3. Louise Blanchard Bethune, "Women and Architecture," *Inland Architect and News Record* no. 2 (1891): 21 (see: <https://buffaloah.com/a/archs/beth/speech.html>).
4. Sigrun Bülow-Hübe, Marianne Brandt, Adrienne Górska, Cini Boeri, Itsuko Hasegawa are also shown at this table.
5. This table also features Lotte Stam-Beese, Diana Balmori, Carme Pinós, Alice Constance Austin, Maria Claudia Clemente, Vittoria Calzolari, and Paola Viganò.
6. Rem Koolhaas in 2020 curated the exhibition *Countryside: The Future* at the Guggenheim Museum, New York. See Amo, Rem Koolhaas, *Countryside: a Report* (Cologne, Ger.: Taschen, 2020).
7. This table also features French Algerian architect Georgette Cottin-Euziol, Alessandra Cianchetta, and Flora Ruchat Roncati.
8. The table was completed by Louise Blanchard Bethune, Phyllis Lambert, Eleanor Raymond, Diana Agrest, Beverly Willis, Odile Decq, Part W Collective, Horizontale.
9. Such as Nanda Vigo, Maria Giuseppina Grasso Cannizzo, Carmen Andriani, Elisabetta Terragni, Francesca Torzo. Also: Pia Pascalino (Studio Labirinto), Toshiko Mori, Egle Renata Trincanato, Zenaide Zanini, Paola Salmoni, and Susanna Nobili.

Credits

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