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Rooms of their Own: Displaying Architecture by Women in Copenhagen

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A review of the exhibition *Women in Architecture*, held at the Danish Architecture Center, Copenhagen (13 May–23 October 2022), curated by Sara Hatla Krogsgaard. This exhibition was held in conjunction with Henriette Steiner and Svava Riesto's project, Women in Danish Architecture 1925–1975.

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There is little doubt that for those interested in contemporary architecture, Copenhagen is one of the liveliest cities in Europe at present, playing somewhat the same role in showcasing the new that post-unification Berlin did a generation ago. And at first glance, this child-friendly capital, full of fathers pushing strollers, and with play spaces and crèches well represented in the Danish Architecture Center's guide to its new architecture, might appear to be a feminist paradise (Brams 2019). A closer look, however, at this guidebook proves otherwise. Of Denmark's fifteen largest architecture firms, only three have at least as many female as male partners. And of the 100 new buildings featured in that guide, the twelve firms with few if any women leaders have played a role in designing half; COBE, one of the six firms with no female partners at all, was involved in the creation of fifteen of these structures. Meanwhile, Henning Larson Architects and Vilhelm Lauritzen Architects, two firms founded by men but now with equal numbers of male and female partners, were credited with a combined total of only six buildings, and Dorte Mandrup, one of the most widely admired and profoundly original architects currently practicing in Europe and the only firm with more female than male partners, with just two buildings.

Perhaps in response, the Danish Architecture Center, which published the guidebook, also hosted an impressive exhibition entitled *Women in Architecture*. Curated by Sara Hatla Krogsgaard in conjunction with the Women in Danish Architecture 1925–1975

project led by Henriette Steiner and Svava Riesto, it included, in lieu of a conventional catalogue, a useful guidebook to buildings and landscapes designed by women in and around Copenhagen between 1920 and 1970 (Rahbek, Riesto, and Steiner 2022). The book features photographs by Liv Løvetand Rahbek, some of which also featured prominently in the exhibition, which was divided into three parts. The generously scaled and well-designed installation of the show made clear how much Danish women had contributed, and are well positioned to continue to contribute, to the country's architectural culture.

In the first of the three sections of the exhibition, room-like spaces focused on one or two women at a time, with a single work by each being showcased. Near the end, as the space opened out, a wall of video displays was accompanied with earpieces through which one could hear interviews with contemporary female architects practicing in Denmark, while a larger video screen tucked into a corner of the same ample space featured interviews with young women just launching their careers there. Finally, three installation pieces, by Tatiana Bilbao from Mexico, Débora Mas from Spain, and Siv Stangeland from Norway, responded to the challenge of, in Virginia Woolf's famous words, creating 'a room of one's own'.

Today's new Danish architecture is known for being big and bold. There is nothing subtle about the architectural acrobatics of the new apartment buildings lining the harbor and being built to the north and the south of the city center in Nordhavn and Ørestad. The bike-friendly infrastructure connecting these showpieces of sustainability is especially laudable. The opening rooms of the exhibit reminded viewers, however, that in the 20th century, much Danish architecture, and especially that designed by the country's most celebrated female architects, was subtle and understated, even as it made use of new materials and technologies in ways that helped transform the lives of most Danes. In spaces kitted out with domestic cabinetry and furnishings, including a kitchen, and defined by hanging fabric that reminded this visitor of the Silk and Velvet Café that Lilly Reich and Mies van der Rohe created in Berlin in 1927, exhibition goers were introduced to Hanne Kjaerholm, the first woman to become a professor of architecture at the Danish Academy of Fine Arts; Ragna Grubb, the designer of the Women's Building erected in Copenhagen in 1936; and Ulla Tafdrup, who transformed Danish kitchen design through her use of time-motion studies. That Kjaerholm designed the house she shared with her husband, Poul, while he designed the furnishings, provided a refreshing reversal of the usual gender stereotypes. However, detailed information, including drawings and plans, were stored in pull-out drawers that attracted the attention only of the toddlers for whom they were at eye level.

This domestic scale gave way at a turning point in the first part of the exhibition to a focus on larger works, including the Kildeskovshallen Public Baths and Sports Center, designed by Karen and Ebbe Clemmensen in collaboration with the landscape architect

Agnete Muusfeldt. The quality of the exhibition design became clear as even the paving shifted to echo the textures of the buildings being shown, with material samples joining the usual models and photographs that evoked the spirit of the places being described. Particularly compelling was the final section of this part of the installation. Its focus was Susanne Ussing, a ceramicist as well as an architect who, in collaboration with her husband Carsten Hoff, designed housing in a counter-cultural spirit that playfully broke with modernist standardization to give inhabitants a degree of control over their domestic environments.

The listening wall, where one could hear the voices of women who had already established themselves in the profession in Denmark coupled with videos showcasing the careers of young women architects just starting out, was a deft touch. With this wall, the curators could dodge which living Danish women to showcase while allowing more women to describe their experiences and allowing their faces, if not always their work, to be seen. While many of the younger women profiled clearly were reluctant to believe that real discrimination remained, or at least to endanger their careers by speaking out about it, Mandrup, the elder stateswoman of the group and undoubtedly the most celebrated of all Danish women architects, displayed no such hesitancy, confirming that the chilling statistics presented by the curators continued to sting.

The exhibition opened out into a generous space that easily accommodated Bilbao, Stangeland, and Mas's ample installations. Their suavely sculpted forms made it clear that women can indeed design boldly. When I toured the exhibition, these were delighting the many toddlers stumbling through them, as well as grown-up architecture enthusiasts. Rather than providing spaces for the kind of private contemplation that generates creativity envisioned by Woolf, however, they were in fact generously open to exploration by more than one person at a time. One could easily imagine them as follies in a park, for which the atrium space of the Office of Metropolitan Architecture's building served as an effective substitute on a damp summer morning.

Rather than simply seeking to canonize the most visible handful of women practicing architecture across the country over the course of the last century, even as it introduced them to a new audience, *Women in Architecture* was exemplary in the attention it paid to the range of achievements by Danish women architects. The installation, moreover, subtly encouraged one to pause and look a little longer and think a little deeper. It exposed the discrimination that has hampered many careers, even as it optimistically refused to dwell on barriers, and demonstrated how much is to be gained from folding women's achievements into the stories we tell about architecture past and present.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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