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## Ecuadorian Women Architects: A Gender Turn in the Collective Memory

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A review of: *Pioneras de la Arquitectura Ecuatoriana*, virtual exhibition at <https://www.pionerasarquitecturaec.com/exposición-virtual>, launched 20 November, 2020, curated by María José Freire and Verónica Rosero. The review examines the Ecuadorian exhibition, which recovers memories that have long remained in the personal and intimate sphere and exposes them to the social sphere, a fundamentally political act.

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Architecture is a profession that works closely with the private-intimate or public-exposed dyads. While the private sphere corresponds to what is not open to the scrutiny of others, the public one corresponds exactly to the opposite: what is open to external observation. Architecture, through designing and building, spatially recreates this social order. Every raised wall is a marked border between these two spheres and defines the inhabitants of those spaces, as well as their privileges and misfortunes (Lazar & Sun Ke, 2020). When looking at the history of architecture in Ecuador, we observe that the memory of its first women architects has been relegated to the intimate — the family circle, the domestic, the reproductive, the private (Rosero & Freire, 2020). The legacy of men, on the other hand, has always been immediately exposed to, disseminated in, and perpetuated by the public eye. Thus, what is private becomes invisible and non-existent, while what is public becomes noticeable and prevailing.

The purpose of the virtual exhibition *Pioneras de la Arquitectura Ecuatoriana* (Pioneer Women of Ecuadorian Architecture) is to show women's contributions to Ecuadorian architecture, amplifying the knowledge of their work, which was mainly known only in the private-intimate sphere, for public memory. This is a very important contribution, since in architecture (as well as in other fields) we build our present and future based on what we can remember from our past, at both individual and social levels. Our journey as a social group is based and defined on what has not been forgotten; the nature of

collective memory is essentially public. That is why it is so important to bring to the public sphere the work of women architects. Social memory is either public or it does not exist.

This exhibition, in four main sections, addresses the integration of women into the profession since the first half of the 20th century, as well as the contributions of seven relevant profiles of women architects to the shaping of the local built environment of Ecuador. The first section is a timeline that shows the gradual integration of women into architecture universities in Ecuador between 1920 until 2008, with an emphasis on 1950 to 1980. Although it was in 1933 that the first architecture school was founded in Guayaquil, it was not until 1967 that Cecilia Rosales graduated from the Central University of Ecuador as the first female architect. Overall, far fewer female architects entered the profession, than male ones. A second section presents the statistical data that confirms this reality: during this same period, women represented only 13% of the graduates in the four architecture faculties in Ecuador. This gender asymmetry was also evident in the media: specialized magazines, architectural guides, and architecture biennials all favored work by male architects. Here, the diffusion of women's work reaches a maximum of 10% of the total. By this analysis of the unequal percentage of women versus men present in the public eye, the exhibition demonstrates that one of the most effective mechanisms to keep women in a situation of asymmetry is to erase them from long-term cultural memory.

The exhibition's third part features, through a set of infographics, relevant profiles of women architects, displaying their outstanding work in different categories: design, construction, theory and academia, urban planning, and building rehabilitation. For example, the work of Evelia Peralta, founder of *Revista Trama*, the first magazine in Ecuador specializing in architecture, and co-founder of the Quito Architecture Biennial, stands out. The work of Ethel Arias, who was in charge of the reconstruction of the Government Palace of Ecuador, among other duties, is also presented in detail. Likewise, the work of Guadalupe Ibarra, María Antonieta Palacios, Marcela Blacio, Ana Solano, and Dora Arizaga are given long-overdue attention.

The exhibition's final section, as a corollary, presents several statements based on feminist reflections. This invites us to explore the public-private interactions from a different and deeper point of view. Through the analogy by which cultural assignments by gender have been constructed in the same terms as for buildings (the public area is the place for men and the private one is the women's realm), we can build a profound critique on the current social imaginaries. These imaginaries hardly query privilege and its concealment mechanisms. This incomplete construction of local memory has determined a biased image of the profession in Ecuador.

Consequently, building a public image by showing the existence of multiple women who contributed to the architecture, from theory to design and construction, allows us to draw a new horizon in society. Showing that female architects have been historically present but subordinated and hidden from the public eye empowers women and raises awareness. Likewise, in the 'Feminist Reflections' section, the exhibition calls for the collaborative and reciprocal work of women in recognizing these gaps. The denial of this reality is a deep-rooted obstacle to achieving equal conditions and labor recognition that harms female colleagues. Therefore, through the infographics that show the work of female architects, this exhibition recovers memories that have remained in the personal and intimate sphere and brings them to the exposed and social sphere. This is fundamentally a political act, since through these actions, social power is redistributed equitably, the organization and dialogue of women are fostered, patriarchy weakens, and new ways of symbolic and material social structures are created.

Additionally, in *Pioneras de la Arquitectura Ecuatoriana*, the meditation on what is visible and invisible has raised a query about the profession itself, which tends to exalt the factual and the tangible elements (buildings) and to under-value women's intellectual creation. The exhibition aims to reclassify the work of these women, recognizing not only their built projects but also their theoretical contributions. Through recovering and disseminating their pioneering intellectual creation, this project delivers a valuable perspective to architecture itself since theoretical approaches — even without being filtered by a gender perspective — have been structurally marginal in the architectural practice in the Ecuadorian context. A reduced reflection and scarce conceptual discussion in the production of architecture is one of the factors that most influences the permanence of gender biases, roles, and asymmetries.

Design with a gender perspective requires an initial questioning of conventional common sense, followed by the formulation of viable alternatives for the coexistence of all genders. In contrast, design based on the patriarchal canon, which does not question the *status quo*, can generate uninhabitable private and public realms that become areas of survival rather than of existence or coexistence, creating more difficulties for the women who occupy or pass through them. Architectural works and cities that are built with a lack of gender perspective sustain inequalities, both in the home and outside it (Falú, 2014; Navarrete-Hernández, Vetro & Concha, 2021). Therefore, it is key to eliminate structural gender barriers in this profession that has historically been masculinized, integrating both the theoretical reflections and the needs of men and women in an equitable manner. By presenting the relevant theoretical works of pioneering women architects in Ecuador (third section), the exhibition manages to reduce these barriers and show alternative approaches about the profession from a female perspective.

When reflecting on women in architecture in a disaggregated way — as a diverse but invisible group of people — it is inevitable that we think of those women masons who have always worked in the broad field of construction (at least commonly in a Latin American context). Due to their lack of university studies, these women remain hidden in gendered shadows, a lack of visibility aggravated by unequal socio-economic conditions. The visibility of their role in architecture is a topic yet to be addressed — a pending yet necessary assignment to achieve equity in our profession and to question its very foundations and through all its dimensions.

Engendering social memory through the exhibition and collectivization of women architects, thinkers, and builders allows us to reconstruct the symbolic world, presenting things as they are and not as they appear to be. That is to say that, contrary to appearances, women have always been practicing and have played a key role in the consolidation of the profession since its origins. After all, is it not the final objective in the pursuit of gender equity to achieve a fair and functional collective life where we all can be or become who we are meant to be? This task is enormous, and it demands beginning from a human scale, rethinking the way we build our houses, our streets, our neighborhoods, our immediate territory. This humanistic approach would be the most beautiful power of architecture with a gender approach.

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### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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