



Negotiating Feminist Positions in the 1980 Exhibition *På Vej: Women Architects in Denmark Envision a More Equitable Future*

Svava Riesto, Section for Landscape Architecture, Planning and Society, University of Copenhagen, DK, svri@ign.ku.dk

Henriette Steiner, Section for Landscape Architecture, Planning and Society, University of Copenhagen, DK, hst@ign.ku.dk

The socially and environmentally engaged feminist architectural practices of the 1970s and 1980s seem more relevant than ever as the building industry continues to fuel spatial, social, economic and ecological injustices. Those decades saw the emergence of feminist architectural exhibitions, the most well known today being *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective*, held at the Brooklyn Museum in New York in 1977. Another example is the lesser-known Danish exhibition *På Vej* (On the Way) of 1980. Launched as part of the United Nations' Decade for Women, it drew large numbers of visitors and international attention. First shown in Copenhagen, the collectively curated exhibition later travelled to the Danish cities of Aarhus and Hjørring. In this article, we contextualize this exhibition and examine its planning process, curatorial choices and accompanying publication. Moreover, we show that rather than presenting a unified feminist statement, *På Vej* negotiated various feminist concerns. In doing so, we highlight not only diverse positions and possibilities, but also the tensions and challenges that feminist architectural and curatorial practices of the time engaged with, posing questions about gender and collaboration that are still relevant today.

Keywords: architectural exhibitions; feminisms; collective curatorial practices; 1980; Denmark



Introduction

'When it comes to the built environment, words don't do the job in the long run', wrote a group of Danish women architects in 1980: 'At some point the need arises to see all the ideas and visions visually, so that they become manifest as projects that can be communicated' (DAL/AA 1980a: 1).¹ And indeed, showing women's ideas and visions visually was the aim of the Danish feminist exhibition *På Vej* (On the way) of 1980. It opened three years after the well-known *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective*, curated by Susana Torre at the Brooklyn Museum in New York City (1977). Although *På Vej* attracted a large audience, expressed important concerns about women and the built environment, and was featured in international publications, the exhibition receives little discussion in historical accounts of Danish architecture.² Yet this travelling exhibition was a significant event that made issues of social and ecological justice visible, while articulating and negotiating different feminist agendas that are still relevant today (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Collage with photographs from the exhibition *På Vej*. Published as part of a special issue on *Women's Architecture* in the architectural magazine *Blød By* (1980: 30–31).

På Vej took place at a time which architectural historiography has often described as one oriented towards architectural experimentation. In particular in Western Europe and North America, the late 1970s and early 1980s has often been narrated as one of largely apolitical 'paper architecture' and other postmodern experiments in form, carried out in architecture or art schools by architects who were unable to realise built work in a stalled economy (Muschamp 1991; Ilkjær 1987). As more recent

scholarship has shown, however, this sort of work has been overexposed at the expense of other forms of practice in the period. In the Nordic countries, for example, design professionals also cultivated more politicized forms of practice concerned with gender equality and social and ecological justice (Mattsson 2017; Riesto 2023).

Much of the display of *På Vej* showcased architectural work that spoke to a politicized agenda. Shown at Copenhagen City Hall during the summer of 1980, the schedule was planned to coincide with the presence of delegates to the mid-term conference of the United Nations' Decade for Women (1975–1985), which took place in Copenhagen. This underscores how the exhibition intended to address both local and international audiences — how it aimed to disrupt gendered hierarchies in the professions as well as gendered norms in the built environment itself by only displaying the work of women architects.

We suggest that *På Vej* allows the telling of an alternative story about how architects sought to gain influence during a period marked by global recession and relatively little building activity in Denmark (Tietjen 2010). It is also an example of a form of architectural practice that engages a wider civic realm and audience — even in a period where the profession has often been bracketed as inwardly turned. We contextualize *På Vej* and highlight its planning, aims, curatorial approaches and reception by considering newspaper reports, records held in official and private archives and two oral history interviews with curators. A driving figure in the making of the exhibition is the Danish-born architect Bodil Kjær (born 1932), whose extensive archive is a main source for this article.

We will show that *På Vej*, seen as a whole, negotiated various feminist concerns, but also tensions and challenges encompassed by feminist positions and architectural and curatorial practices at the time. As such, it offers a rich pre-context to some of today's architectural work that explicitly takes up a feminist position, engages in social and ecological justice agendas and resorts to more speculative forms of practice.

Danish Collaborative Exhibitions Organized by Women in Context

With the stated aim of presenting work from a broad range of women architects, urban planners and artists, the group exhibition *På Vej* was first put on display in Copenhagen from 17 to 27 July 1980.³ In parallel, another exhibition called *Design by Danish Women*, curated by the architect Grete Jalk, was also shown in Copenhagen, at the venue of the UN conference.

In the Copenhagen City Hall, *På Vej* combined works by architects, urban planners, artists and other professionals with an interest in the built environment. The initiative had come from the group Kvindelige Arkitekter Jylland (Woman Architects of Jutland,

henceforth KAJ), who co-organized *På Vej* as a working group under the Danish Architecture Association (Danske Arkitekters Landsforbund), with shifting members. Just like other feminist initiatives at the time, *På Vej* was thus organized collectively by a group of women. The first curators to be involved were the architects Bodil Kjær and Kirsten Birch (born 1940, today called Birk Hansen), who invited the Danish feminist architecture collective Thyra⁴ – which had recently been founded by the architects Bodil Damgaard, Anne Fogh, Kirsten Hanson, Karen Kratina and Marianne Nielsen – to take on the curatorial work together with them (Figure 2).

From early on, *På Vej* was planned in dialogue with the Danish Governmental Committee that prepared the UN conference in 1980 (Kjær 1979). After being displayed in Copenhagen, it travelled to Denmark's second largest city and was exhibited in Aarhus City Hall.⁵ The idea was initially that workplaces and cultural institutions around the country could later display parts of it or the entire exhibition (DAL/AA 1980b: 1; Vraa Kjær and Lind 1980). Newspaper records show that it also went on to the city Hjørring, but we have not found sources that confirm other travels (Højbjerg 1981: 7).

The core idea behind the exhibition was to show work by Danish women, 'most of them planners, architects and artists' (DAL/AA 1980b: 1). A press release presented the exhibition as

the first attempt to give a comprehensive display of projects and proposals that express ... women's attitudes towards the environment. The exhibition is a prompt for further debate and an attempt to get in direct contact with users and residents for future collaboration on more human-friendly environments.⁶ (DAL/AA 1980c: 1)

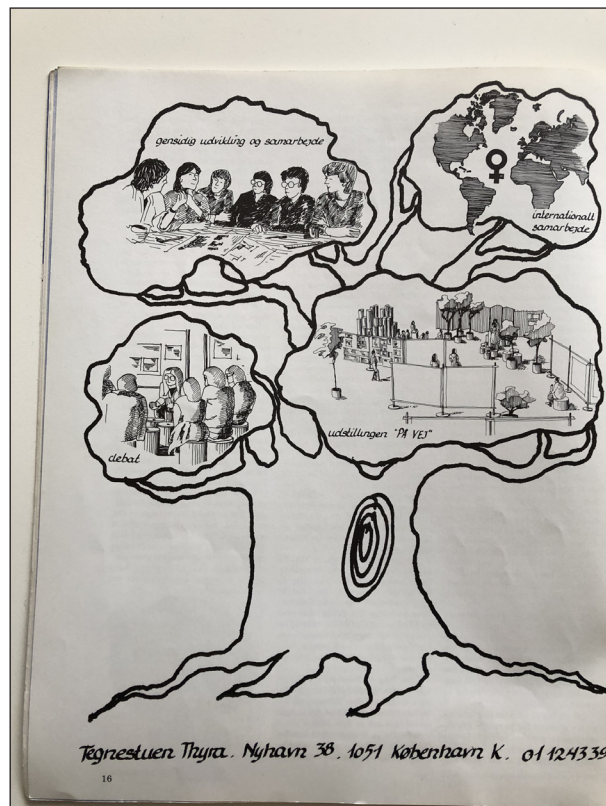


Figure 2: In 1981, the Danish feminist architecture collective Thyra presented the exhibition *På Vej* as one of the four main foci of its practice, the others being mutual development and collaboration, international collaboration and debate. From *Blød By* (1981: 16).

På Vej displayed works by multiple women architects and artists from Denmark and abroad, and in principle, everyone could submit proposals. The exhibition combined paintings, sculptured walls made especially for the exhibition, photography, video screenings, slide shows and more. Among the architectural designs shown were projects for a museum, a training facility for firemen and ecological institutes. The curators attempted to create distinct and intimate spaces in the exhibition, separating it into various rooms using partitions, plants and furniture.

Kjær (n.d.-a) had spent many years abroad before working on the exhibition. She had studied in London, both at the Architectural Association School of Architecture and at the Royal College of Art, and worked first at the Arup studio and later ran Bodil Kjær Associates (1969–1979) in London. Later she lived in Italy, combining her practice in Europe with teaching appointments at universities in the United States.⁷ Following her return to Denmark around 1980, Kjær taught for a short time at the Aarhus School of Architecture, where she invited her colleague, Birch, to co-organize *På Vej* (Birk Hansen 2023). Both were active in the local women’s organization of architects, KAJ.

The two architects and educators shared an interest in questions about the role of women in architecture, and we can assume that they knew about the internationally well-known feminist art exhibition *Kvindeudstillingen X* (The Women’s Exhibition X) held in Copenhagen in 1975. While Kjær (2023a) and Birch (2023) did not know of the 1977 exhibition *Women in American Architecture* at the time, Kjær (1982) was familiar with the work of the feminist design cooperative Matrix in London. She wrote a review of their 1980 exhibition *Home Truths* in 1980, drawing several connections between British and Scandinavian feminist organizations, films, research projects and other initiatives, including the *På Vej* exhibition.

Regionally, *På Vej* can be contextualized in relation to several exhibitions in the Nordic countries that critiqued the contemporary built environment and suggested other ways of building through the combination of multiple media and spatial installations. Examples are *Alternativ Arkitektur* (Alternative Architecture) displayed in 1977 at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, north of Copenhagen, curated by Kjeld Kjeldsen; and *Børn er et Folk* (Children Are One People), which was shown in 1978 and curated by the artist and architect Susanne Ussing, also at the Louisiana museum (Riesto 2023; Vilslev Thorsen and Hoff 2017).

A number of other exhibitions, some also curated by women, attempted to search for expressions of women’s work and experiences more generally. Like *På Vej*, these exhibitions often sought to dissolve the borders between different media, between art and architecture and between the architecture of the exhibition venue and the

displayed objects or installations. One such example is the Swedish travelling exhibition *Vi Arbetar för Livet* (We Work for Life) (1980–1982) that showed a combination of sculptures, textiles, paintings and photographs by 26 Swedish woman artists; it was produced by Rikssällningen, the Swedish national agency for travelling exhibitions, in collaboration with the art gallery Liljevalchs Konsthall in Stockholm (Robbert 1980).

Another example of such an experimental exhibition is *Gennem Kvinderum — en rejse i indre byer* (Through Women's Spaces — A Journey through Interior Cities) (1980), created collectively by 50 people, and shown at Aarhus Kunstmuseum. There, a series of museum spaces were transformed into different imaginary cities, each with its own spatial expression and materiality. Notably, some of these spaces were later shown through photographic documentation as part of *På Vej* in Aarhus.

Like Susana Torre's *Women in American Architecture* (1977), the organizers of *På Vej* decided to accompany the exhibition with a book, called *Kvinder ytrer sig om omgivelserne* in Danish. A slightly different English edition was published as *Women's Expressions on the Environment: A Commentary to the Exhibition PÅ VEJ That Shows the Work of Women Architects, Planners and Artists* (Birch et al. 1980a; 1980b). It brought together short texts and images by 30 women artists, writers, designers and architects and showcased more projects than were included in the exhibition itself.⁸

Negotiating Feminist Positions and the Relevance of Womanhood

The *På Vej* curatorial group set out to find projects that could be exhibited by publishing an open call in architectural magazines. The initial aim was to show international and local visitors a broad spectrum of work by women that addressed 'built environments, future landscapes, cities, houses, squares, streets and more, and show what life they imagine to be lived there' (Vang 1980–81: 6).⁹ This occurred in a context where criticisms of modern planning had become widely articulated, and a growing critique of resource overuse and overconsumption had led to calls for architects to reconsider their contribution to the built environment through countercultural and 'alternative' architectural projects (Avermaete and Gosseye 2021: 302–305; Bendsen, Riesto and Steiner 2023; 202–248, 296–306; Riesto 2023).

In Denmark and many other countries, the economic recession in the wake of the oil crisis and the decline in construction activity in the late 1970s created difficult conditions for architects. Many professionals struggled to find paid design and planning work. The recession hit women architects particularly hard. It was in response to this that women began to form collectives and organizations as a form of resistance and activism. This was also the backdrop for the Danish organization *Kvinder i Byggesektoren* (Women in the Building Sector). The architect Hanne Topsøe-Jensen, who was active in the group later, articulated their predicament:

The premise is that women in the building sector are under a lot of pressure in both their professional and private lives. We are often isolated in our working environments, and in the economic crisis we are pushed even further out into marginal positions workwise. In a situation of crisis, even greater political pressure is required to make it possible for planning and architecture to be made on women's terms.¹⁰ (1981: 2)

Indeed, in 1979, one year before the *På Vej* exhibition, a Nordic conference for women in the construction sector, held in Kungälv outside Gothenburg, Sweden, had sought to highlight the plight of women architects and building professionals and create political pressure for change (Figure 3). One hundred and twenty women from Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland and Denmark spent three days together at that conference, co-organized by the *Kvinder i Byggesektoren*, the Swedish group *Bo i Gemenskap* (Living in Community) and the Norwegian *Kvinnepolitisk Planforum* (Women's Political Planning Forum). They created a new professional association in 1979, *Nordiska kvinnors bygge- och Planforum* (Nordic Women's Building and Planning Forum), that organized several conferences on the topic. Their founding conference in Kungälv, which discussed the conditions underlying their work and sought ways to build 'on women's terms', was part of a wider range of initiatives in Denmark, where women in construction and architecture united to form communities, organizations, working



Figure 3: Drawing from the report *Bygge og. bo på kvinnors villkår* (Building and Living on Women's Terms) with the motto, in Swedish: 'A solitary woman is but a slave, but a thousand sisters can make demands'. From Hansen and Kaul (1979: 45).

or reading groups, publications and more. Moreover, the architectural magazine *Blød By* produced three special issues on feminism in 1980, 1981, and 1983.

At the time, many women in Denmark had entered the paid workforce, and conditions for working women had in fact improved; for example, beginning in 1980 women were granted 16 weeks of paid maternity leave (Holm 2012). *På Vej* was framed as a way for women to break out of professional isolation and inequity. However, this attempt to break out of unjust gendered structures was done not only by highlighting women professionals' accomplishments, but also by instigating 'a process in which various woman artists and architects begin to work together in new ways'¹¹ to push for change in the built environment (Vang 1980–81: 6).

'Women with Women': Whose Exhibition?

Despite the curators' good intentions, from Kjær's archive we know that it evidently proved less easy to persuade other women architects to participate in the exhibition (1980a: 2) (**Figure 4**). While we can only speculate why this was the case, we may of course ask to what degree this lack of commitment might have to do with the way the exhibition itself was being organized and its aims presented. Kjær noted that the lack of entries following the call for submissions gave rise to questions of whether the exhibition should still aim at providing an overview of the diverse work being done by the many different women in the field, or whether it should instead offer a more unified statement about women's conditions, thereby advocating a struggle that was not necessarily shared by all women architects. An area of tension was whether the exhibition should be showcasing the diverse work of women professionals or whether it was meant to be formulating a shared feminist critique of contemporary built environments. Such tensions surface repeatedly in the archival material we have unearthed concerning the organization of *På Vej*.

One example of the different feminist positions that came together, and clashed, in and around the exhibition concerns the choice of the poster to advertise it, which led to numerous arguments about the kind of audiences the curators wanted to address (Højbjerg 1981: 7). In the image chosen for the poster, a lithograph by the Finnish artist Annikki Tiirikala portrays a grinning, troll-like woman who appears to break out of her own pictorial frame, bearing the seed of a new tree of life in her womb (**Figure 4**). While the members of Thyra were clearly in favour of using this image for the poster, Birch and Kjær were against the idea (Birk Hansen 2023). In a letter to Thyra, Kjær argued that using this image would 'deter people from coming to the exhibition', because it would not communicate its relation to the built environment; instead, it might be perceived by 'normal ordinary people — that is, those that we wish to see as



Figure 4: The poster for *På Vej*, 1980, features a drawing by the Finnish artist Annikki Tiirikkala. Although the curators debated whether this image would send the right signal to potential viewers, they ultimately decided to use it. From Birch et al. (1980a: 75).

exhibition guests' — as yet another 'negatively criticizing and holy moralizing' idea 'that they couldn't be bothered to go and see' (1980b: 1).¹² The image was chosen for the poster nonetheless, and it was also reprinted in the publication that accompanied the exhibition (Birch et al. 1980a: 75), yet the tensions show something about that moment around 1980 when different ideological and cultural positions collided around women's professional and political identities, which was also an aesthetic battle. In this sense the tension over the poster points to a cross-roads. By the end of the 1970s, we were moving away from feminist symbols of anti-fashion and youth rebellion, evident, for example, in the symbol of the purple diaper, a self-made head-scarf made from cheap cotton diapers, which were worn in particular by many women professionals who took up jobs as kindergarteners or teachers in Denmark in the 1970s. The 1980

exhibition came at the brink of a decade in which understandings of professional roles were changing, as were aesthetics and gender identity, morphing into the yuppie culture (Johnsen 1983).

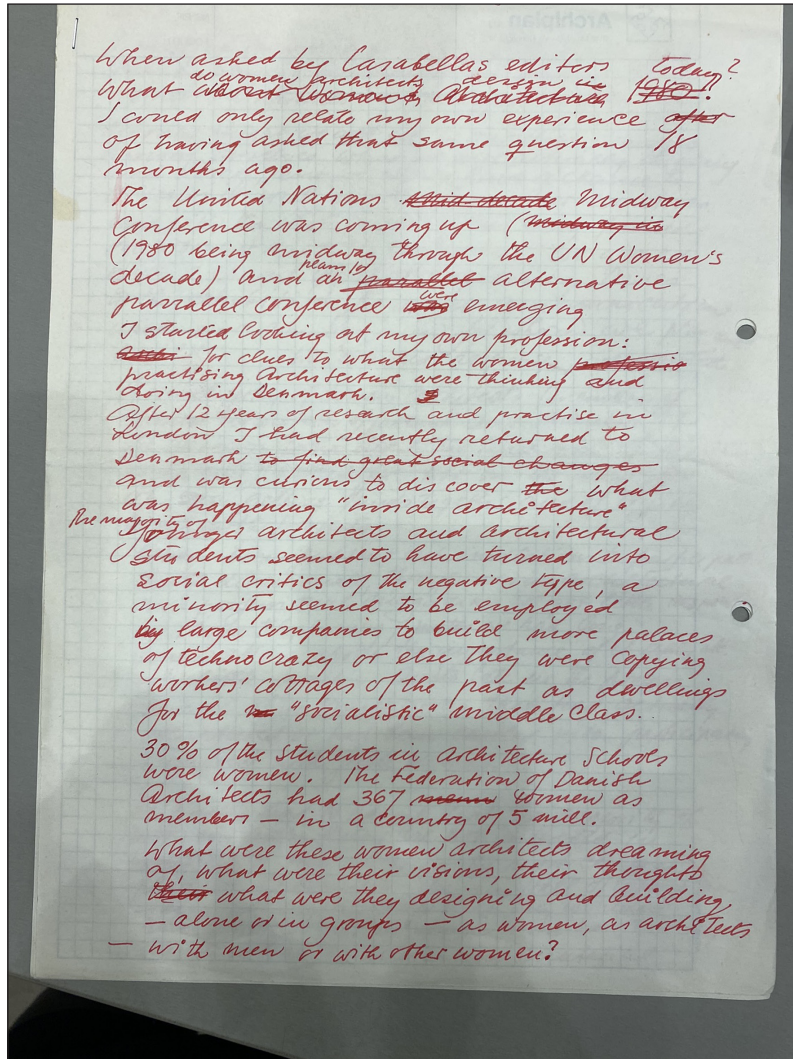


Figure 5: The handwritten note in which Bodil Kjær reflects on the outcomes of Pål Vej in the context of a planned interview with the magazine Casabella. From Kjær (1980a).

This discussion points to some of the complicated and layered set of feminist concerns driving the exhibition, ranging from showcasing women's work and spurring solidarity among women professionals to promoting activist practices and aesthetical expressions that connotated a specific left-wing culture. It also highlights the difficulties faced by the organizers themselves, who wanted to remain true to the initial political motivations behind the project while simultaneously appealing to a mainstream audience and influencing public opinion.

In an unpublished note, apparently written years later, headed ‘Revolutionary — Reactionary. Women with Other Women in New Situations’, Kjær formulated an emotionally charged, class-based criticism of all *borgerskabets kvinder* (the phrase can be translated as either ‘bourgeois women’ or ‘middle-to-upper-class women’) (n.d.-b: 1). In the note, Kjær — by then herself a leader of an international design studio, university professor and world traveller — reveals her regret that well-off women merely visited the women’s movement as ‘a hobby, a fashion, a knitting club’, rather than authentically joining the class struggle facing their gender. In doing so, she draws a sharp line between bourgeois (or middle-to-upper-class) women and the women’s movement as such, seemingly hoping to raise awareness of the larger issues women face around the world. If women would begin to authentically take part in the women’s movement, in true solidarity with women from all walks of life, Kjær writes, they would be able to experience more ‘affirming, warm, sensuous, happy, care, love, solidarity’.

Related correspondence in Kjær’s archive suggest that the curators of *På Vej*, a loosely organized group of unpaid volunteers, were struggling with other internal conflicts, too (e.g., 1980b). In particular, it seems, the distribution of the workload leading up to the show was challenging. The letters mention economic scarcity in the budget and how some of the organizers had to do the exhibition planning alongside their fulltime jobs. The exhibition project had received funding from Danish Arts Foundation, the Aarhus School of Architecture, the foundation Salling, Copenhagen Culture Fund and others (DAL/AA 1980c), but this mostly covered production costs — not the labour or preparations.

Furthermore, the curatorial group comprised people with different backgrounds and skills and working from different conditions, which sometimes seemed to make it difficult to balance expectations. Looking back, Kjær remembers the collaboration as one in which she would have wished the workflows to be different. Drawing on the fact that she, ‘apart from being educated in forms of collaboration as such, had several years of experience with collaboration and realization of large projects’, Kjær recalls, ‘I perhaps had an advantage in relation to most of the others in the group’ (2023b).¹³ Some letters reflect moments in which the curators described their collaboration as ‘exceptionally difficult’ (Kjær 1980c), explicitly mentioning ‘aggressions’ that apparently occurred (Birch 1980).

Documentation of controversies and conflicts does not always end up in the archives. As architectural historians we are much more used to writing about successes, achievements and creative synergies than about disappointments and the many struggles that can also be an intrinsic part of creative collaborations. Much of the correspondence indeed also reveals that the collaboration was guided by mutual inspiration, respect and generosity. Yet to fully understand *På Vej* and the co-work that

led up to it, we need to recognise the struggles that came along with working together as an ad hoc group, with no formalized leader and in a changing cultural milieu, yet still finding ways to unite ‘women with women’, as they went along.

Multiple Spaces, Multiple Voices: The Exhibition Design

While the open call for projects did lead to some submissions, it was only when the curators began to contact potential participants through their personal networks that they began to receive positive feedback from more artists, architects and planners (Kjær 1980a: 2) (Figure 5). The curators also included in their display another travelling exhibition that became a sort of ‘exhibition within the exhibition’: *La Femme Danoise*, curated by architect Karen Zahle (born 1931), which had appeared first at the Danish cultural centre in Paris in 1975 and then at other cultural institutions abroad (Grue 1980). With these contributions, *På Vej* became a rich exhibition with multiple displays. Its content changed slightly when the exhibition moved to Aarhus, but the overall message remained the same.

The exhibition’s first appearance in Copenhagen was in the City Hall’s large hall, a setting with monumental staircases and double-height ceiling that was divided into a number of smaller exhibition spaces. These were defined by partitions and potted plants organized according to the ground plan by Kjær, made up of circular spaces (Figures 6 and 7). Each space was curated by different architects and displayed varying storylines.

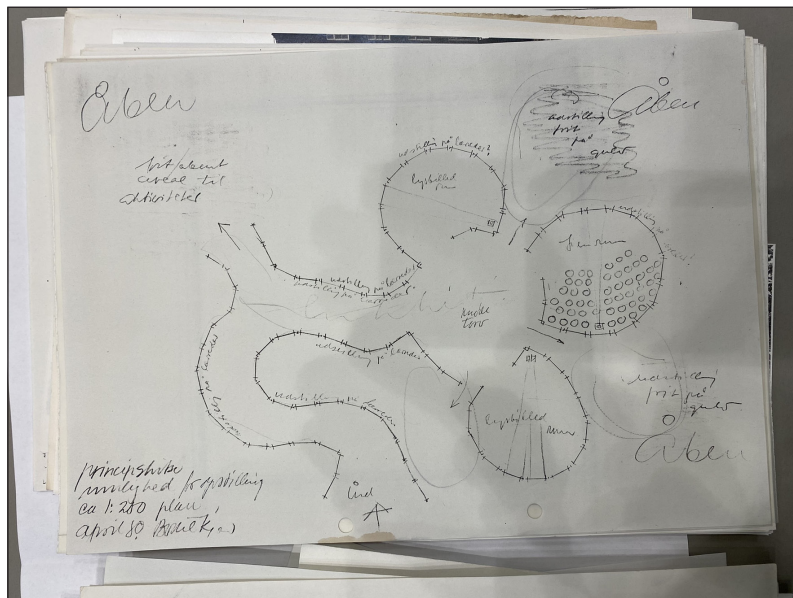


Figure 6: Hand-drawn plan of the exhibition space for *På Vej* by Bodil Kjær, 1980. The central gallery of Copenhagen City Hall was divided into smaller, circular spaces defined by partitions and potted bushes. Bodil Kjær’s archive, Rigsarkivet.



Figure 7: One of the small ensembles of café chairs and a table where people could meet and chat in the exhibition, resembling a community space on a housing estate or in an urban neighborhood. From left: Bodil Kjær together with architects Lene Vraa and Inge Lind. Photographer unknown. Bodil Kjær's archive, Rigsarkivet.

Imagine café tables and chairs inviting visitors to sit down and chat, re-enacting the architects' vision of small, informal meeting spaces for local communities in urban neighbourhoods, or a room where the floor is covered with large cushions, a space filled with laundry, where visitors can rest and watch videos about gender equality in Denmark and women's unpaid labour on screens that seem to be built into washing machines. Now envision such spaces alongside more historical elements, such as those from the *La Femme Danoise* exhibition — bridal shop mannequins or a life-size dummy of the Danish women's rights activist and author Mathilde Fibiger (1830–1872), giving a material presence to the often-overlooked women of Danish history (Figure 8). These were just some of the variety of elements and storylines included in *På Vej*. In other parts of the exhibition, posters provided information, often written in a pedagogical, political and normative manner, about the work and ideas of the participating architects and artists (Figure 9).



Figure 8: Architect Karen Zahle working on the exhibition *La Femme Danoise*, re-exhibited as part of *På Vej*, here with a life-size wax figure of the 19th-century women's rights activist Mathilde Fibiger; other items displayed included a shop dummy of a bride and washing machines. Photo by L. Seifert. From Grue (1980: 22).



Figure 9: A poster with pop-up books, featuring themes related to life in the suburbs. Made by architect Kirsten Vegnsgaard and shown at *På Vej*. Bodil Kjær's archive, Rigsarkivet.

While we have only been able to find a few photos of the exhibition,¹⁴ a contemporary review paints a picture of its multifarious and vibrant environment: ‘Posters, montages of images, perspective drawings, sculptures, models, video screens, slide shows, debates, theatre etc. – surrounded by many green plants, trees, fruit bushes such as currants, black currants and gooseberries’ (Vang 1980–81: 6).¹⁵ The curators had deliberately chosen this heterogeneous spatial expression, using multiple media and curatorial techniques: ‘We try as much as we can to use photos, slides, perspective drawings, models, debates, performances etc. instead of the traditional architectural drawings: “plan, section and elevation”’ (DAL/AA1980a: 1).¹⁶ In this way, the exhibition deliberately challenged the representational means typically used in displays of contemporary art and architecture, creating spatial, situated experiences to reach beyond a specialized audience of architects and urban planners. This seems to have worked, since the exhibition reached a large and varied audience, as stated in the generally positive reviews (Munksgaard 1980: 364–365; Vang 1980–81: 6–8; ‘Anmeldelser og Noter’ 1980: 364–365).

Some parts of the exhibition were more artistic, even avant-garde. In fact, to a large degree *På Vej* spoke to an audience that was expected to be familiar with architecture and feminist thought, boasting a somewhat edgy vibe. An example is *Vardagsteknik på våra villkor* (Everyday technology on our terms), a film by the Finnish sociologist and researcher Tarja Cronberg and Norwegian architect Anne Sæterdal, which was screened on a large TV in the exhibition. This featured a dance as a means of posing questions about the rationalization of the everyday environment. In their chapter in the accompanying book, Cronberg and Sæterdal broached the issue of structural

changes to production and society (in Birch et al. 1980b: 97–99). Their project focused on the harsh consequences of technological innovations that made women’s work and daily lives more monotonous and anonymous and alienated women from many previously meaningful gendered tasks. They argued for an alternative understanding of technology that would be more intuitive, promote ‘social relations between people, instead of increased isolation’, and take no toll on the environment.

Social and political themes, often pointing to left-wing debates of the time, thus moved in and out of feminist discourses at *På Vej* and were situated alongside less explicitly political displays. When shown at the Aarhus City Hall, the exhibition extended into the public square outside the building, where a large pink public sculpture encouraged children to play (**Figure 10**). The architectural periodical *Arkitekten* concluded that although women often seemed to be overshadowed by their male colleagues, *På Vej* defied that narrative and revealed that women architects and artists were no less capable of ‘creative fantasy and societal-political engagement’ (‘Anmeldelser og Noter’ 1980: 364).¹⁷ Further, the periodical suggested that the works as such seemed not to be particularly shaped by a feminine undercurrent, although it conceded that the orientation towards gender might be particular to women architects.



Figure 10: An installation in the public space outside the Aarhus edition of the exhibition, by artists Lene Vraa and Inge Lind together with Bodil Kjær, 1980. Bodil Kjær’s archive, Rigsarkivet.

The exhibition and its publication, *Women’s Expressions on the Environment*, foregrounded social issues such as co-housing, children’s right to the city, local participation in architecture and planning and community spaces in neighbourhoods

and urban areas more broadly. It also addressed Marxist discourses on alienation, questions about everyday life and women's contributions in terms of invisible labour and their intimate knowledge of the everyday sphere. In one chapter of the book that accompanied the exhibition, members of KAJ raised the question of families' — and women's — isolation in suburban areas, indicating the architectural order and typology of isolated single-family homes leading to a loss of both community and the transmission of skills (Birch et al. 1980b: 125–127). The loss of handicrafts traditionally made by women was thus put on a par with the loss of traditional building technologies: the repetition of neatly spaced, similar-looking prefabricated homes was equated with a cultural loss of tradition and community. Questions of planning, architecture, technology, power and politics hence emerged as interwoven. Here we see both a nostalgic, anti-modern and anti-technological discourse and a radical feminist utopian mindset, combined with the belief that change is possible if ordinary people and communities join forces with architectural professionals and activists to go against the grain of the capitalist order.

In her contribution, another architect, Ulla Falk, suggested the establishment of 'ecological schools' that she saw as interdisciplinary 'preschools' for higher education. The idea was to teach practical and theoretical knowledge about ecology and to give students or participants an opportunity to experiment with building construction, agriculture and energy supply. Distributed throughout the country, these schools would also provide input and ideas for local communities (Munksgaard 1980: 29). Together with the architects Anne Ørum-Nielsen and Hildur Jackson, Falk gave a concrete example of this in their plan for the reconstruction of an old farm to create an ecological school. Here too we see the longing for a different life, outside of the urban capitalist economy and modern typologies, in line with other speculative and ecofeminist orientations. (Birch et al. 1980b: 72–78).

By contrast, Ussing elevated art as a medium that can, on the one hand, cut across what she described as a longing for a 'simple life', e.g., when people move into old rural properties such as former farmhouses or fisherfolk's cottages. On the other hand, she proposed the rationalization of mind and body in the mainstream welfare state's middle-class notions of 'healthy life', as expressed in the housing estates of the 1950s (Birch et al. 1980b: 62–68. See Riesto 2023). Designating both ways of life as limiting and petit bourgeois, Ussing presented art as a liberating force that would arguably require a new economic system.

Even though the positions were conflicting and seemed to clash both behind and on the stage of the exhibition, *På Vej* stayed true to its politicized agenda. It negotiated feminist issues of socio-economic inequity at a moment when different feminist voices

came to light: when women architects were interpreting the lessons of modernism through critiques of patriarchy and capitalism, pollution and ecological crisis, as well as of human alienation through technology and rationalization.

Women Architects in Denmark Envision a More Equitable Future

Seen as a whole, the exhibition *På Vej* highlights a number of sometimes conflicting radical structural alternatives to what feminist architects considered the dreary state of a society caught in a triple bind, between patriarchal capitalism's modernist architectural megalomania, the ecological exhaustion of the planet and human alienation caused by technology and rationalization. Despite the wealth of problems facing women — and the communities in which they lived — and despite their varying beliefs in the power of architecture and the architectural profession to offer healing solutions, the exhibition comes across as optimistic.

Although women architects endured ongoing struggles and inequities, including in their experience of putting together the exhibition itself, *På Vej* was a significant achievement. Revisiting it thus not only reveals an alternative story of the kind of concerns architects were voicing at this moment in time; it also shows how the intersection of feminism and architecture provided a rich context through which to negotiate different professional positions.

Then again, given the generally patriarchal tone of historiographies of Danish architecture, perhaps it should not be so puzzling that this episode has been largely overlooked (see Bendsen, Riesto and Steiner 2023). This only makes it more pertinent to draw attention to the exhibition and the agendas it represented and to listen to the underlying plurality of its messages which emerged only when the exhibition took form and brought together women and others who shared feminist views and concerns. The project even brings forward the strengths of the exhibition as a medium: it is spatial, situated, often non-linear and can allow for many voices and perspectives, even when these are not necessarily congruent.

This way of assembling women's work and various feminist perspectives and showcasing them to a broader public through central institutions certainly remains inspiring today, when women and other architects outside privileged power structures are still struggling against unequal conditions. It demonstrates the potential of coming together to imagine more equitable futures and show, through speculative work such as in exhibitions or publications, that it is possible to practise otherwise. The association of women with more or less explicit political or feminist agendas has value in itself and can be empowering. It is an opportunity of find a voice, to speak up, make a difference, and even to provide ways to move forward.

Notes

- ¹ 'Når emnet drejer sig om de fysiske omgivelser, slår ordene alene ikke til i det lange løb. På et tidspunkt opstår der et behov for at se alle idéerne og visionerne i visualiseret form, så de bliver til opfattede projekter og kan formidles videre'. All translations by the authors.
- ² Correspondence with editor Patrizia Scarzella (held in Bodil Kjær's archive) reveals that there were plans to feature *På Vej* in the Italian architectural magazine *Casabella*, with an extensive interview with Kjær and contributions by ten Danish women architects. In the end, a short report was published in *Domus* (Scarzella 1981), and Kjær (1982: 86–87) wrote an overview. Historical accounts of post-modern architecture in Denmark do not mention *På Vej* (e.g., Ilkjær 1987; Nielsen 2021a; 2021b). It has, however, been discussed in Jordan and Larsen (2010), and Bendsen, Riesto and Steiner (2023).
- ³ The UN conference took place on 14–30 July 1980, along with the Alternative Women's Conference, also in Copenhagen (see Kjær 1979).
- ⁴ Named after the 10th-century queen Thyra, to honour her role as Denmark's first woman commissioner of architectural projects (Jordan and Larsen 2010).
- ⁵ Shown during the city's annual cultural festival, 6–14 September 1980.
- ⁶ 'Udstillingen her er et første forsøg på en samlet fremvisning af projekter og forslag, der udtrykker nogle af disse kvinders holdning til omgivelserne. Udstillingen er et oplæg til videre debat og et forsøg på at komme i direkte kontakt med brugere og beboere for fremtidigt samarbejde om mere menneskevenlige omgivelser'.
- ⁷ Visiting professor at Ball State University (1967–1968) and the University of Texas at Arlington (1976–1977); taught at the Pratt Institute in 1970. In the early 1980s, Kjær moved to Maryland, becoming a professor at the Department of Housing and Design.
- ⁸ Several lists of the projects that were exhibited as part of *På Vej* in Copenhagen and Aarhus survive (Bodil Kjær's archive, Rigsarkivet).
- ⁹ 'Man har gerne villet vise noget om, hvilke tanker kvindelige arkitekter og kunstnere gør sig, især om fremtidens omgivelser, fremtidens landskaber, byer, huse, pladser, gader, osv. og vise hvilket liv de forestiller sig, der vil kunne leves der'.
- ¹⁰ 'Præmisserne er efter vores mening, at kvinder i byggesektoren er hårdt pressede fagligt og privat, vi er ofte isolerede på vores arbejdspladser, under den økonomiske krise skubbes vi endnu længere ud i faglige marginalpositioner, i en krisesituation kræves der større politisk pres, for at gennemføre planlægning og byggeri på kvinders vilkår'.
- ¹¹ 'Udstillingen skulle også vise begyndelsen af en proces, hvor kvindelige kunstnere og arkitekter af forskellig slags begynder at samarbejde på en ny måde'.
- ¹² 'Ganske normale almindelige mennesker -d.v.s. dem, som vi ønsker som udstillingsgæster -har generelt udtrykt, at de ikke gider gå og se endnu mere negativt kritiserende og helligt moraliserende'.
- ¹³ 'efter min uddannelse i selve det at samarbejde mange års erfaring med samarbejde om gennemførelse af større projekter – så måske havde jeg en fordel frem for de fleste af de andre i gruppen'.
- ¹⁴ While wrapping up this article, we became aware that the national archive, Rigsarkivet, may hold some photographs of *På Vej*, which were previously in the national library in Aarhus, Statsbiblioteket. These photos were, however, being digitized and catalogued, and we have not been able to see them as part of this research.
- ¹⁵ 'plancher, billedmontager, perspektivtegninger, skulpturer, modeller, video-tv, lysbilledeserier, debatter, teater, m.m. – omkranset af mange grønne planter, træer og bærbærende buske så som ribs, solbær og stikkelsbær'.
- ¹⁶ 'Vi forsøger ... I vid udstrækning at benytte fotostater, dias, perspektivtegninger, modeller, debatter, teater m.m. i stedet for de traditionelle tegninger i "plan, snit og front"'.
- ¹⁷ 'Det viser, at kvindelige arkitekter og kunstnere ikke står tilbage for deres mandlige kolleger med hensyn til skabende fantasi og samfundspolitisk engagement'.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

References

Unpublished Sources

Birch, K. 1980. Letter to B Kjær, 4 June. (B Kjær's archive, Rigsarkivet (National Archive), Copenhagen).

Birk Hansen, K. 2023. Interview by S Riesto, Copenhagen, 16 February.

DAL/AA 1980a = Danske Arkitekters Landsforbund/Akademisk Arkitektforening, Pressemeldelse [Press release], 23 May. (10/0.1.1-80.133: 1, H Vestergaard's archive, Rigsarkivet).

DAL/AA 1980b = Pressemeldelse [Press release], 14 July. (B Kjær's archive, Rigsarkivet).

DAL/AA 1980c = Pressemeldelse [Press release], 29 August. (B Kjær's archive, Rigsarkivet).

Kjær, B. 1979. Letter from KAJ to the governmental committee att. cand. jur. H Boye, 1 October. (B Kjær's archive, Rigsarkivet).

Kjær, B. 1980a. Women in Architecture 1980. (B Kjær's archive, Rigsarkivet)

Kjær, B. 1980b. Letter from to Tegnestuen Thyra, 27 June. (B Kjær's archive, Rigsarkivet).

Kjær, B. 1980c. Letter to K Birch, 27 June. (B Kjær's archive, Rigsarkivet).

Kjær, B. 2023a. Interview by S Riesto, Aarhus, 5 December.

Kjær, B. 2023b. E-mail to S Riesto, 10 December.

Kjær, B. n.d.-a. CV. (B Kjær's archive, Rigsarkivet).

Kjær, B. n.d.-b. Revolutionær-reaktionær. Kvinder sammen med andre kvinder i de nye situationer [Revolutionary-reactionary. Women with other women in new situations]. (B Kjær's archive, Rigsarkivet).

Topsøe-Jensen, H. 1981. På kvindeforskningsgruppens vegne: brev Kvinder i Byggesektoren. Oplæg til diskussion af KIB's næste årsmøde [On behalf of the group for women's research: Letter to Women in the Building Sector. Prompt for discussion of KIB's next annual meeting], 29 September. (HTJ/LRC': 2. B H Vestergaard's archive, Rigsarkivet).

Vraa, L, Kjær, B, and Lind, I. 1980. Udstillingen 'På Vej' i Århus 6.-14. September 1980. Rapport fra udstillingsdeltagerne [Report from participants of the Aarhus exhibition]. (B Kjær's archive, Rigsarkivet).

Published Sources

Anmeldelser og Noter: Kvinder Udstiller [Reviews and notes: Women exhibiting]. *Arkitekten*, 82(15): 364-365.

Avermaete, T, and Gosseye, J. 2021. *Urban Design in the 20th Century – A History*. Zurich: Gta Verlag.

Bendsen, JR, Riesto, S, and Steiner, H. 2023. *Untold Stories: On Women, Gender and Architecture in Denmark*. Copenhagen: Strandberg Publishing.

Birch, K, et al. (eds.). 1980a. *Women's Expression on the Environment: A Commentary to the Exhibition PÅ VEJ That Shows the Works of Women Architects, Planners and Artists*. Trans. by J Lomholt. Århus/Copenhagen: Modtryk/Danske Arkitekters Landsforbund.

- Birch, K**, et al. (eds.). 1980b. *Kvinder ytrer sig om omgivelserne: Kommentarer til udstillingen På Vej som viser arbejder af kvindelige arkitekter, planlæggere og kunstnere: Københavns Rådhus fra den 17. til den 27. juli, Århus Rådhus fra den 6. til d. 14 sept. 1980*. Århus/København: Modtryk/Danske Arkitekters Landsforbund.
- Blød By 1980 = *Blød By*, 10 (special issue: *Trafik. De bløde slår igen* [Traffic: The soft strike again]).
- Blød By 1981 = *Blød By*, 11 (special issue: *Kvindearkitektur* [Women's architecture]).
- Blød By 1983 = *Blød By*, 24 (special issue: *Kvinder i Arkitektur og Planlægning* [Women in architecture and planning]).
- Grue, B**. 1980. Sådan havde vores hverdag set ud hvis den var lavet af kvinder [What our everyday would have been like if it was designed by women]. *Aktuelt*, 13 July: 22.
- Hansen, K**, and **Kaul, S**. 1979. Bygge og bo på kvinners vilkår: Rapport fra en konference [Building and living on women's terms: Report from a conference], Kungälv: Nordiske kvinners bygge- og planforum.
- Højbjerg, J**. 1981. Byfornyelse og kunst i forening [Urban renewal and art united]. *Aalborg Stiftstidene*, 27(7): 7.
- Holm, HH**. 2012. Milepæle i ligestillingens historie [Milestones in the history of gender equality]. *Danmarks Statistik*, 5 March. <https://www.dst.dk/da/Statistik/nyheder-analyser-publ/bagtal/2012/2012-03-05-milepaele-kvinder> [accessed 22 December 2023].
- Ilkjær, MO**. 1987. *Postmodernismen i dansk arkitektur: International baggrund, dansk debat og praksis* [Postmodernism in Danish architecture: International background, Danish debate and practice]. København: Byggeriets Studiearkiv.
- Johnsen, L**. 1983. *Da moden gik amok, og formerne faldt*. Copenhagen: Borgen.
- Jordan, T**, and **Larsen, RL**. 2010. *Female Forces of Architecture. Women's Centennial Anniversary at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Architecture*. Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts School of Architecture.
- Kjær, B**. 1982. A Woman's Place. *Architect's Journal*, 15 September: 86–87.
- Mattsson, H**. 2017. Shifting Gender and Acting Out History: Is There a Swedish Feminist-Postmodernist Architecture? In: Schalk, M, Kristiansson, T, and Mazé, R (eds.), *Feminist Futures of Spatial Practice*. Baunach: Spurbuchverlag, 289–301.
- Munksgaard, E**. 1980. Kvindesag og byggefag [Women's movement and building professions]. *Samvirke*, 11: 28–29.
- Muschamp, H**. 1991. Ground Up. *Artforum*, 30(2): 29–32. <https://www.artforum.com/print/199108/paper-architecture-33722> [accessed 14 July 2023].
- Nielsen, KL** (ed.). 2021a and b. *PoMo*, 1 and 2 (special issues: *Arkitekten*, 2 and 3).
- Nielsen, KL** (ed.). 2021b. *PoMo*, 2 (*Arkitekten*, 3).
- Riesto, S**. 2023. Creating Alternatives. Stories of Participation, Collaboration and Gender in Architecture 1960s–70s. *Journal of Architecture*, 28(3): 354–382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2023.2199310>
- Robbert, L**. 1980. *Vi arbetar för Livet* [We work for life]. Stockholm: LiberFörlag/Liljevalcks Konsthall.

Scarzella, P. 1981. Le donne e il progetto. Danish Women. *Domus*, 619(July): 38–39.

Tietjen, A (ed.). 2010. *Forstadens Byggekultur 1945–1989. På sporet af velfærdsforstadens bevaringsværdier* [Building culture of the suburb. Tracing preservation values in the welfare suburb. København: Dansk Bygningsarv.

Torre, S. 1977. *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective*. New York: Whitney Library of Design.

Vang, B. 1980–81. Udstillingen På Vej. I *Fiskens Tegn*, [3]: 6–8.

Vilslev Thorsen, B, and **Hoff, C** (eds.). 2017. *Susanne Ussing: mellem kunst og arkitektur*. København: Strandberg Publishing.

