Architectural Histories

Perotti, E, Frey, K and Riesto, S. 2024. Women's Display: Editorial. *Architectural Histories*, 12(1): pp. 1–11. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/ah.15359

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Women's Display: Editorial

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The Special Collection *Women's Display: Women's Exhibitions and Exhibition Design in the 20th Century* explores why, how and under what conditions women made exhibitions about the built environment and who these women were, to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the exhibitions themselves and their design across different individuals, collaborative groups, time periods and geographical contexts. Women were involved in the financing, planning, organizing, critiquing and staging of exhibitions since the 19th century, even though their contributions, aims and impacts are often little known. The articles aim to broaden and diversify the understanding of exhibitions made by women in the 20th century by focusing on subjects whose stories have been forgotten or marginalized in architectural history. For many women, exhibition design was not only an important career step, but also a political and social commitment and a collaborative form of work voicing critique and an experimental laboratory for testing new approaches. Exhibition design proved to be an accessible niche for many woman architects, who discovered in it a chance to gain a foothold in the profession and to have a platform from which to speak out publicly. The exhibition also opened the opportunity of trying out new design concepts and making a theoretical contribution. A series of exhibitions in Switzerland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Russia, Cuba, Canada and the USA from the 1920s to the 1980s are analyzed, using different approaches to the study of women in architecture, illuminating both individual biographies and collective works in the context of historical and social contingency.

Keywords: Women's exhibition; women architects; exhibition design; women's history; feminism; activism; cooperative practice

During the last decade, we have seen a rise in exhibitions that showcase women in architecture, and which are only or mainly curated by women. After the exhibition *Frau Architekt* (Deutsches Architekturmuseum, Frankfurt/Main, 2017),[1] many others have followed, for example *Good News. Women in Architecture* (MAXXI, Rome, 2021)[2] and *Women in Architecture* (Danish Architecture Center, Copenhagen, 2022),[3] in which established institutions seem to want to showcase a departure from the tacit decision to focus on men's work. But as topical as it may be, it is by no means new that women are making exhibitions in architecture, or that architectural exhibitions are presented as showcasing women's role and agency in the built environment.

Already in the late 19th century, women were actively involved in the financing, planning, organization, criticism and making of exhibitions, even if their contributions, aims and impacts are often still little known. This Special Collection aims to broaden and diversify the understanding of exhibitions made by women in the 20th century, when displaying architecture became an important part of architecture culture. We do this by focusing on subjects whose stories have previously been forgotten or marginalized in architectural history.

The Special Collection asks why, how and under what conditions did women make exhibitions about the built environment in the 20th century and who these women were. This issue has been covered in several monographs that shed light on the exhibition-related work of individual women, such as Charlotte Perriand (Barsac 2008, 2014–2019) and Lilly Reich (Costa Meyer 1999; James-Chakraborty 2015), or on individual events such as the *Nationale Tentoonstelling van Vrouwenarbeid* (National Exhibition of Women's Work) in The Hague in 1898 (Grever and Waaldijk 2004). Nevertheless, a more diverse and nuanced understanding of women's exhibitions and exhibition design, across different individuals and collaborative groups as well as different time periods and geographical contexts, is long overdue, and this Special Collection aims to contribute to such an emerging field of research.

This collection does not claim to be comprehensive in itself or to draw essential conclusions about women as a homogeneous group with identical needs, possibilities and positions, but it does suggest some possible common features that call for further attention in future research. The articles in the collection examine a range of exhibitions in Switzerland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Russia, Cuba, Canada and the USA between the 1920s and the 1980s. They are based on presentations given at the meeting of the Interest Group for Women and Gender in Architecture and Urban Design, held at the European Architectural History Network (EAHN) conference in Madrid in June 2022. The meeting, entitled Women's Display: Female Architects and

Designers Planning Exhibitions, was conceived and organized by Eliana Perotti and Katia Frey, co-founders of the Interest Group, together with Hilde Heynen and Kathleen James-Chakraborty.

The research that led to the articles collected here shares a trait that is common to historical research on women's exhibitions: they all address the double challenge of archival silence when examining work that is both made by women and ephemeral in nature — two features that have traditionally been blind spots in many official architectural collections and their modes of cataloguing. As the articles show, architectural historians approach this challenge in different ways, combining official archival records, such as drawings and written documents with oral history, with scattered material from private homes or offices and other forms of investigation that in themselves serve to expand the notion of what constitutes relevant empirical evidence for architectural history. Furthermore, the authors take different approaches to the study of women in architecture, along what we may call a spectrum between biographies and the elaboration of collective work, between individual life-stories, social structures and historical contexts (Burns and Brown 2020).

Women's Exhibitions as Sociopolitical Commitment

Political and social commitment was one thing that characterized the earliest form of women's exhibitions in Europe and North-America. Another was the collaborative form of work, especially in the mid-19th-century charity bazaars that became widespread in Europe and the USA as subsidized displays selling handicrafts made by women. It was mainly middle-class circles that were initially responsible for organizing these exhibitions, both to demand women's rights to gainful employment and to present the women's movement to the general public (Pepchinski 2007: 23–50). More professional decorative arts gradually appeared in the wake of these charity bazaars.

The decorative arts movement, which emerged in Europe between 1870 and 1914 following industrialization, became increasingly influential in the display of women's products, where the concerns of bourgeois feminists, applied arts reformers and progressive architects overlapped. The period saw countless examples throughout Europe of women's exhibitions focusing on handicrafts and needlework, such as the *Prima esposizione nazionale dei lavori femminili* (First national exhibition of women's work), held in Florence in 1871. Although male reformers sought to limit women's participation in the renewal of the applied arts, several bourgeois women welcomed the reform movement, convinced that their participation in the movement would bring greater respect for their own products. The liberal arts also gradually found their way

into exhibitions of women's work, such as the exhibition series *Les Arts de la Femme en France* (Women's arts in France), the first of which was presented in Paris at the Palais de l'Industrie in 1892 (Perotti 2025).

World's fairs also played an important role in the history of women's exhibitions. The first areas dedicated to women, often designed by women themselves, and even women's own exhibition halls could be found at world's fairs as early as the 1870s. As Mary Pepchinski (2000) points out, between 1873 and 1915, 60% of world's fairs featured so-called women's buildings, which fulfilled a didactic function by representing bourgeois cultures of femininity while simultaneously affirming these women's position in the public sphere. What these exhibitions share is particular ways of organizing, and that the main protagonists belong to a specific class in society. Further, they show that the exhibitions do not promote any explicit style that can be attributed to gender, as the range of dimensions, representations and architectural languages was broad and heterogeneous, ranging from simple wooden exhibition halls to imposing palaces, and from revival styles to modern avant-garde architecture.

In the second half of the 19th century, another form of women's exhibition developed that focused on a broader spectrum of women's work, and this form became the ancestor of many of the 20th-century exhibitions that are discussed in this Special Collection. In Berlin in 1868, the Lette Association, which had been founded to promote women's earning capacity, presented the *Frauen-Industrieausstellung* (Women's industry exhibition), a pioneering event that sought to give a complete picture of the artistic, craft and industrial work of women of all social classes (Pepchinski 2007: 33–35).

The stated aim of the *Nationale Tentoonstelling van Vrouwenarbeid* (National exhibition of women's work), held in The Hague in 1898, was to promote and expand women's gainful employment, and this aim was to be achieved not only through the design of the exhibition and the displayed objects themselves, but also through a whole series of supplementary activities, such as lectures, demonstrations and social events. Moreover, unlike previous exhibitions, the *Nationale Tentoonstelling* was not held in rented premises but staged outside the city, in white-painted wooden pavilions with projecting verandas, built specifically for the occasion. Particular attention was paid to the design of the exhibition scenography as well as the graphics and printed matter, but also the green spaces. Similarly, the great popularity of the Danish crafts exhibition *Kvindernes Udstilling* (The women's exhibition) in 1895 led to an economic surplus that paved the way for constructing the Women's Building that still stands in the center of Copenhagen, through what today could be described as a crowd-funding-campaign by the bourgeoisie and the economic upper class (Bendsen, Riesto and Steiner 2023).

In 1928, the SAFFA (Schweizerische Ausstellung für Frauenarbeit, or the Swiss exhibition for women's work) in Bern marked an expansion of the typology of women's exhibitions by introducing a new understanding and a new dimension: the spatial boundaries of the single exhibition building were broken down, and an expansive, differentiated exhibition complex was introduced instead. The chief architect, Lux Guyer (1894–1955), who was responsible for the overall planning and design concept, conceived a constructive and aesthetic unit for the halls, structuring them using a color concept. The relatively small-scale dimensions of the exhibition halls were intended to express a specific idea of symbolism and aesthetic of female design, as Guyer's own statements testify:

> It is also readily apparent to the layperson that women's work, exhibited to the world for the first time, cannot be piled up in giant halls in a cold, programmatic manner. It is precisely in the nature of women's work that this often-misjudged small-scale work requires a particularly loving and much more delicate framework. The woman, who takes her personal and domestic framework with her everywhere more than the man, cannot borrow an arbitrary standard. The atmospheric, the emotional density, so to speak, had to be drawn in so that these women's works were not stripped of one of their most essential factors, and so that the whole did not grow cold and impoverished.[4] (Guyer 1928: n.p.)

Exhibition Design as a Strategy to Establish Oneself in the Profession

One way to tell stories about women's display is to emphasize that exhibition design was an important career marker for many women in the early 20th century. Some well-known woman architects provide vivid examples of the importance of exhibiting both as an emancipatory strategy for gaining foothold in professional fields and as an experimental laboratory for testing new approaches. The German designer Lilly Reich (1885–1947) introduced completely new ways of designing exhibition spaces: for displaying German fabrics at the 1929 Barcelona World's Fair, she designed radically liberated, open, efficiently furnished exhibition spaces that controlled the movements of the body in a rational but self-determined way. After beginning her career as an embroiderer and establishing herself in fashion design, Reich gradually developed into a space and exhibition designer. She took the innovative principles and discourses surrounding dress reform — which thematized the relationship between the (female) body and clothing, carrying with them an ideology of liberation — and transferred them to space, introducing the soft, flowing quality of textiles as structural elements and sensuous spatial components. This was exemplified in 1927 in the Café Samt & Seide (Velvet & silk) in Berlin, where the exhibit itself became a space-constituting element (Perotti 2023).

Innovation, expertise and independence also characterized Charlotte Perriand's career as an exhibition designer. This began early on, from 1927 to 1937, during her close, enriching but ultimately restrictive 10-year collaboration as a furniture designer and home furnisher in the Paris studio of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret. In 1940, Perriand experienced a remarkable turning point when the Japanese government invited her to oversee the country's industrial art production. In Japan, she organized major official exhibitions on her own authority: *Sélection-Tradition-Création* in 1941, followed in 1955 by *Proposition d'une synthèse des arts* (Proposing a synthesis of the arts), both in Tokyo, which built an important bridge between Western and Eastern cultures under the banner of tradition and modernity (Barsac 2008). But even before her trip to Japan, at the *Salon des arts ménagers* (Household arts show) in Paris in 1936, she created the monumental photocollage *La grande misère de Paris* (The great misery of Paris), an immersive fresco that both condemned poor living conditions in the city and showed how they might be improved. This socially critical work referred to high infant mortality rates, poorly equipped schools, excessive suburban density, environmental pollution, unequal living conditions, the alienation of women in the household and the loss of contact with nature (Barsac 2014).

In this Special Collection, Kathleen James-Chakraborty and Elizabeth Varley focus on the American architect Chloethiel Woodard Smith (1910–1992), who used exhibitions as a means to establish herself and gain a strong hold in the profession. The authors show that the four major planning and architecture exhibitions she organized and curated — in Washington, DC (1939), Montreal (1941), Havana (1950) and Moscow (1958) — became an instrument for her to acquire communicative, cooperative and organizational skills, to address a broad audience, driven by her commitment to planning and architecture in general, rather than being about promoting her own work.

The field of exhibition design thus proved to be an accessible niche for woman architects, who discovered in it as an opportunity to enter a public stage professionally. The space of the exhibition also opened up the option of trying out new design concepts and making a theoretical contribution.

Housing as a Central Topic

The SAFFA grew into the leading platform for Swiss women, focusing on key issues relating to work, everyday life, social roles and political equality. The thematic program of its 1958 exhibition in particular foregrounded questions of public urban planning policy (Frey 2025) as well as contemporary housing issues. The latter are the subject of Inge Beckel's article that examines this area of competence, which was traditionally

assigned to women. She highlights that the SAFFA 1958 housing exhibition exposed a differentiated approach to housing and dwelling, which encompassed both pragmatic traits and social emancipatory components, and which formulated a critique of modernism's dogmatic guidelines while offering new emancipatory housing options for women (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1: Visitors at the Schweizerische Ausstellung für Frauenarbeit (SAFFA) 1958 (The Swiss exhibition for women's work) in Zürich, 1958.
Photograph: Comet Photo AG. Image credit: gta Archives / ETH Zürich, Annemarie Hubacher-Constam and Hans Hubacher.

In the mid-20th century, the housing issue was also taken up in the Netherlands by the Vrouwen Adviescommissie (Women's Advisory Committee, henceforth VAC), in a much more explicitly political and feminist manner. Maria Novas Ferradas's article examines the VACs that organized model home exhibitions in Rotterdam during the early 1950s as a collective, activist enterprise of women who campaigned for social housing, but whose traces can only be discovered with great difficulty due to the lack of documentary archives.

Indeed, although numerous women's exhibitions were popular and financially successful and had a strong impact on both architecture and planning during the 20th century, they often left few documentary materials in official archives; sources relating to the conception and realization phase are often missing, as are plans, drawings and models. This is particularly true for collaborative organizations like the VAC, which do not fit well into the archival tradition of categorizing material according to individuals.

Architecture as an Instrument for Cultural and Societal Change

The question of how architecture proved itself to be suited to women's exhibitions can be probed historically through a consideration of the numerous women's pavilions, including at world's fairs. This began with the 1893 Woman's Building at the *World's Columbian Exposition* in Chicago. The result of a national competition that was open only to women, the monumental appearance of the Woman's Building marked a paradigm shift in the typology. The competition winner, Sophia Hayden (1868–1953), an architecture graduate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, designed a representative building in the style of the Italian Renaissance. The interior — which in addition to the exhibition space also housed a hall of honor, a library, a meeting room, salons and administrative rooms — did not feature the steel and wooden structures of a typical exhibition hall, instead conveying the atmosphere of a stately palace. The rich decorative elements contributed by woman artists and craftswomen added to the splendor of the building. The iconographically expansive program was meant to celebrate the 'female virtues' of spirituality, sacrifice, wisdom and charity, as well as women's professions (Palmer 1893).

In the context of 20th-century international and national exhibition events in Europe and North America, numerous women's pavilions were created that presented heterogeneous, variable appearances. In 1914, for example, two women's pavilions were erected in Germany: the Haus der Frauen (House of women) in Leipzig, based on plans by the architect Emilie Winkelmann and presented at the *Internationale Ausstellung für Buchgewerbe und Grafik* (International exhibition of decorative and graphic arts) (Lippert 2017: 84–85), and the almost identically titled Haus der Frau (House of woman) at the Cologne *Werkbund* exhibition, based on a design by the architect Margarete Knüppelholz-Roeser (Stratigakos 2005: 150–152). The two pavilions not only used completely different architectural languages — one a defensive Neo-Baroque style, the other a dry Secession style — but also operated with different building morphologies.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the international style of modernism colored the genre of the women's pavilions, presenting different varieties of the architectural avant-garde. For example, the architect Anatolia Hryniewicka-Piotrowska's exhibit Pawilon Pracy Kobiet (Pavilion of women's work) at the 1929 Polish *Powszechnej Wystawy Krajowej* (General national exhibition) in Poznań, featured an experimental Constructivist volume, with striking lettering and a spiral staircase, while the Ring der Frauen (Ring of women) building by Peter Behrens and Else Oppler-Legband at the 1931 *Deutsche Bauausstellung* (German building exhibition) in Berlin had an abstract-looking, cylindrical structure with semicircular extensions and a floating flat roof; the building was reflected in a pool of water in front of it (Perotti 2025).

Architecture later took on a different role in women's exhibitions, not as a shell of the event, but in projects and designs presented as exhibits that emphasized the activist agenda. The 1980 Danish exhibition *På Vej* (On the way) was dedicated to displaying women's ideas, showcasing architectural projects that carried a political message. Yet, as Svava Riesto and Henriette Steiner argue in their article, that exhibition also became a vehicle for negotiating different standpoints, even questioning what the role of a self-declared women's exhibition should be: a display of different kinds of work made by women, or an exhibition with distinct feminist agendas? The authors show the many feminisms expressed among the group of curators and exhibitors, including an emerging focus on ecology.

Katia Frey traces a similarly activist and collaborative approach to architecture in a 1989 exhibition at the Schweizerisches Architekturmuseum (Swiss Architecture Museum) in Basel, which attempted to commemorate and update the two historic SAFFA exhibitions and took up the discourse of women's work on a theoretical level. The show offered an innovative design that foregrounded architecture through abstract and symbolic language. The communicative, rhetorical function of architecture was orchestrated by the cooperative approach of the three architects involved, who deliberately refrained from using their own visible signatures in order to create a cross-genre, polyphonic questioning of the social, professional and private lives of contemporary women.

This call for plurality, cooperation and social and ecological commitment seems no less relevant today in relation to current exhibition practice and societal challenges. Furthermore, there is a need to study gender in relation to other questions of lived experiences, bodies and orientation, as well as power, social orders and cultural imaginaries. With regard to the design, context and agency of exhibitions by women designers, the articles are collected here to pave the way for multiple and diverse trajectories into a field that still requires further intensive exploration.

Notes

[1] Curated by Christina Budde, Mary Pepchinski (2017) and Wolfgang Voigt; 30 September 2017–8 March 2018.

[2] Curated by Pippo Ciorra, Elena Motisi and Elena Tinacci (2023); 16 December 2021–23 October 2022.

[3] Curated by Sara Hatla Krogsgaard, Jannie Rosenberg Bendsen, Svava Riesto and Henriette Steiner; 13 May–23 October 2022.

[4] 'Es ist auch dem Laien ohne weiteres klar, dass Frauenarbeit, zum ersten Mal vor der Welt ausgestellt, nicht in Riesenhallen programmmässig, kalt aufgetürmt werden kann. Es liegt eben gerade im Wesen der Frauenarbeit, dass diese vielfach verkannte Kleinarbeit eines besonders liebevollen und viel zarteren Rahmens bedarf. Die Frau, die überallhin ihren persönlichen und häuslichen Rahmen mehr mitnimmt als der Mann, kann nicht einen beliebigen Massstab entlehnen. Das Atmosphärische, sozusagen die Gefühlsdichte, galt es hereinzuziehen, damit diese Frauenwerke nicht um einen ihrer wesentlichsten Faktoren entblösst wurden und um nicht das Ganze zu erkalten und verarmen zu lassen'.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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