

## *Recording and Reflecting on 'AA XX 100: AA Women in Architecture 1917-2017'*

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The AA XX 100 project was established in 2013 to tell the story of women at the Architectural Association (AA) in London, and to commemorate the centenary in 2017 of their admission to the school. When the project started we did not even know the names of the first students, but by the project's completion we did and so much more. It became clear to us through our research that the history of AA women in architecture is at once a history of women's presence within an educational institution (and a very particular one at that!), a history of women's presence within a profession – architecture – and a part of the history of architecture in both Britain and the wider world.

The project unfolded over a four-year period, and was originated by the architect Yasmin Shariff and Brett Steele (the AA Director). It was carried out by a team led by Elizabeth Darling, Lynne Walker, Manijeh Verghese, Ed Bottoms, Eleanor Gawne and Ellen Leopold, working alongside AA students, architect members and other staff. It was a multi-faceted project and featured an annual lecture series under the AA XX 100 'brand,' and an oral history project led by Ed Bottoms, that saw AA alumnae filmed and interviewed. It culminated in 2017 with the publication of the book, *AA Women in Architecture 1917-2017*, which accompanied the exhibition, 'AA XX 100: AA Women in Architecture 1917-2017', which ran from October to December 1917, and which is the focus of the discussion here. Our aim is to document the exhibition (which we co-curated, as well as co-editing the project book) and, in so doing, reflect on how our research questions and approach to curation were framed in relation to the institution and our position as feminist historians.

### *The Curatorial Process*

Some early decisions shaped the form that the exhibition would take. The primary one was a reluctance to curate a display of individual women and their projects, which is usual for architecture exhibitions. This, we felt, would have replicated the myth of the lone architectural genius on which a sexist architectural history is based, and is often ahistorical. Instead we adopted a thematic approach. This allowed us to achieve two things, first to link the work of AA women to broader developments in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-century world architecture. Second, and at the same time, to represent key practitioners and projects and to show how they were shaped by the AA *and* historical conditions, especially changing ideas about gender and women's place in architecture. Our aim was not to downplay the importance of individuals and their architectural productions but to weave them into a wider and more complex history. By stressing this interweaving we found a way to show that while women's presence

in architecture may not have been ordinary, it certainly was not untypical or exceptional, which a focus on the individual alone can suggest.

Another factor that shaped our curating was the fact that for the AA to even have an exhibition about women and architecture was something entirely new (and, indeed, untypical of wider exhibition practice). Making AA women, past and present, visible within the institution became a key strategy for us. This we did by occupying as much space as possible at the AA: not just the main gallery on the ground floor, but the entrance hall, and grand staircase up to the piano nobile, where we used the main rooms (including the student bar though not the library). As a parallel to this, our designers, Eva Jiricna and Georgina Papathanasiou, created settings that let the individual exhibits speak for themselves: subtle framing, plain materials and spacious layouts gave an underlying gravitas and respect to the work on display. [FIGURE: view of front main gallery with Zaha Hadid]

Our research led us to formulate the following themes to organise the display: 1917; Politics of Practice; Public Practice/Public Service; Beyond the Drawing Board; Collaborations; Local/Global; AA Spirit and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Women (we also had sections devoted to the AA XX 100 Oral History Project and a series of portrait photographs of AA women on site or in their offices on the staircase walls and a slide show of AA women in the bar). These distributed themselves fairly logically and (for the most part) chronologically across the building but an early challenge came with the untimely death of Dame Zaha Hadid in early 2016. Up to that point we had envisioned that her highly successful career would have been represented within the theme of Local/Global and would have served as a good example of linking an individual – very much a ‘starchitect’ – to the wider context which shaped her. The fact of her death suggested that her radical architecture perhaps warranted more of a commemoration and a central place in the exhibition narrative. Our initial solution was to give her pride of place but keep her in the Local/Global section, where she rightly belonged, by reconstructing part of her 1983 installation ‘Planetary Architecture Two’ which had filled the same space. Practicalities, however, overtook us and the insurance value of the exhibits meant we could not show them in this un-invigilated first-floor space. This required us to step outside the chronology of the exhibits and move her work downstairs to the main gallery and potentially do what we had been striving so hard to avoid, the separation of individual from historical context. However, the new position of the exhibit, which now comprised the model for the Hong Kong Peak project and a characteristic painting of a project for Trafalgar Square and related drawings, worked out in collaboration with Zaha Hadid Architects, in fact suggested another narrative. It faced the opening section of the exhibition, which focused on 1917, that moment when women were first admitted to the AA. We therefore had the radical act of women entering a hitherto all-male school, faced by the

radical work of arguably the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-century's most important architect, a woman. It also underlined how far women had come in a century of practice.

### *The Exhibition*

Visitors' first encounter with the exhibition was in the entrance hall of the AA's building at 36 Bedford Square in Bloomsbury, central London. There we placed on facing walls two photographs which demonstrated the way the AA had evolved since women were admitted. The first, taken in 1896, showed male students dressed in drag and blacked up for a pantomime performance to the all male student body [FIGURE]. The other was a photograph of the 2016 graduating class. This showed the diverse ethnicity of the school population today and the gender balance in which women now exceed men.

From these 'scene setters', visitors entered the main gallery, where the first display was '1917.' This explored the life and work of the four women who joined the school in October 1917, the conditions they encountered there, their spirited reaction to those circumstances, and their life after graduation. A key exhibit was a series of silhouettes which showed them as the 'Future Heads of the Profession: Lady Students at the A.A' which appeared in a 1918 edition of the *Architectural Association Journal*. [FIGURE]. When we began our research, we did not know the names of all these first students - the records from 1917 are missing - and which student went with which 'head'. But with a few clues, which emerged, and the help of their families, we identified them: from left to right: Winifred Ryle (Maddock), Ruth Lowy (Gollancz), Gillian Cooke (Harrison), and Irene Graves (Garforth). Of the original four students, two married AA students and set up in successful husband and wife practices and two left, having married non-architects.

Researching the lives of these individual women allowed us to draw more general conclusions about how women's entry into the sort of systematic architectural education that was offered at the AA was facilitated by the Women's Movement and its advocacy for equal access to education and from that the professions. Many had family members who were active in the Suffrage movement and all came from well-to-do upper middle-class families, a reminder of a class profile that has dominated architectural education and practice more or less ever since. What also became apparent was the preference of these early graduates (and many of the generations who followed in the 1920s and 1930s) to work collaboratively either with a marital partner or other women, and often for women clients.

This was evident in the first building designed by an AA woman graduate which was a village hall in the Sussex countryside; a typically modest project. Such small-scale work dominated the work of these first alumnae, but as early as 1927 it became clear that women were not going to allow themselves to be stereotyped as domestic designers. In that year, Elisabeth Whitworth Scott, a recent graduate (1924), won the anonymous international competition to design the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon (1927-32) [FIGURE]. This was seen as a victory for all women, and confirmation of their ability to design large-scale public buildings. Exhibition research revealed that Scott saw this great achievement from a feminist perspective and made a specific decision to employ women, particularly AA alumnae, to work with her on the scheme.

Another landmark was the election of Cooke in 1931 as the first FRIBA, Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects, the major professional body of architecture in Britain. This showed the way that women understood themselves to be part of the profession (and we showed a copy of her Diploma certificate) and that they could and should play an active role in its organisation and discourse. This concern for an identification with the profession and with the nature of practice would become stronger in the later 1920s and the next several decades, these that themes shaped the curation of the next two sections of the exhibition: Politics of Practice, and Public Practice/Public Service.

Here we focused on how creativity allied to social commitment, and the desire to shape the profession accordingly, was manifested in the work of many AA women. There was very much the sense that the privilege of their education required of them some form of service to society. We found that, continuing the theme of collaboration noted above, that AA alumnae worked frequently with women reformers from outside the school, using their skills as designers to argue for social change. In the 1930s, this related mostly to the issue of housing with graduates such as Janet Fletcher, Mary Crowley, Judith Ledebor and Justin Blanco White working with the reform group 'New Homes for Old' to oppose what they saw as an unimaginative state housing policy and to advocate for a slum clearance programme, which proposed modern, well-designed flats alongside amenities such as nursery schools, playgrounds and allotments. [?FIGURE]

This willingness to stand against the mainstream, and be fiercely critical of the status quo, can be found five decades later in the work of Matrix, to which the second half of the Politics of Practice display was devoted. This feminist architectural cooperative was formed in 1980 by women practitioners, several AA graduates among them. Cutting across the decades in one display was a deliberate strategy, as we wanted to draw attention to the persistent strand of feminist and social activist commitment among AA alumnae. Like those involved with New Homes for Old, Matrix's concern was to empower people who had little influence over the formation of the built environment

and they did this in a number of ways: writing, exhibitions, and through developing new modes of practice. Documented in their 1984 book, *Making Space, Women and the Manmade Environment*, (a very battered library copy of which was on display, to show how much of an inspiration it was to students) their approach stressed the architect as a facilitator, listener, mediator, of working with and not against clients to get the buildings that worked best for users. We also exhibited material relating to their best known project, the Jagonari Educational Centre, Whitechapel, east London, completed 1987, and designed with the participation of their Bangladeshi women clients.

Our emphasis on Matrix in the exhibition was also a statement about how their approach and activities are now more than ever relevant, and a model for contemporary practice. Such thinking also underpinned, to some extent, the next section, Public Practice/Public Service. This continued the themes laid down in Politics of Practice, and showed how the ideas of 1930s AA women were absolutely instrumental in ensuring that the idea of well-planned environments from region to city to town to neighbourhood unit to home became an integral part of the post-war reconstruction programme. In fact, it was not just their ideas that shaped the architecture of the Welfare State, but the women themselves.

Most notable of these was Mary Medd who became the leading figure in the theory and practice of school design after 1945; we exhibited photographs of Burleigh Infants School, Cheshunt, Hertfordshire (1946-7), one of her earliest and collaboratively designed schools. And again, to make the point that a commitment to public architecture and the public realm has not withered, despite our neo-Liberal age, we included the work of Julia Barfield (working with her husband David Marks) and their recent primary school in Cambridge. This innovative project, completed 2013, is the first training school set up by a University (Cambridge) to provide teacher training, research and teaching on one site. The concept of a school, where every voice matters, divided into small communities, yet unified as a whole, led to a circular plan building, which is non-hierarchical and inclusive, built around an open courtyard into which every classroom opens.

Such projects showed how within a decade or so of first entering the school, AA women were engaging with architecture at all scales, often working collaboratively and with real social commitment. Our research also revealed different or unexpected ways in which women used their design training and allowed us to show how architecture exhibitions do not just have to comprise solely of two-dimensional representations of buildings. This might be a model (such as the Hong Peak maquette in the Zaha Hadid display), books by designers, RIBA registration certificates, the miniature furniture used by Mary Medd to promote discussion about school design [FIGURE] but also work that we categorised as 'Beyond the Drawing Board.' The school seems to have a particular track record in

graduates who train and then practise in diverse fields, often to remarkable effect and impact, so we placed a large vitrine in the space between Politics of Practice and Public Practice/Public Service, to feature the work of women who had trained at the AA but not pursued an explicitly architectural career.

This theme allowed us to enliven the exhibition with the use of film, an important outlet for AA graduates – the Oscar winning art director Carmen Dillon, Sylvia Moberly who worked for Walt Disney, and much more recently Susanne Bier, the director, whose film, *A Better World* won an Oscar in 2011. Also included was the work of the textile designer Marian Pepler, and the furniture and textile designer Florence Knoll. Her company, which survives her, generously loaned us two of her pieces of furniture which served both as exhibits and places for visitors to sit and reflect. [FIGURE: Knoll textile] We also used the vitrine to reflect on the way students were taught to design, showing a selection of drawing implements that would have been used by AA students for much of the preceding century. Now virtually historic artefacts they included a slide rule, rotring pen, compasses and a t-square. In contrast a working model of the Universal Constructor designed by Julia Frazer and John Frazer was on display, this was an early example of the CAD systems that now dominate practice.

Beyond the Drawing Board completed the displays in the main gallery. Visitors then proceeded up the main staircase to the suite of rooms on the first floor. This staircase is the main thoroughfare of the school, and we wanted to populate its walls with photographic portraits of AA women (and the curators!) to remind everyone on a daily basis of women's presence in the institution and in the profession. [FIGURE]

In approaching the curation of the first-floor spaces, an initial problem seemed to be that they are 'public' and social spaces for the school, comprising the front and back members room and student bar. On reflection, however, we realised that the co-mingling of exhibits and today's students working on their current projects in these rooms offered a wonderful sense of how contemporary women students are building on and connecting with the work of their antecedents. This was reinforced by the fact that most of the exhibits in these spaces focused on works from the 1960s onwards. In the front members room two themes were explored: Collaborations, and Local/Global. Again, a problem arose, because we could not use original material in these spaces apart from a very robust and well protected model of the Hopkins house (Hampstead, London, 1976) by Patty and Michael Hopkins. We realised that this could be used to the exhibition's advantage through the use of digital material and the creation of thematic slideshows to represent a wider array of women. That also allowed us to add in the theme of 21<sup>st</sup> Century women (curated by Hannah Durham, Albane Duvillier, and Ye Jin Lee), a series devoted to work in the present day by AA students and recent graduates. Rather than select and

privilege a few in this process, an open call was held and 70 submissions were received and edited into a slideshow. Some historic student work was shown in the back members room as a complement to these most recent projects.

One of the key themes that emerged from the research for AA XX 100 is the collaborative nature of architecture, which the section Collaborations highlighted. Architects' teamwork with other professions, engineers, artists, surveyors, contractors, building workers and so on is vital, but in the exhibition we focused on portraying diverse partnerships among and between architects, especially men and women working together on individual projects or in firms of architects or in partnerships of women. Most numerous were husband and wife teams from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. We represented a series of practices from the 1950s to the present day and used our labels and panel texts to raise questions around authorship between married couples that, as we reminded visitors, are rarely asked of male collaborators like Herzog and de Meuron: Who designed what? Who does the designing? Is design the most important part of architecture? Whose name is on the practice? Who gets the credit? The question of authorship is further fraught with gendered cultural assumptions—'he must have been the designer/lead/responsible for the concept, while recognising individual contributions is complicated by the partners' inevitable claim that credit should be equally divided.

We were also able to show that these intimate and creative collaborations have produced significant public architecture such as the extensive work at the Festival of Britain, 1951, by Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry [FIGURE]; the Glyndebourne Opera House, 1994, designed by Patty and Michael Hopkins; the London Eye, 2000, from the practice of Julia Barfield and David Marks; and Tate St Ives, 1993, created by Eldred Evans and David Shalev. These married couples are among the architects who with their 'significant others' have designed architecture, urban space and landscape, which in our view warranted space in an exhibition of women architects. Significantly from the curatorial perspective, which emphasised the collaborative nature of architecture, we did not insist on the (misnamed) 'sole practitioner' or exclude women who practised with their spouses.

Local/Global was conceived from our research discovery that since 1917, women from all over the world have come to Bedford Square to study architecture, working alongside British-born students. In the 1920s, several students were from empire families in India and Kenya; while a steady stream of students came from former colonies, Australia and New Zealand in particular. In 1930, the first Asian women students arrived from the colony of Malaya (Malaysia), the remarkable Yuen sisters who were of Chinese descent. The post-war colonies and Commonwealth contributed students again: notably Minnette de Silva from Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Denise Scott Brown (South Africa), and another wave

of Australians in the 1970s. Today women make up 52 per cent of the student body, 90 percent of which is from outside the UK.

Local/Global therefore explored the trajectories taken by AA alumnae as they returned home from the locale of Bedford Square and set up their own practices. It also followed UK-based former students who have designed projects all over the world or used the local to inspire their designs. We showed a project by Salma Samar Damluji in which she reconstructed and rehabilitated 12 mud-built houses in the fortified town of Masna‘at Urh in Wadi Daw‘an, Yemen (2007-10). [FIGURE]

Local/global can also mean working in and from London in the global marketplace. In 2017, AA alumna Amanda Levete’s practice, AL\_A, unveiled the Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology (MAAT) in Lisbon [FIGURE], and, during the exhibition, their new Exhibition Road entrance and galleries opened at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. It is rare that two major museum projects are completed within the same year by a single architect, so it seemed especially important to have these in our display.

In an attempt to reach the spiritual home of the AA and its occupants we decorated the Bar (which opens off the front members’ room) with a photomontage of images of student life across the past 100 years. This expressed the spirit and exuberance for which AA students and the institution are known, and created a setting in which ideas provoked by the exhibition could be debated.

The exhibition was not merely a discrete event. We very much wanted it to be a springboard for discussion and to have a legacy which addresses and promotes women’s presence in architectural culture. An international conference, ‘AA Women and Architecture in Context, 1917-2017’ convened in partnership with the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art was held in November 2017. The three-day event was followed by a two-day coach tour of buildings designed by women architects in London and Cambridge, co-organised with the Twentieth Century Society. Looking to the future of practice and of history, a workshop for sixth formers, many of whom were considering their career options, was arranged with the organisation Art History in Schools. Comprising talks and drawing sessions in the exhibition, many of the young women left decided on pursuing architectural training.

### *In Conclusion*

This was a large-scale project, finished less than a year ago. In many ways we are still reflecting on what we have learnt from our research, but already we recognise that certain themes were examined insufficiently in the exhibition. The interweaving of colonial and post-colonial discourse throughout the lifetime of this institution, and in the work that its graduates produced, was too little examined and



is deserving of fuller attention and articulation. Similarly, while we were able to address issues around institutional sexism, with abundant evidence thereof (a key exhibit was a minute book that noted a decision to introduce a restrictive quota for women students in 1930), personal sexuality itself proved a more elusive topic to pursue. Nevertheless, the exhibition had many strengths, which we have sought to present here, most importantly making visible the work of so many women across 100 years of practice.