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Introduction

Where Are the Women Architects?

Walking into a lecture hall, attending a convention, sitting in a boardroom, participating on a jury, or strolling through an exhibition—these are just some of the times that I have wondered, “Where are the women architects?” And I am not alone in asking this question. In the past few years, a chorus of voices has begun to ask why women, who first began studying architecture 140 years ago, continue to struggle to gain a foothold in the profession. Despite women’s increasing enrollments in architecture schools since the 1980s, their numbers in practice have flatlined, and the higher one moves up the career ladder, the further they decline. At the top, measured by the profession’s highest awards and honors, they drop to nearly zero. This attrition of women in architecture and the career hurdles they face readily evoke building metaphors, such as a leaky pipeline and the glass ceiling. When one considers, however, the generations of dreams and work and ambitions that have been lost to us, it seems that the more appropriate term for this phenomenon is tragedy.

In this book I set out to explore a question that has long troubled the profession, diminishes its luster, and shows no sign of fading away. I begin in chapter 1 with a history of the question and its contexts, stretching from the 1870s to the 1970s. Since the nineteenth century, women as well as men have posed the question of women’s absence in architecture, some arguing for change and others for the status quo. My aim here is less to chronicle women’s entry into the profession, which other authors and books have done, than to track an unfinished dialogue that has haunted architecture—in a cycle of acknowledging and then abandoning its gender issues—for a very long time.

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Chapter 2 brings the picture up to date, looking at the current status of women in architecture, from their first experiences as students to their climb up the professional ladder. The view that emerges makes clear why the question of women's slow progress has reemerged in recent years, and more urgently than ever: it is hard to look at the statistics and not feel alarmed. Female architecture graduates continue to struggle to enter and stay in practice, large salary gaps persist, sexism on the job seems to be getting worse, and women remain vastly underrepresented in the profession's leadership roles. Indeed, this perspective suggests less the question of why women leave architecture than of why they would pursue it at all.

But if we look at the status of the question itself—how it is being pushed in unprecedented ways and by a new range of voices into the forefront of public and professional discussions about gender equity—the sense of a hopeless and grim continuity begins to dissolve. Indeed, this book has been timed to help identify and strengthen a rising third wave of feminism in architecture, which follows on the first wave that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century and the second wave that began in the early 1970s and continued into the 1990s. The current movement is not entirely distinct from the second one; many of the participants are the same, and their voices did not, in any case, disappear in the interim. What marks it, however, as a new and exciting development are the many young women (and men) who are joining in the call for change, as well as the international reach of their interventions. This new generation of advocates harness today's conditions and possibilities, including global marketing and new forms of technology and communication.

Mattel's creation and launch of Architect Barbie in 2011 spawned a global reaction that exposed, for the first time, just how effective social media could be in catalyzing discontent with the gendered status quo in architecture. In the discussions about and around this new Barbie, explored in chapter 3, her critics and supporters delved into the conditions facing women in architecture, revealing a shared desire for change but differing

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viewpoints among older and younger generations on how to achieve it. The doll also brought to the fore the issue of missing role models, in terms of both real women within the profession and their lack of representation in the broader popular culture. Although any number of television shows, movies, or novels present us with strong female characters who are doctors or lawyers, female characters who are architects are hard to find.

The absence of women is also keenly felt in the world of architecture prizes, and chapter 4 addresses why women architects are so rarely sighted on the podium when the profession bestows its most coveted awards. The chapter begins with a look at how the architectural press reacted when Zaha Hadid broke the glass ceiling of the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2004. The coverage revealed that the bias against women as innovative creators, already expressed in the nineteenth century and explored in chapter 1, never fully went away. This was certainly not news to Denise Scott Brown, who, in 1991, was passed over for the Pritzker Architecture Prize that was awarded solely to her design partner and husband, Robert Venturi, in part for their joint work. The chapter concludes by exploring how, in 2013, two Harvard architecture students, representative of a younger feminist generation and its political uses of new communication networks, launched a petition on Change.org to demand belated recognition for Scott Brown. The petition, which to date has garnered nearly twenty thousand signatures globally, rocked the architectural world, even if it did not succeed in its mission to convince the Pritzker Architecture Prize committee to set the record straight.

Although the Scott Brown petition harnessed the power of the Internet to raise awareness globally about how critics and juries have overlooked women architects in the past, digital technologies are not in themselves a solution. The erasure of women architects from the historical record and the lack of information and public awareness about their work will not improve in the digital age unless more women in architecture actively engage with the new information and communication

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technologies to ensure their own visibility. Chapter 5 continues the exploration of gender equity in architecture and digital activism through the lens of Wikipedia. Recent feminist criticism of Wikipedia has brought attention to how male editors' bias against entries on women has served to erase or marginalize their presence from the world's most frequently used reference source. Women architects, as it turns out, are also not immune to the editors' deleting proclivities. I consider the reasons for women architects' absence on Wikipedia and why we should care about this website and others like it.

The rise of a third wave of feminism in architecture has, unsurprisingly, provoked a counterreaction. Insisting on architecture's essential meritocracy, opponents of change, who also deploy the power of social media, argue that gender does not matter and that talent alone should determine who succeeds. They fail to acknowledge, however, that the profession's unfriendly climate for women already eliminates a large and vital part of that talent pool. And that means more mediocre architecture, however you cut it.

In this book I hope to provide insights, sometimes from unusual vantage points, into the challenges that the architectural profession faces at a critical juncture in its history in addressing and righting a long legacy of discrimination against women. It is also meant as a clarion call. For those of you who, like me, care deeply about architecture and want to see it become a truly inclusive profession, I ask that you be vocal and make trouble.