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Review of The First American Women Architects

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ARCHITECTS

Sarah Allaback, *THE FIRST AMERICAN WOMEN ARCHITECTS*.

Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press (www.press.uillinois.edu), 2008. 280p. illus. notes. append. bibl. index. \$45.00, ISBN 978-0252033216.

Reviewed by Madeleine Charney

It isn't easy to uncover the hidden stories of early women architects. Because there were social barriers to education and recognition for women in this male-dominated field, the records are scant and unclear. It is understandable that some women architects used male-sounding pseudonyms or initials instead of first names to veil their female identities, but that tactic has also limited our opportunity to appreciate their achievements today. In spite of these challenges, architectural historian Sarah Allaback has reconstructed a concise and readable history of seventy-six dedicated and talented women who were either attending schools of architecture or working in the profession by 1920.

A forty-page introduction provides rich social context, beginning with an excerpt from a letter in 1926 to the American Institute of Architects (AIA) from Katherine Budd, the first female member of the Institute's New York chapter. Budd demands that the AIA refrain from its persistent addition of "Miss" to her name in its listings, because no comparable prefix was attached to any male member's name. The introduction also recalls an alternative to practicing architecture that many women used in the mid-nineteenth century — writing fiction, essays, travel diaries, historical sketches, and other texts that reflected their perceptions of the built world. Allaback notes that such publications were a force behind the opening of design schools in many major American cities.

The assumption that women were naturally inclined toward house design began to dissolve as women slowly gained entrance into new architecture programs, such as the one at Cornell University. The first World's Fair held in America (Chicago, 1893) was a turning point for widespread public recognition of women architects, as they fiercely debated how to best represent themselves at this exposition. Highlighting such pivotal events enlivens the author's writing and piques the reader's curiosity. Allaback deftly reveals how the suffragist movement, World War I, the Great Depression, and other transformative periods threaded through the lives of these women and profoundly influenced their career paths.

Besides the biographical information, each entry offers insights into the nuances of the architect's style, often speculating about why her professional life evolved as it did. For instance, Harriet Moody managed Depression-era scarcity with the use of recycled materials that "gave a special quality to her cottages, which were intended to seem old-world English, and preserved a sense of craftsmanship at a time when traditional building techniques were being lost" (p.139). At times, readers are treated to a glimpse into the architect's work setting. Marion Mahoney Griffin, for example, was employed by Frank Lloyd Wright during her first year in the profession and "shared Wright's love of drama, in particular of dressing up in period costumes and performing theatricals" (p.88).

The illustrations, which round out the histories, include portraits, blueprints, advertisements, and photographs of public and private buildings. Especially inspiring are the photographs of women at worksites and in their studios hovering over drawings — the emblem of their fulfillment and productivity. Each entry includes a partial list of buildings as well as writings and additional sources. The location

of each architect's papers is included if known. Indexing is thorough. Two appendices list female graduates of architectural schools and members of the American Institute of Architects. An annotated bibliography in text format (slightly more challenging to read than a list) refers to biographies, essays, dissertations, reference books, archives, exhibitions (with catalogs), and two websites. These sources provide tools for future researchers to use in unearthing more information about early women architects about whom so little is known.

There are other reference books offering more comprehensive coverage of women architects, such as *Architecture and Women: A Bibliography Documenting Women Architects, Landscape Architects, Designers, Architectural Critics and Writers in the U.S.*, by Lamia Doumato (Garland, 1988). Allaback, however, features the earliest of these pioneers who led the way for other women, in a text both enlightening and pleasurable to read. Many of the civic-minded women she describes were diligent advocates of historic preservation. The lamentable loss of their own histories may be at least partially corrected as research continues in this area. Allaback encourages future scholars to dig deeper into archives and increasingly accessible online resources. Well informed by the author's work with the National Park Service, the National Historic Landmarks Program, and the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record, *The First American Women Architects* will be an asset to public and academic reference collections.

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