Gender issues in architectural education: feminine paradigm

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Abstract. Whether we are referring to architectural practice or architectural education, women’s lack of visibility is an important issue that reveals the fact that architecture is still defined by a masculine paradigm starting from design norms and canons followed by the dissemination of the traditional image of the architect as white aggressive and egocentric middle-class man.

In terms of architectural education, the gender barometer leans, according to specific statistics, in favour of the male side and, the growing interest of women concerning the architecture profession, denounced by an increased percentage of female graduates of higher architectural education for the last few years, is not yet equivalent to the number of women enrolled in the Romanian National Architects Chart. Until recently, the macho culture of architecture was encouraged starting with its educational roots through professional practice and leadership. Identifying the premises of a current of change defined in specific literature as: feminizing of architecture education and practice, I propose an analysis of gender immersion within the profession and a reconsideration of the current teaching-learning process by opposing it to the principles of the feminist pedagogy.

Keywords: architectural education, gender issues, Romanian architecture, woman architect, feminist pedagogy.

1. Introduction

The gender perspectives in the architectural field can be structured according to specific domain as follows: the Legal context dealing with gender equality legislation,1 the Economic context revealing the Pay Gap between architects according to gender,2 the Socio-professional context that deal with issues of women architects status in a male dominated profession and Educational context focused on studies around traditional architectural education and feminist critique denouncing the masculine matrix of educational system and opposing feminist teaching/learning principles. Concerning the Socio-professional context, one can argue about the proliferation of the masculine stereotypical image of the architect, the challenge of choice between work and family that affects especially women because of the long working hours, strict deadlines and displacement to the construction site, lack of career opportunities and promotion that women are facing due to the short maternity leave and misattribution of work erasing women’s contribution as designers. From strictly professional point of view, gender issues in architecture field tackles aspects like: feminine particular design characteristics, women’s experience of the built environment that is different than male’s and neglected in the built environment, subjective dimensions of the architectural object that can be


2 The difference between male and female wages at the EU 27 level is around 17 % as stated by Eurostat (2009); Romania numbers around 8% gender pay gap.
criticized as being masculine and feminine according to specific gender stereotypes and the gendering of space and architectural program according to users.3

Without any doubt, architecture is facing a professional crisis caused primarily by the financial and economic climate and by the extremely large number of licensed architecture graduates that are facing difficulties in acquiring a job according to their field of expertise. Ideological discourses around the erasure/recovery of tradition, places architecture in the middle of an acute crisis of cultural identity amplifying the ambiguities concerning the framework of architectural practice. Continuous researches trying to define the contemporary architecture paradigm are convergent to the reconsideration of the architectural education and of the architectural workshop as a way of disseminating the ideology of the profession.

As research topic, the paper will reveal aspects concerning the gender crisis in architecture highlighted by the outnumbered registered and practitioner women architects and women’s lack of visibility in the architecture profession. The research hypothesis points out to the architectural education as promoter of traditionally gender stereotypes and raises a question about the origin of gender crisis in architecture.

Gender issues in architectural education are to be analyzed according to the purpose of the present paper comparing the features of the traditional masculine paradigm in architectural education and feminist design principles as alternative. But, first of all we should look at the public image of the architect and see if it is constructing on a gender equity basis, and to do that we should consider the first step in human’s education: the kindergarten.

2. The architect’s image

Until women’s bashful entry in Europe’s architectural field at the beginning of the 20th century, as licensed professional, male architects dominated the field and acted as demiurges of the human habitat mostly disregarding the need of others, especially women. Thus, the traditional image of the architect is depicted in literature and media as “white middle class western man known for his aggressiveness and egocentrism.”4 Disregarding the idealized portrait of the architect issued by professionals, media and popular culture that comments around the incompatibility between architecture and femininity, Mattel Toy Company’s Barbie I can be series, launches at the beginning of 2011 the Architect Barbie doll that comes after Surgeon Barbie, Computer Engineer Barbie, Race car Driver or Air Force Pilot Barbie. The discourses around Architect Barbie as role model that could encourage young girls to pursue a career in architecture are far from ending a year after the launching of the plastic doll. Comments about Barbie’s pink appearance were made and the voice of women architects concluded that it is hard to imagine a long hair blonde architect with short dress accessorized in pink wearing high heels on the construction site. A more suited image should reveal a more practical profile according to the targeted professionals: short hair, long pants, less pink and no high heels. Praised by the American Institute of Architecture (AIA) as an appropriate role model for young girls future career choice, or questioned by the Architects’ Journal (AJ) that have dressed the front cover appearance of the Architect Barbie in black leather instead of denim and pink, it can be argued that alongside this kind of initiative, the image of the real women architect must be better promoted through media as concrete successful career samples. And perhaps, not dismantling the benefits that the plastic Barbie Architect doll could bring to women accession in the architectural career, the architectural toys, like Froebel wooden construction elements, should be promoted more in kindergartens as practical means of creating spatial abilities.

Feminist critique of contemporary architecture condemns proliferation of canonical models of patriarchal society through architectural education.5

3 Specific male/ female indoor/ outdoor space or architectural program (hospital, nursery, kindergarten, fire station etc.)
The deconstruction of the classic models reperatory of the starchitects\(^6\) – canons that are operated by the architectural history and theory, is one of the objectives motivating the feminist critique intervention in the field of architecture. The public architect’s image and the classic architectural vocabulary are amended as being predominantly male. The research in the context of gender immersion in the built environment is full of analogies of architectural product compared with the human body. Notorious examples in this direction include Le Corbusier’s Modulor, Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man, or anthropomorphic metaphors of the Renaissance city in analogy to human’s anatomy. An example of allegory, of a questionable subjectivity, referring to architectural representation means, is constituted by the phallocentric symbolism of the skyscraper, a way of public displacement of demiurgic power of the creator/architect. The Skyscraper is announcing the possession of the male architect over the exterior, giving women the stereotypical protective duty over the interior and the domestic sphere. The feminist critique accuses also, besides the proliferation of the specific macho culture constructive and aesthetic values, the lack of consideration regarding women needs in the built environment: difficulties in accessibility at the urban level or hierarchic disposal at the domestic level. Strong arguments are arising following the study over the recent history of women in the architectural profession, amending difficulties and discrimination at professional entrance in higher architectural courses, and, as a result to the statistics that weights the balance of active architects in favour of men. (Annex 1, representing the Romania case that keeps an almost constant ratio between the percentages of registered OAR members, categorized according to gender, the difference being lower compared to other European countries.)

3. A short history of women in Romanian architecture

Women’s entrance in Romanian architecture with equal practitioner rights with their male counterparts, given by higher architectural school diploma, started at the beginning of the 20\(^{th}\) Century a few decades after the first generation of Romanian graduates, exclusively men, trained at Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris.\(^7\) They returned home and were the founders of the Romanian Architects Society on the 29\(^{th}\) of February 1891 and recognized as moral and legal person on the 7\(^{th}\) of March 1903, the Romanian Architectural School in 1892 and the architecture review entitled Arhitectura in 1906.

Starting with 1895, women received the right to study in higher education.\(^8\) But this fact did not provide automatically the right to exercise their profession. For example, despite the free access to the law education, the women could not enter the Bar.\(^9\)

If in 1916, the Members Chart of Romanian Architects Society counts no women architect, in 1924 from 166 registered architects only 6 were women: Andreescu Maria Virginia, Cotescu Maria, Friedman Irineu Maria, Hogas Maria, Ioanovici Antonetta and Zaganescu Ada Beza.\(^10\) Virginia Andreescu Haret (1894-1962), the niece of famous painter Ion Andreescu and the wife of eng. Spiru Haret, the scholar’s nephew, was the first to enter the Superior School of Architecture in Bucharest following also the courses of Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. In 1919 she becomes the first Romanian licensed women architect. She also studied at Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris and she took supplementary courses in Rome. She started her career at the Historical Monuments Commission under the guidance of arch. N. Ghika - Budesti and developed research over our national historical monuments. She

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\(^6\) The noun “starchitect” refers to a celebrity architect whose fame is promoted and very often augmented through media to the rank of idols of architecture field his works being acknowledged as references and design canons. Legendary masculine figures described as canonic architects have influenced and are continuously influencing the architectural ideology: Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Leon Battista Alberti, Filippo Brunelleschi, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Antoni Gaudi, Alvar Aalto just to name a few.


\(^8\) Education Sciences Institute UNICEF. “Perspective asupra dimensiunii de gen in educatie”. Bucharest. (2004 ).


\(^10\) Ada Zaganescu was included as architect working outside Bucharest, more precisely, at the Romanian Legation in London.
covered various architectural programs: individual and collective dwelling units, public buildings\textsuperscript{11}, designing especially educational facilities\textsuperscript{12} as she worked at the Ministry of Education since 1947. Awarded several times for her designs, she represented Romania abroad at Architects International Congresses held in Rome, Paris or Brussels, and her publicist activity was also fruitful.\textsuperscript{13}

Henrieta Delavrancea Gibory (1894-1987), Riri, as the closest ones nicknamed her, was one of the liberal figures of the 30\textsuperscript{th} among others as Marina Stirbey, Cecilia Cutescu, Magdalena Radulescu, Solange de la Tour, Virginia Andreescu Haret etc. She joined the courses of the Superior School of Architecture in Bucharest in 1913 (getting her diploma in 1927) with another woman as her colleague, Marioara Ioanovici as the only two females among twenty students.

"I was the fourth female architect after Ada Zaganescu, Virginia Andreescu and Mimi Friedman" stated the modernist, neo-Romanian style\textsuperscript{14} women architect, at an interview in 1980. Then followed Maria Cotescu and Henrieta’s cousin, Lucia Dumbraivean, the future wife of arch. Horia Creanga. H. Delavrancea Gibory designed 22 holiday houses in Balcic, 28 villas in Romania, 5 churches, Prince Nicolae Palace at Snagov, tea Pavilion for Queen Mary in Balcic, Philantropia Hospital, Fundeni Hospital, France Consulate in Bucharest, Oravita Prefecture, Capitol Cinema in Bucharest, Brezoianu dwelling assembly, the restoration of Sf Gheorghe Church in Bucharest etc.

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{images/1.jpg}
\caption{Figure 1: Cantuniari House, Bucharest; Canciov House, Balcic; Rasoviceanu House, Balcic; Traditional House Balcic- Etnographic Museum; Details - Granicerilor Pavilion; Mosescu House.\textsuperscript{15}}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{images/2.jpg}
\caption{Figure 2: Royal Palace, Balcic (1924- 27).\textsuperscript{16}}
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\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{images/3.jpg}
\caption{Figure 3: Rasoviceanu House, Balcic( 1934.).\textsuperscript{17}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{11} Theatre and Casino in Govora (1928 ), Ghencea Church on 13 September str. (1934 ), Weather station and Office pavilion in Baneasa, Palatul Tinerimii Romane on Schitu Magureanu str. ( 1925 ).

\textsuperscript{12} Dimitrie Cantemir High school on Dacia Blvb. Bucharest (1926 ), Gh Sincai High School on Serban Voda str. Bucharest , Center of Anthropological Research of the Faculty of medicine Bucharest (1927 ), primary school from Socola, Iasi (1925 ), Girls high school Focșani (1933 ). Normal girls school from Barlad (1931 ), Dominita Ruxandra high school from Botosani, Craft school Ploiești, type designs for primary schools with 2,3,4,7, classrooms with various alternatives: with and without gym hall and Director’s apartment, built all around the country.

\textsuperscript{13} She collaborated with arch. N. Ghika- Budestii writing “The evolution of architecture in Muntenia and Oltenia “and in her last years, Virginia Andreescu Haret elaborated the work: “The history of The National Theater building from Bucharest “.

\textsuperscript{14} Influenced by her master Prof. arch. Petre Antonescu, rector of the Superior School of Architecture.


\textsuperscript{16} Idem 15

\textsuperscript{17} Idem 15
The communist period meant a forced equivalence of professional status between genders, practice that overcrowded women that was left also with all domestic chores. Differences between women and men physical capabilities, stereotyped abilities or characteristics were erased but all that in an abusive manner without regard to family aspects in relation with long working hours. This is the moment of glory for some women architects that took over a number of large commissions closely related to dictator’s order. The People’s House, the second largest building in Europe after Pentagon is a good example in this direction, a huge project with a woman chief architect in charge: arch. Anca Petrescu. Women’s empowerment process convinced at first a small number of female students to follow the courses of higher architectural education, but the percentage of female students grew and became comparable with male’s after 1989 (see Annex 2).

In 2004, a study developed by Education Sciences Institute from Bucharest reported a percentage of 1.6% undergraduate girl students who chose architecture as a career compared to 1.9 % of boys. 

Annex 3 shows the percentage of teachers at the university level structured according to their corresponding architecture university. Even if the percentages keep growing, the architectural higher education is still dominated by male figures not to mention the status of women in leading committees of the two professional organizations: Romanian Architects Order and Romanian Architects Union.

In the context of the present paper, the focus is on architectural education as one of the factors influencing the visibility of women in Romanian architecture. Considering the feminist architectural criticism, a first aspect to be mentioned concerns the lack of women role models promoted by the architectural history and theory fields and the Romanian architecture profession in particular. The omnipresence of the Pritzker Prize winner Zaha Hadid accompanied by a few exotic names of contemporary architecture prevails, with the help of media, the socio-professional sphere.

The model-architecture is closely related to the demiurgic performance of the single creator, although this practice contravenes to the common collaborative work inside the architectural offices. The starchitect concept describes the highest social recognition level assigned to an architect, image media promoted most of the times, the creation becoming iconic. Highlighting the feminine model becomes essential in the context of the feminization of architectural education, a process involving both architectural licensed graduates (Annex 2) and teachers (Annex 3).

After analyzing the traditional architectural education in terms of gender characteristic applied to the teaching/learning process, one could observe the persistence of a masculine paradigm. This statement could be based on the following couples of opposite characteristics, the first promoting male features and prevailing over the second, female stereotyped attributes:

- isolation instead of collaboration;
- product despite process (emphasis on the final architectural product);
- teaching emphasized over learning (master-apprentice relationship);
- homogenization preferred over pluralism;
- rational over emotional;
- inflexibility instead of negotiation;
- competition as compared to teamwork (the macho culture relies on aggressiveness and individuality).

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18 Decree no. 284/1973 of The International Labor Organization no. 111 about equal opportunities, work related, between women and men.


20 Women at OAR leadership boards 2010-2014: 26%

21 Women at UAR leadership boards 2012: 25%

22 Zaha Hadid, the Iraqi born architect managed to overcome twice the ancestral stereotypes regarding women’s success in male dominated professions disregarding the geographic provenience. The architect’s fame is very often criticised as not being based upon built projects, her reputation being accelerated due to beautiful vanguard images. („How to become a famous architect without building anything”. Source: http://www.archsoc.com/kcas/brilliantarchitect.html. Accessed on 14.06.2012.)
Contemporary architectural education can be described by the following features:

- the undervaluation of feminine qualities that could be applied to architecture;
- the proliferation of the masculine paradigm that questions women’s authority in the architectural profession;
- the persistence of patriarchal architectural canons as aesthetic and methodological architectural repertoire;
- lack of women role models in architectural history;
- the perpetuation of the masculine design principles since Antiquity;
- the architectural design studio “does not provide a healthy equitable education environment for women to study in.”

If the root of the problem, the lack of women’s visibility in the architecture profession lies on the traditional architecture education, the masculine paradigm has to be reconsidered to fit the current need of architecture in the context of the increasing number of female student graduates.

The feminist pedagogy principles, long debated in specific literature and applied to architecture education can be summarized as follows: the reformation of teacher-student relationship in point of the democratization of power relations and reconsidering the unidirectional transfer of information, emphasis on communication and collaboration in the architectural studio, privileging the individual opinions based on individual experiences and the critique of traditional teaching/learning process. All these principles are convergent and shaping a collaborative learning experience, the principal objective of the contemporary feminist pedagogy. Promoting values considered to be feminine, the feminist critique focuses on collaboration and interdisciplinary in preference over individuality and competition, it prefers empathy over egocentrism, promotes continuous lifelong learning and detachment from the traditional dependence on the teacher-mentor. Emphasis over the educational process over final architectural product is denouncing a necessity, the reconsideration of the constraints system promoted by the contemporary institutional matrix.

Collaboration is essential in the architectural profession although today’s practice promotes the starchitect, the creator of a complete work. Examples of biased merit attribution to a single architect disfavouring the team are not few and cannot be ignored, this practice being accentuated for mixed teams formed by man and woman architects, in many situations husband and wife.

Nobody can contest the equal opportunities regarding the access to higher education, impartial at present in what concerns gender. The statistics are proving an evident percentage increase of active women architects but, despite this fact, at leadership or entrepreneurship levels, the majority is on the male side. The Ion Mincu Institute of Architecture and Urbanism in Bucharest, for example, had no woman Rector since N. Socolescu (1892) till now.

Would architectural education look different if higher education institutions of architecture would have a feminine majority in terms of teachers and leadership positions? Are characteristics and values segregated by gender reflected differently on women/men practicing in architecture or on the architectural object?

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23 “The Architectural prima Donnas are all man” stated Denise Scott Brown (1989) referring to the successful professional duo alongside Arch. Robert Venturi, the last inheriting all the credits that should be spited in two.

24 Le Corbusier’s Modulor, Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian man; the perfect harmony of human’s body proportions describing the perfect harmony of the Greek temples.


27 Idem 23
Feminist pedagogy applied in architectural education in order to promote the image of women architect and feminine teaching and design methods can be summarized as follows:

- gender sensitive training with respect to different learning capabilities and abilities of students,
- introducing gender studies issues in the architectural profession through architecture curricula,
- introducing the work and personality of female architects in architectural history studies,
- focus on communication and less on competition,
- promoting teamwork and cooperative learning through design tasks in the architectural studio,
- introducing other specialities into the architectural studio,
- enabling lifelong learning that implies moving away from the traditional dependence from the master,
- emphasis on the learning process not on the final architectural product.

Different architectural organizations in Great Britain or USA, RIBA and AIA or Australian Institute of Architects have undertaken studies on the access, presence and possibilities of promotion of women in the context of pursuing education and careers in architecture. These studies invoke alleged discrimination cases, career interruption periods often due to maternity leave or family difficulties due to long working hours specific to the profession, professional activities unsuited to women’s profile such as construction site visits or competitiveness as male characteristic. All these aspects can lead to a fable women involvement in professional practice despite the growing female students’ number at the international level.

The higher education institutions and the architectural office are two locations engaged directly in the architecture production although a reference to architecture addresses specific issues around the architectural object itself. At the level of the architectural office, the professional practice is being organized, design decisions are coordinated, interdisciplinary relations are intermediated to the benefit of the project and negotiations with the beneficiary are augmented till the reception of the final project. All the above locations are corroborating in composing the architectural project and are represented by the fourth level without which, architecture and the demiurge architect would remain in anonymity: mass-media, the main factor responsible over the visibility of architecture and promotion of vanguards projects and personalities.

Very few approaches to entrepreneurship and project management have been undertaken in the architectural offices in terms of gender implications in leadership issues. Most studies are focused on the management of female office architecture and are analyzing women’s promotion opportunities in leadership positions and encourage this aspect motivating by gendered stereotyped characteristics and values. Empathy and communication classify women as being well suited as mediators and negotiators in the relation with the beneficiary. The major difficulty is considered to be the reconciliation of private life and domestic responsibilities, corresponding to the patriarchal culture, with the career progress.

Hopefully, the current trend regarding the feminization inside the architectural profession, especially on the educational level, will encourage a change of perspective upon the profession empowering women to engage also in entrepreneurial positions and soon enough the work of women architects will be heard of and prominent female figures will promote empathy and collaboration over competitiveness and egocentrism.

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28 RIBA Report in 2003, Royal Architectural Institute of Canada study in 2003 and the Royal Australian Institute of Architects study in 2005. In the Romanian context such studies are lacking, the literature indicating very poor aspects about architectural offices headed by women. (An example would be: “A50- 50 de birouri de arhitectura” a book compiled by BICAU in collaboration with Business Week.) There are however several famous examples of feminist practices all over Europe such as Matrix Design Co-Operative (UK), Muf Architecture (UK), Baupiloten (Berlin), Urbantactics (Paris) and FATALE (Stockholm).
4. References


[7] „ How to become a famous architect without building anything”.


Annex 1: Study in progress representing the Romanian Architects Chart members according to gender. Women architects constitute around 42% of the total number of registered architect for the year 2011. The study performed by the Architects Council of Europe, entitled: La profession d’architecte en Europe 2010, places Romania just after a few European countries with the highest percentage of women architects: Greece with 57% female, Croatia with 56%, Bulgaria with 50%, Slovenia with 50% and Sweden with 49%. On the contrary, the highest percentages of men architects are in Slovakia with 85% male, Austria with 84%, The Netherlands, Germany with 79% and Belgium with 76%.

Annex 2: Study in progress concerning licensed graduates (1951-2008) from Ion Mincu Institute of Architecture and Urbanism (UAUIM), the first School of Architecture in Romania (Bucharest). The upward trend regarding female licensed graduates.

Annex 3: Study in progress regarding the gender of current teachers in Architecture Universities in Romania.