

Girls on Film

How the lens has captured women in Architecture, and how this contributes to our understanding of architecture through time.

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1943

Figure 1 :

Women Welders in Gary,
Indiana Steel mill, published
in LIFE magazine August
9th 1943. Photographed by
Margaret Bourke-White



1956

Figure 2 :

Minnette de Silva inspects
the De Saram house,
Colombo, Sri Lanka. 1956,
RIBA Collections



1958

Figure 3 :

The Bailey House, Los
Angeles, California, Pierre
Koenig 1958, photographed
by Julius Shulman



Abstract

Through the medium of photography, we have a vast visual history of the role of women in architecture and a striking pictorial legacy of women's evolving place within the built environment. The three images I have chosen to represent three distinct categories of female representation in architectural settings. The journey starts with the depiction of women as passive users of buildings, placed within the spaces created by men. We then progress to the second category of visual imagery and in this we see women morphed into active users of the built environment as makers and builders – performing roles traditionally depicted as male in male-only environments. And then finally, the third category where women have become the architects of spaces, no longer just passive users, or even active users. Women now own the creative role. Although these images reflect societal shift in attitudes towards women's capabilities, the fact that categories two and three remain relatively small, highlights the ongoing struggle to have a gender equal share of creative thought and power in architecture.

Introduction

I have chosen to explore the contribution of visual imagery to architecture through the lens of female participation in the built environment. The three images I have chosen represent three distinct categories of female representation in architectural settings. Yet these three images emanate from just two decades - the 1940's and the 1950's. Each image tells its own story at a point in time, and the three images together paint another composite picture when viewed in relation to each other and question our assumptions (or hopes) of continuous chronological progress for women, in life and in the architectural profession as society becomes more enlightened and embraces diversity and inclusivity. A path we assume to be inexorable. In this essay I will

examine the significance and meaning of each image and explore the themes resulting from this trilogy of photos and what these images contribute to our understanding of how architecture has evolved over time, drawing out both positive and negative aspects and concluding with my hypothesis on where architecture stands today in relation to female representation.

These two mid-century decades are also particularly interesting periods to examine as they encompass two vastly differing societal contexts relating to the role of women. The 1940s were dominated by world war, resulting in mass death and destruction where men bore the brunt of frontline combat on a scale that dislocated the traditional gender roles across the whole of society and women had to step into the factories and building sites to perform the work previously reserved for men. Barely a corner of economic or industrial life was untouched by this massive shift.

The 1950s then provide a stark contrast to this apparent 'advancement' of women into male-dominated domains. In the post-war Western world, a new utopian ideal developed out of the rubble of lost cities, and architecture had an important and prominent role to create this new vision of the future, plan and build new towns, new ways of living, new types of communities - to be 'better' than the past. As men re-inserted themselves into domestic life, they re-asserted their dominance of economic life and back into their traditional roles as the head of the household. Women were then placed back into the role of homemaking and child-rearing. *Put back in their place*. Legally, in many professions, women had to give-up paid employment on marriage and the 'old order' was largely restored. So now in this new decade of new construction, the male architect is in charge of building this brave new world and it is a rare and exceptional woman at this point who can break into the profession. Largely ignored by history, all these images of women remain to this day, a small part of the

overall visual history and narrative of the built environment, as men have continued to dominate the field, and female representation remains low.

In this essay I seek to highlight their contribution at the individual level as well as shining a light in dark corners of architectural progress to amplify the real and differing contribution of women through the visual narrative, rather than leave this contribution marginalised as a quietly ignored sideshow. Despite over 100 years of women in the architectural profession, I aim to explore the conflict between cultural concepts of femininity and the creation of the architect as a masculine character.

Women welders

In 1943 the crisis of war demanded that women from all classes and backgrounds take a place in the industrial workforce for the war effort. This phenomenon as seen in the image of women welders in Gary Indiana spurred a sense of autonomy for women in North America and Europe. The image is from a collection taken by LIFE magazines first female photographer, Margaret Bourke-White¹, with the aim to chronicle women's contribution to the war effort. The article alongside the images stated "They have been accepted by management, by the union, by the rough, iron-muscled men they work with day after day. In time of peace they may return once more to home and family, but they have proved that in time of crisis no job is too tough for American women."² The image is a powerful statement in securing the notion that women are not only capable but welcomed into the typically male working environment. It was the phenomena of the war which brought about serious change to the wider public's thoughts on gender

¹ "Margaret Bourke-White," International Centre of Photography, n.d., <https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/constituents/margaret-bourke-white?all/all/all/all/0>

² Ben Cosgrove, "World War II: Photos of Women Factory Workers on the Home Front, 1943," LIFE, November 2, 2020, <https://www.life.com/history/women-of-steel-life-with-female-factory-workers-in-world-war-ii/>.

roles.³ Looking through other covers of LIFE magazine from this period, it is an exceptional and contradictory image to the prevailing images of women in traditional feminine settings (Ref fig.4 and 5). But just as in society, so too in architecture this image captures the reality of women successfully undertaking male roles in the built environment. And although statistically women didn't immediately enter jobs in the profession, it set the scene for a shift in attitudes towards woman's capabilities, and stimulated women's professional ambition outside of previously accepted areas like teaching, admin, or working with children.

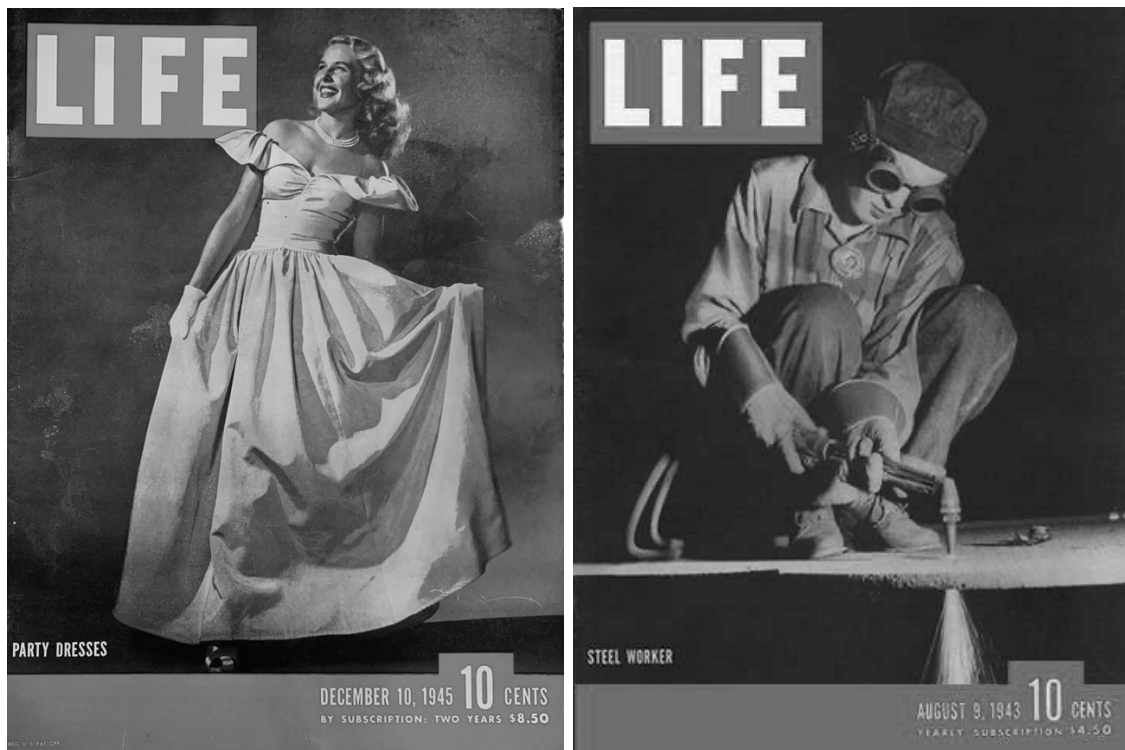


Figure 4 (left) : LIFE Magazine December 10, 1945 Party Dresses Fashion Jean Welch,

Figure 5 (right) : LIFE Magazine August 9, 1943 Woman Steel Worker Ann Zarik,

³ Lynne Walker, "Golden Age or False Dawn? Women Architects in the Early 20th Century," *Historic England*, accessed January 2, 2023, <https://umbraco.historicengland.org.uk/content/docs/research/women-architects-early-20th-century-pdf/>.

Passive woman

Julius Schulman's photograph of Case Study House 21 (Bailey House) from 1958 encapsulates a passive role of women as end-users in architecture – receivers of an end product. The period of the 1958 photograph is one of a utopian post-war modernism, in part a reaction to the destruction of so many homes during WWII bombing, but clearly depicting woman firmly back in the home where she is needed to create this utopian dream. The aim of the Case Study House programme was to find solutions to the post war housing crisis, perhaps aiming to give a sense of nostalgia and 'normalcy' to the population. Yet the population I am referencing to is that of the male, those who would be purchasing the housing and it is clear the photograph was curated with male heteronormative ideals in mind. Perhaps it is not too far to declare that the woman in this image is depicted almost as a decorative feature, an after-thought, and certainly not an active participant in the creation of this environment. Architectural critic Cathleen McGuigan notes the power these images have on the mind stating that the images "are so redolent of the era in which they were built you can practically hear the Sinatra tunes wafting in the air and the ice clinking in the cocktail glasses."⁴ This hard sell of modernism by Arts and Architecture magazine is at the expense of women, glorifying pre-war ideals. She has simply been placed within the space created by men to show that this is *her* place in life. Although researching extensively, I cannot find the name of the woman in the photograph, only discovering that Schulman was "known to position beautiful students"⁵ in his photographs, further highlighting the attitude to women as props. Furthermore, the fact that this image was created 15 years *after* the photograph of the female welders who are actively making

⁴ Claudia Luther, Cathleen McGuigan, quoted in "Julius Shulman Dies at 98; Celebrated Photographer of Modernist Architecture," Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles Times, July 17, 2009), <https://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-julius-shulman17-2009jul17-story.html>

⁵ Alona Pardo, Elias Redstone, and David Company, "Julius Schulman," in *Constructing Worlds: Photography and Architecture in the Modern Age* (Munich: Prestel, 2014), p. 71.

and building in an industrial setting demonstrates that 'progress' for women is not a steady upward trajectory but a series of progressions and regressions, with steep hills to climb and no gender balance guaranteed at the top of each hill. There is no residual echo in this glamorous and decorative housewife, of the women who were previously welders. By now, the male (and male architect) has reasserted himself in charge of the external world of work, and the builder of the world around him, having been repatriated from the frontline back to the office and factory and to his economic dominance following the end of WW2.

This photograph demonstrates the idea of "gender posing" that academic Erving Goffman analyses in his book which explores the visual presentation of women in advertising. He writes that these poses can be discerned from things as subtle as hand gestures, and facial expressions. But essentially these tiny, nuanced moments or movements have the power to express stereotypes and in turn reinforce hierarchies that oppress women and maintain privileges for men. In the Bailey House image, the unnamed woman sits in the foreground giving her the focus of the scene, but she sits lower than that of her male counterpart. Goffman recognises that physical height often symbolises hierarchy in our society, and in advertising. "Men tend to be located higher than women, thus allowing elevation to be exploited as a delineative resource"⁶. She is also averting her gaze, rendering her passive and vulnerable and giving the viewer opportunity to regard her body while it feels like she is not looking. It is clear the male gaze is present here, fully legitimised by the notion that 'sex sells.'

It is important to understand that advertising photography doesn't reveal inherent truths about men and women. In the real-world perceptions and behaviours of both genders

⁶ Erving Goffman, "The Ritualization of Subordination," in *Gender Advertisements* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), pp. 43-43.

are affected by magazines intent to create “commercial-realism”⁷ to sell their product. This begins a vicious circle where women constantly find themselves dis-enfranchised by this distorted reality. Further research that has been based on Goffman’s research has found that these sentiments are so entrenched into the female psyche that “despite the increase of female photographers, gender posing in advertising campaigns not only remains prominent, but has even intensified.”⁸ This is how the patriarchy has influenced culture, thus how images affect us all. Being alert to conscious and unconscious bias in imagery related to women is crucial. For the architect to carry these notions consciously or unconsciously into their work environment or design creation is counter-productive to any ambition to foster diverse and inclusive design solutions.

Minnette de Silva

If you know the name Minnette de Silva at all, then your first image is of her culture. As a colourful Sri Lankan woman stood next to Le Corbusier another grey male modernists, she was unique. This image was both her making and her downfall. In the media, highly racialised accounts regard her as captivating, more in the sense of a fascinating object from the ‘orient’. Viewed as an enigmatic and beautiful woman from a foreign and exotic culture, this cast a sexist cloud over her architectural theories and achievements. In her autobiography De Silva recounts how she was depicted in the British press “was it all due to the picturesque saree... or could it be the irresistible lure of the mysterious east?”⁹ This constant exoticizing of her simultaneously dogged and propelled her career. It also clearly cast her as an outsider. This catch-22 reminded me of Naomi Wolf’s final message in in her book ‘The Beauty Myth’ ‘No matter what a

⁷ Erving Goffman, “Picture Frames,” in *Gender Advertisements* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), p 23

⁸ Denisa Vitova, “The Male Gaze of Female Photographers,” Medium (Medium, February 17, 2020), <https://denisavitova.medium.com/the-male-gaze-of-female-photographers-3a97eb3e1e30>.

⁹ Minnette De Silva, in *The Life & Work of an Asian Woman Architect* (Colombo, Sri Lanka: M. De Silva, 1998), p. 102.

woman's appearance may be, it will be used to undermine what she is saying".¹⁰ De Silva boldly rejected assimilation into architectural culture, her uncompromising nature ensured her work was as authentic as herself. The image of Minnette taken in 1956 shows her visiting the construction site of the De Saram house in Colombo, Sri Lanka. As an advocate for regional artistry and craftsmanship, it is not surprising to see her, hands on, amidst the building work. She appears caught off guard, not posing just doing. Yet, it seems this kind of documentation was pre-meditated. de Silva understood her fragile entry into this male world and pre-empted her erasure from history by writing her autobiography, 'The life of an Asian Woman Architect'. It is a laying down of memory and documentation through images and scraps of writing and shows her recognition of the necessity to create her own archive. In photographs she often appears as part of the scene - standing alongside her buildings, looking over work, and making the drawings.¹¹ It is as if she uses photography as evidence and as a time capsule for future generations – a future where women are no longer discredited or obliterated from the timeline.

"You can't be what you can't see." - Marian Wright Edelman : The representation of the architect in media

The other common theme amongst my three images is that they show the physical bodies of women present in the built environment. Women's bodies have been central to debate on their capabilities and identities in the workplace. They are simultaneously a hindrance and a source of power but more often the former. As Sontag states 'A man can always be seen. Women are looked at.'¹² I am interested in understanding the ideological barriers architectural culture has put on who is 'in' and who is 'out'. Feminist

¹⁰ Wolfe Naomi. 1990. *The Beauty Myth* First Vintage books ed. Toronto: Vintage Books.

¹¹ Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi, "Crafting the Archive: Minnette De Silva, Architecture, and History," *The Journal of Architecture* 22, no. 8 (2017): pp. 1299-1336, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2017.1376341>.

¹² Annie Leibovitz and Susan Sontag, "A Photograph Is Not an Opinion. Or Is It?," in *Women* (New York: Random House, 1999).

scholar Despina Stratigakos finds that popular culture presents us with a “pervasive insistence on the incompatibility of the architectural and the feminine”¹³. A study done by Professor Kathryn Anthony at the University of Illinois reviewed 45 films made between 1942 – 2010 in which the lead role is an architect. In 91% the protagonist is male, and, in 96%, he is white.¹⁴ This Hollywood projection is unsurprising as it accurately depicts the lack of diversity of the profession perhaps 10 years ago when in fact today in a report by ARB ‘the gender split for architects under 30 was exactly 50/50’¹⁵. But it is the prevailing power the images still hold over our current outlooks that I find particularly terrifying. This image of the male architect in popular culture presents more than an aesthetic ideal, but a masculine persona.

In ‘The Image of the Architect’ Andrew Saint explores (from a European and male only perspective) how the architect has appeared in the last 200 years. His first chapter is titled ‘The Architect as Hero and Genius’ and opens with a film still from the 1943 film *The Fountainhead* based on the novel by Ayn Rand¹⁶. It shows the Architect protagonist standing confidently before a modernist skyscraper and rendering the author’s image of the architect, celebrated as a man of intellect and individualistic heroism. This is just one example of the many identical portrayals of the architect in Hollywood. In the chapter, “Tall Buildings, Tall Tales: On Architects in the Movies” in Mark Lamster’s book, *Architecture and Film*, writer Nancy Levinson looks beyond the image and into the personality and characteristics of the architect on screen. He is found to be heroic, frustrated, and underpaid¹⁷. It is this persona which centres around ego, working over hours and a patchy social life which has been detrimental to the

¹³ Despina Stratigakos, “What I Learned from Architect Barbie: Why Can’t Architects Wear Pink?,” *Places Journal*, June 1, 2011, <https://placesjournal.org/article/what-i-learned-from-architect-barbie/?cn-reloaded=1>.

¹⁴ Kathryn Anthony, “Why Hollywood Needs to Change Its Conception of ‘The Architect,’” *ArchDaily* (ArchDaily, October 25, 2013), <https://www.archdaily.com/441844/why-hollywood-needs-to-change-its-conception-of-the-architect>.

¹⁵ arb_admin, “ARB Publishes Its Latest Annual Report,” Architects Registration Board, July 16, 2020, <https://arb.org.uk/arb-publishes-its-latest-annual-report-nr20/>.

¹⁶ Saint, Andrew. *The Image of the Architect*. Yale University Press, 1983. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1ww3w0s>.

¹⁷ Lamster, Mark, ed. 2013. *Architecture and Film*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press. Accessed January 6, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucl/reader.action?docID=3387295>

professions for both men and women. This stereotypical Hollywood image is not far-fetched and speaks to the toxic culture architecture encourages in schools and practices. As I have researched, the traits Hollywood endorses are those of the 'masculine', a set of characteristics women can be scorned for expressing or ignored for not possessing. As my trio of images express, the navigation of women into the architectural realm is complicated, and trading the 'correct' path to success is determined by who you are, and if you are allowed in and by whom.

Conclusion

I've taken a particular genre of visual image to be found in the archives of architectural history and I have used this broad genre of 'women in architecture' to re-examine architecture through this particular lens. I have chosen images that reflect very different activities for women in architectural settings, showing both participation *in* the profession and in environments built by and for men, alongside their portrayal *by* the profession. In preserving and recording history through photographic images, the proclivities of the male gaze and male ambition for power, control and legacy inform the tone and style of the images. We might at first think of the female welders as strong women punching through into a male domain. We see Minnette enjoying a role as a leading architect. But then both these images are suddenly undermined, and a different context emerges when we survey the photograph of the 1958 housewife, placed firmly back in her home and all this implies for gender progress. It seems that 15 years on from the welders, not only has no progress been made, but in fact thrown into reverse. This causes us to reflect on all three images together and take a closer look at what is really there. In researching more into Minnette, we discover there is relatively little written about her; she wrote her own autobiography to record her own contribution; and the evidence points to her career being dogged by eroticism of her

'foreignness' , distracting us from and undermining and marginalising her contribution as an architect.

So how would I summarise the contribution of these images?

The real contribution of these three images together is to show us that architecture has a steep challenge to achieve sustained and sustainable gender parity. The images show us that progress is too easily assumed to be happening with the passage of time and the growth of a more enlightened society. Gender equality is not something that is achieved one day and then we can all forget about it. These images tell us that there are hidden biases, assumed norms and unchallenged systems, processes and behaviours that we need to be alert to and continually work to improve.

In researching this essay, the paucity of available material of women in architectural settings in itself points to a level of marginalisation inbuilt into the historical narrative on architecture and the educational process.

Images, in my research have shown to be a powerful resource in preserving the memory and contribution of women and can help to redress the prevailing male narrative of architectural history. Today, for me and many women they unveil a history of people who made it against the odds and arise feelings of unity and power. The narrative of my images also addresses an issue that all movements that challenge society must maintain. The fact that progress is non-linear and we must always be on guard to observe and call out when the first signs of regression appear.

I suggest new architectural culture is to be made by first remembering the past, and then giving women and other marginalised communities someone to aspire to – someone you can be, because you can see.

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