

Are women (still) in the shade?

An enquiry into female creativity reaches back to architects and designers from the past century, and compares their plight with the situation today.

Are women still having trouble gaining the spotlight and being recognised for their value and talent on equal footing with their male colleagues? Is there such a thing as a feminine vision in the fields of design and architecture?

by PATRIZIA SCARZELLA

"Women in the shade: tracing femininity in architecture and design" is the translated title of a study conducted several years ago by Silvia Fabbroni, a Florentine architect who presented her research in Florence in 2014 on the occasion of an exhibition on the designer Charlotte Perriand. Fabbroni read the biographies of Margaret McDonald Mackintosh, Marion Mahony Griffin, Lilly Reich, Charlotte Perriand, Aino Aalto, Ray Eames, Anne Tying and Harriet Pattison.

All were designers, muses, girlfriends or wives – respectively of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Alvar Aalto, Charles Eames and Louis Kahn. In different ways and to different degrees, they remained mostly unknown and in any case less famous than their partners, even when they acquired fame autonomously, like Perriand. The only exception is Ray Eames, who always signed projects with Charles equally.

The story of the landscape architect Harriet Pattison, Kahn's muse and mistress, is extreme and emblematic of how far this zone of shade can extend. In the documentary *My Architect, A Son's Journey* (2003) filmed by Nathaniel, Kahn's son Pattison gave birth to in 1963, there is the following Q and A between son and mother about her role.

Harriet: We were soulmates, I would say, and inspired each other. So there was an equal exchange in many ways. I was a critic. I do think I brought the sense of nature and of the site to Lou's work.

Nathaniel: Where did you work in the office?

H: I worked in a room, and sometimes it was locked.

N: Why?

H: Well, because of his wife, who would come in, drop by, sometimes.

N: That sounds fairly nerve-wracking.

H: It was nerve-wracking. It was humiliating in some ways. When the buildings were created and finished, for example the Kimbell Museum, everyone went out to the opening, but I was not invited. I was not allowed to come.

N: Was the problem that you were a woman, or that you were involved with him?

H: Yes, all of those things, yes.

N: Didn't you ever say to him, "Why don't you respect me more?" (H: Yes.) Why don't you include me in these things?"

H: Well, you see, I felt so happy and delighted to work on things. I mean, to work on something like this was just thrilling. And when we were working on projects, we were just completely absorbed with the ideas. There was great freedom and love of what we were doing. It was the price that I paid, but it was worth it, you know?

It is still common belief that neglecting one's children in order to concentrate on one's artistic development and career advancement is not part of women's nature. While a creative father always immersed in his own thoughts, devoted to his art, and absent for his children is justified and often forgiven, the same behaviour in a mother is not easily accepted, as if it were not part of female chromosomes to be so fully absorbed by creative drive as to exclude all the rest, including children.

In an interview I conducted with Pernette Perriand Balzac, the daughter of Charlotte Perriand, she spoke of this absence and described her mother's total dedication to her creative drive as something she, Pernette, did not understand until she was an adult. "She worked completely alone, and was always very focused on creating."

When I was little, it exasperated me that her mind was always absent at the table; she was so immersed in her thoughts. She was a very demanding woman. She spent her whole life pushing forward, working uninterruptedly, like a ship moving full steam ahead and never stopping."

Times have changed since the past century, but are creative women architects and designers still in the shade? Do they have trouble moving into the spotlight and being recognised for their value and talent on equal footing with male colleagues?

Does a feminine vision of design and architecture really even exist? Does this question come across as futile and steeped in



From top: bronze pendant by Natsuko Toyofuku, 2018; decorative panel in pitchstone, an interpretation of the majolica earthenware from Caltagirone, Sicily. By Elena Salmistraro for Lithea, 2018. Below: the ceramic vase Mandrillus in the Primates collection (2017), inspired by animistic terracotta objects from Ancient Rome. By Elena Salmistraro for Bosa



1970s feminist revenge? They are open questions that might be slightly rhetoric and spurious, but invite debate.

Some people think that soon, inevitably, a specific type of gender-recognisable buildings will emerge, seeing that female students have outnumbered male students at design- and architecture faculties in Italy. The architect Luisa Bocchietto, the first woman president of the World Design Organization, which groups together 140 design associations from 40 countries, has a different opinion. At a recent conference, she asserted that projects are either good or bad, regardless of their creator's sex. How can we disagree? On forms for personal information, the question regarding male or female sex is considered no longer appropriate, and has been disappearing in some ambits in the US for being a breach of privacy.

In 2008 in Turin, Luisa Bocchietto and Anty Pansera curated the exhibition "D come Design. La mano, la mente e il cuore" (which translates to "D is for Design. The hand, the mind and the heart") for the Turin World Design Capital event organised by the World Design Organization. The show gathered over 100 women designers from the past and present. Before that, in 2000 in Ferrara, Pansera organised the exhibition "Dal merletto alla motocicletta" ("From lace to the motorcycle"), a first cataloguing of creative female Italians. More recently, in 2016 at the Triennale di Milano, Silvana Annicchiarico was the curator of the display "W. Women in Italian Design", an exploration of the contribution of female Italian designers. It attempted to show a feminine timeline of history with an extended map full of forgotten names and stories.

The result was a heterogeneous and multifaceted overview. About 350 designers were grouped in chapters designated by five key words that traditionally connote and identify womanhood: interweave, protect, procreate, represent and reflect.

These words are both strong and (perhaps) weak, in that they often position female design in the margins of design history.

In this panorama of Italian design, some (few) women designers are exponents of the profession, and they have international visibility. Above all, there is the work of Patricia Urquiola (1961), a highly talented interweaver and contemporary interpreter of the typical threads of female tradition, especially regarding textile, which she translates into empathic objects. Younger members include Elena Salmistraro (1983) and Cristina Celestino (1980) who are emerging with a specific identity that sees them combining with great sensibility the two contradictory elements of strength and delicacy.

There is Denise Bonapace (1977), who works on the relation between body and clothing – see her recent project *Abitario*. There is Monica Castiglioni, an internationally famous jewellery designer. Then there is a substantial group of Japanese designers who have been living in Milan for many years. They include Kaori Shiina, Kazuyo Komoda, Shinobu Ito and Natsuko Toyofuku. They are the protagonists of my video interviews *Double way*, which I just started, aiming to discover the interaction between their culture of origin and their adoptive Italian culture.

In the meantime, there is the initiative by Clara Mantica, who is constructing an online platform and data bank of female designers, following the example of the project "100 Esperte contro gli stereotipi" by Luisella Seveso and Giovanna Pezzuoli with the support of the European Commission and the Fondazione Bracco. The project gave a voice to 100 women scientists, then 100 women economists, and coming soon, 100 women experts in international politics.

The designer Anna Lombardi has the specific objective of monitoring the many unknown female figures that work in the design field and hold creative or technical positions at Friulian companies. As a promoter of the Udine Design Week, she presented the first step of the study last year by means of a fascinating video map shown at Galleria Tina Modotti in Udine. In my opinion, being able to identify the specificity of feminine design is not so important.

The more concrete, less theoretical, conceptual issue is to guarantee that women designers have equal job opportunities, visibility and salaries. These notions are fundamental to equality between the sexes, which is a mission pursued by associations such as the IDSA Women (Industrial Designers Society of America), and this seems to me of primary importance today.



Elements from the Garden Layers collection (2018) by Patricia Urquiola for Gan. Includes rugs, pillows, coffee tables and mats for outdoor use



Dominique, a bronze ring by Monica Castiglioni