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Review of The First American Women Architects

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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. Allalbach 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 Mood 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). Allalbach, 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. Allalbach 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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