

'Archi-ettes' in Training: The Admission of Women to McGill's School of Architecture¹

During the first week of June this year, the School of Architecture at McGill University was visited by its first woman graduate, Catherine Mary Chard Wisnicki (figure 1). She was invited back to Montréal by her alma mater as part of the school's centennial celebrations—except for a period in the 1950s, Chard Wisnicki has lived in Vancouver since the late 1940s—to receive an honorary Doctorate of Science.² A pioneer of British Columbia Modernism and one of the country's first women architecture professors, Chard Wisnicki's contributions to the profession in Canada have long been neglected. Her momentous graduation from McGill in 1943 was the culmination of the debate over the admission of women as architecture students at the university.³

The Debate

The controversy had inspired a flurry of internal correspondence as early as 1918, when Juliana Dallaire of Moose Creek, Ontario, sent the following request to the university:

Kindly send me the calendar of the University and please tell me if it is possible to study landscape gardening, perspective, inside decoration and work in white and ink in the University. Also [if] it is necessary to pass examinations.

Yours truly

Juliana Dallaire⁴

An optimistic university registrar, J.A. Nicholson, replied to Dallaire's request, outlining the necessary qualifications for admission and adding,

So far women have not been admitted to the course in Architecture, but it is just possible under the changed conditions consequent upon the war that an exception might now be made.⁵

Five years before Dallaire's letter, a request from the Montreal Women's Club had demanded the admission of women students to a number of faculties at McGill, underlining the appropriateness of architecture as a woman's career choice:

The Montreal Women's Club of 303 members desires to record its conviction that the time has now fully arrived, when opportunities for the highest intellectual development must be as open to women, as they are to men—and therefore calls upon the Principal and Corporation of McGill University to raise its standard to that of the seat of learning in other lands, and to that of its Sister Universities in Western Canada, by throwing open all its Faculties to women, as they are to men students, laying special stress upon the Course in Architecture, which in particular appeals to women.⁶

The Club petitioned the university again in 1929, at which time the Faculty of Applied Science, which then included architecture, justified their rejection of women students on the grounds that the Department of Architecture was already overcrowded and that the building was "designed for male students exclusively," without "cloak room, common room or rest room."⁷ Professor Ramsay Traquair, who was then director of the school and fiercely opposed to the admission of women, added to these reasons:



Figure 1. Catherine Chard (Wisnicki), first graduate of McGill's School of Architecture. (Courtesy of Catherine Chard Wisnicki)

by Annmarie Adams

Much architectural draughting is done at night, the main drawing-room being open until ten o'clock. The responsibility for the maintenance of discipline in the evening is assumed by the students themselves. If women students were admitted, it would be necessary to provide staff supervision during these evening drawing periods, and such supervision would require additional members of the staff and put the School to extra expense for which it has no funds.⁸

It was, however, the "changed conditions" brought about by the Second World War, rather than the First World War as Dr. Nicholson had presumed, which finally convinced McGill's administration to admit women students to architecture. The university may also have been convinced to change its anti-women stance by a surprisingly modern-sounding letter signed by "Deborah" printed in the *Montreal Daily Star* in 1937, which is reproduced here in its entirety:

Sir,—For a number of years application was made annually to the Corporation of McGill University to open the Department of Architecture to women on the same basis as in arts, law, medicine and accountancy, in which the qualifications and general standing but not the sex of the applicant are considered. The last reply received some years ago stated: "That the accommodation in the Dept. of Architecture is now taxed to the utmost and that additional students cannot be admitted unless more room is provided." As there were only 37 students in the five-year course at the time, it must have been a very expensive faculty to maintain and it would have seemed more economical to provide more room and thereby provide for a larger number of students. Several women were ready to enrol but were obliged to go elsewhere for their training. Our information is that no university on the American continents which has a dept. of architecture places any sex restrictions on students, unless it may be Princeton which refuses to admit women or negroes. But now, according to the report published a few days ago, there are 10 fewer students in architecture than formerly, thus providing ample accommodation for a limited number of women students and it would be interesting to know if McGill's ban against women has been removed. The Archives of McGill showed that neither men nor women were mentioned in its charter, only the generic term, 'students' and it is therefore doubtful if the university has any legal right to differentiate as to the sex of the applicants.⁹

That same year, a resolution was unanimously passed by the Alumnae Society of the university to urge the Senate that women should be admitted to architecture.¹⁰ As dean of the Faculty of Engineering, which now included architecture, Ernest Brown struck a committee to study the matter. This five-member team sent letters of inquiry to the heads of architecture departments in eight North American universities, asking six specific questions about the acceptance of women in other schools and in the profession in general. The responses to these questions, from directors at Toronto, Manitoba, Harvard, Yale, MIT, Columbia, Pennsylvania, and Texas, provide extremely interesting reading today.

The only point over which there was any disagreement from the other schools was on the employment of women architects. Not surprisingly, McGill faculty members who opposed the admission of women emphasized this question in building their case for women's continued exclusion. Professor H.H. Madill, head of the school at the University of Toronto, from which the first woman graduated in 1920, provided the most "useful" evidence to McGill against the acceptance of women:

The women graduates do have difficulty in obtaining employment, particularly in getting their first start.... There have been seven women graduates from this school and they have all worked in offices at various times, but as far as I know there is only one at the present time employed in an architect's office. Of the others—2 are in interior decorating, 3 are married, and one is unemployed.¹¹

Madill's statement, in fact, inspired McGill's Professor Chambers, who had composed the letters to the other schools, to conclude, "for most people, architecture is still a man's job."¹²

Traquair continued to fight the admission of women to architecture at McGill well into the late 1930s.¹³ In fact, at the meeting of the above-mentioned "Committee on the Admission of Women into Architecture," held in early November of 1937, Traquair and three of the committee members voiced fierce opposition to women's

1 A shorter and more preliminary version of this paper will appear in a special edition of *ARQ* celebrating the centennial of McGill's School of Architecture. The research is part of a larger interdisciplinary project based at the McGill Centre for Research and Teaching on Women and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I am especially grateful to the other members of the research team, Sarah Baker, Jill Trower, and Peta Tancred, and to Margaret Gillett, who generously shared her research notes on the history of women at McGill. The staff of the OAQ was also very helpful in providing information on its early members. The term "archi-ettes" is borrowed from notes on Québec contributed by Harold Lawson from the "Provincial Page" of the *RAIC Journal* 17, no. 11 (November 1940): 204.

2 On the awarding of the degree, see Annmarie Adams and Peta Tancred, "McGill export helped build B.C. Modernism," *The Gazette* [Montréal], 8 June 1996, H5, and Annmarie Adams, "Catherine Chard Wisnicki to receive honorary degree," *School of Architecture Centennial Newsletter*, summer 1996, 2.

3 The rather stormy debate over the admission of women is analyzed in Margaret Gillett, *We Walked Very Warily: A History of Women at McGill* (Montréal: Eden, 1981), 317-22.

4 Undated copy of this letter in McGill University Archives (MUA). There is mention in the Faculty Minute Book no. 6 (29 September 1909) of an earlier application for admission in 1909, however, no copy of this application has been found. On 2 October 1909, the same book records, "Professor Nobbs reported on the advisability of admitting women to the course of Architecture. The Faculty decided that it would not be advisable to do so at the present."

5 Letter of 20 July 1918, MUA.

6 Faculty Minute Book no. 7 (5 May 1913), MUA.

7 Letter of 5 October 1929, MUA.

8 "Extracts from Minutes of October 2, 1929 regarding 'Admission of Women to Architecture,'" MUA. Traquair's misogynist views were most clearly articulated in his "Women and Civilization," *Atlantic Monthly* 132 (September 1923): 289-96.

9 "Neither Male nor Female" [letter to the editor], *Montreal Daily Star*, 11 March 1937, 10.

10 Letter, 14 June 1937, from Nora Morgan McCammon to the Secretary of Senate, MUA.

11 Report from Professor Chambers to Dean E. Brown, Faculty of Engineering, dated 29 October 1937, 3, MUA. On the admission of Esther Marjorie Hill, the first Canadian woman architect, to the University of Toronto, see "Slowly and Surely (But Somewhat Painfully): More or Less the History of Women in Architecture in Canada," *Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada Bulletin* 17, no. 1 (March 1992), 7.

12 Report from Professor Chambers to Dean E. Brown, Faculty of Engineering, dated 29 October 1937, 4, MUA.

13 For more information on Traquair, see Norbert Schoenauer, "McGill's School of Architecture: A Retrospection," *McGill: Schools of Architecture and Urban Planning Prospectus* (Montréal: McGill University, 1986), 9-13, and the article by Isabelle Gournay in this issue.

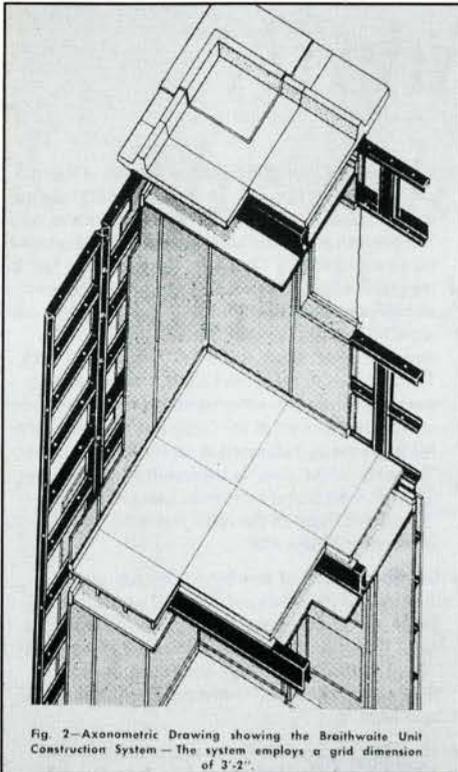
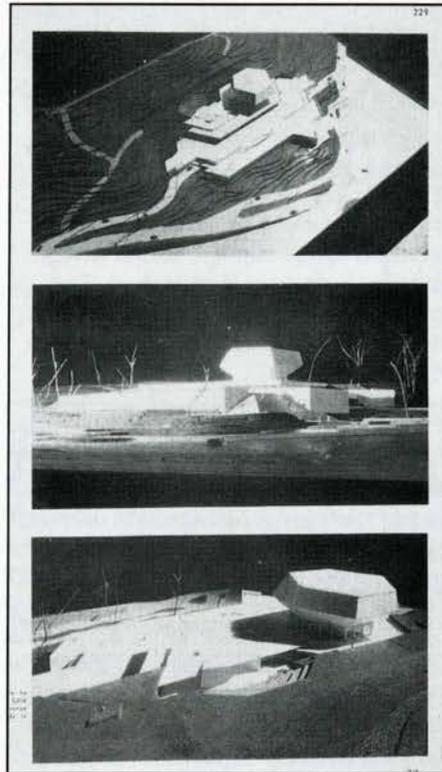


Fig. 2—Axonometric Drawing showing the Braithwaite Unit Construction System — The system employs a grid dimension of 3'-2".



14 Minutes of a meeting of the Committee on the Admission of Women into Architecture, held 5 November 1937, MUA.

15 Schoenauer, 14.

16 On Bland's profound impact on the school, see Anne McDougall, "John Bland and the McGill School of Architecture," *Canadian Architect* 15, no. 3 (March 1988): 33-37. Turner apparently also encouraged women to enter the school; see M.E.T., "Women Architects May Soon Be At Work Here," *Montreal Star*, 3 October 1942, and "A Belated Letter," *RAIC Journal* 21, no. 12 (December 1944): 288.

17 Biographical information on both Chard Wisnicki and Scott Holland are included in "New Appointment Coincides with Special Anniversary," *McGill School of Architecture Newsletter*, fall 1989, 1-2.

18 This total is based on a number of different graduation lists available at McGill.

19 These ten architects are Janet Shaw Mactavish, Blanche Lemco van Ginkel, Evanthisa Zoumboulidou Caragianis, Tiuu Tammist O'Brien, Elizabeth Compton Ross, Christina Poznanska Perks, Doris Droste Steffen, Anne-Marie Balazs Pollowy, Sarina Altman Katz, and Malca Tobman Feldman. Dorice Brown Walford received her Master's from McGill and therefore does not figure in this count.

mere presence in the school, even in the face of the positive results sent in by other schools. Traquair feared that women would prove distracting to the male students, and added that "women had not the qualities of imagination to make good designers." At the same meeting, architect P. Roy Wilson stated that women had trouble in "visualising construction, especially on paper." "They could never command the respect of contractors or workmen," he added. Professor Chambers stressed the need for women's segregation. He hoped that if admitted to McGill, women students would be given a separate drafting room "which [they] would come to consider their own."¹⁴ A similar system, the committee had learned, had proved successful at the University of Pennsylvania.

Women were finally admitted to McGill not on their own strengths, but on the administration's growing concern about the shrinking number of students in the school. At one point, there was even a possibility that the school might close due to declining enrollment.¹⁵ This threat, combined with the more liberal administrative policies of John Bland, director of the school from 1941 to 1972, eased women's acceptance to the school. Under the acting directorship of Philip Turner during 1939-41, Bland made the necessary social and physical changes to ensure women's place in the maturing institution. As director, he transformed the curriculum from a Beaux-Arts model to one more firmly based in the tenets of Modernism.¹⁶ Chard Wisnicki's acceptance in 1939 and the admission of a second woman, Arlene Scott (Holland), six months later were pivotal steps towards Bland's vision of a modern professional school.¹⁷

The Graduates

McGill's School of Architecture counts many illustrious architects among its 39 women students who graduated between 1943 and 1970.¹⁸ Although relatively few of them stayed to practice in Québec, these first McGill alumnae made a considerable impact on the profession there. Of the 18 women registered as members of the Ordre des Architectes du Québec (OAQ) prior to 1970, ten received their primary professional education at McGill.¹⁹

Four major themes have emerged from our interviews with these early graduates and from the relatively scanty documentary evidence of their time spent as students at McGill. The first is that an extraordinary number of the women who attended the school prior to 1970 were outstanding students. They received top marks in their classes; they won awards; their design projects and drawings from sketching school were published in national journals; and in some instances, such as Chard Wisnicki, they wrote or co-authored thematic essays published in the professional press during

or soon after their graduation (figure 2).²⁰ Sheila Baillie Hatch (B.Arch. '46), for example, won prizes for architectural drawing (1942), for the highest standing in second year (1943), for architectural engineering (1944), and was later awarded one of three medals by the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (RAIC). Hanka Rosten Renehan graduated at the top of her class in 1948, winning the Lieutenant-Governor's Silver Medal, the Lewis Robertson Prize in design, and the McLennan Travelling Scholarship. Chard Wisnicki, Blanche Lemco van Ginkel (B.Arch. '45), Rosten Renehan, Ala Mendelsohn Damaz (B.Arch. '46), Barbara Milne Lambert (B.Arch. '47), and Sarina Altman Katz (B.Arch. '60) saw their student projects published in national journals (figure 3).²¹

Second, despite the fact that McGill was the last Canadian school to accept women to its program in architecture, its graduates occupy a number of "firsts" (or nearly so) for women in architecture. For example, Lemco van Ginkel (figure 4) was the first woman appointed to a teaching position at the University of Pennsylvania in 1951 (together with Siasa Nowicki), the first woman to be elected as an officer of the OAQ in 1971 and the RAIC in 1972, the first woman to become a fellow of the RAIC in 1973, and the first woman appointed as a dean of architecture and landscape architecture at the University of Toronto in 1980.²² Chard Wisnicki was the second woman to register with the Architectural Institute of British Columbia in 1946 and the fourth to become a member of the Ontario Association of Architects the previous year.

While other studies have presumed that the absence of men in Montréal during the Second World War provided the ultimate opportunity for women to enter the profession in Québec, our research points to the important role played by immigrant women, particularly from eastern Europe, in Montréal following the war. Of the 18 women registered with the OAQ prior to 1970, 12 were born outside Canada. Seven of these hailed from eastern Europe. Our working hypothesis, at this point, is that the cultural backgrounds of the numerous women born in countries where women architects were already a sizable percentage of the profession by the postwar period gave them the knowledge, skill, and experience to make it in the male-dominated Montréal architectural scene. The many women students from eastern European backgrounds who studied at McGill, we speculate, gained the conviction and confidence to become architects from their families. "Eastern Europe (and I am told Hungary in particular) recognized women in the professions much earlier than North America. This led to a natural acceptance of these fields within the family," commented Anne-Marie Balazs Pollowy (B.Arch. '60).²³

This point is crucial to our ongoing study. We believe that the case for women architects in the development of Modernism in Québec was very much contingent on the influx of women architects from other countries after the war. Among the early McGill students who may fall into this category are Christina Poznanska Perks of Poland (B.Arch. '57), Tiuu Tammist O'Brien of Estonia (B.Arch. '58), and Sarina Altman Katz of Romania (B.Arch. '60) (figure 5). They are all extremely successful practitioners whose subsequent careers were built on their early experiences of Modernism.

Our fourth theme is related to both the timing of women's acceptance in Canada (especially Québec) as professional architects and the presumption in the existing secondary literature on women architects (in Britain and the United States) that early women were encouraged to specialize in subfields such as interior design, housing, and, later, historic preservation. Our initial findings indicate that no such "ghetto" actually existed in Canada, although women architects were frequently portrayed in the professional press as experts in these areas.²⁴ If anything, many early women graduates of McGill, such as Chard Wisnicki, Lemco van Ginkel, and Barbara Ferguson (B.Arch. '45) specialized in city planning.²⁵

CHARD WISNICKI'S HONOURARY DEGREE THIS YEAR IS INTENDED to celebrate the centennial of the School of Architecture in 1996. Certainly the next century will see an ever-increasing role for women at McGill and in the profession of architecture. Since the early 1980s, women have comprised about 50 percent of the incoming students to the school. Despite this trend, women comprised only 10.7 percent of the profession in 1991. Nonetheless, Chard Wisnicki encourages today's young women to enter the field. "I anticipate a great future for women in architecture, particularly in view of all the current upheavals in society," states Chard Wisnicki optimistically. "It is my contention that women are awfully good at dealing with upheavals."²⁶



Figure 2 (previous page, left). Axonometric drawing of a prefabricated house, from an essay co-authored by E.G. Faludi and Catherine Chard. (*RAIC Journal* 22, no. 3 [March 1945]: 58)

Figure 3 (previous page, centre). Sarina Altman's thesis project for a music centre, published in *Architecture-Bâtiment-Construction* 33 (juillet 1960): 39.

Figure 4 (previous page, right). Blanche Lemco (van Ginkel) at McGill's Surveying Field School, May 1941. (Courtesy of Blanche Lemco van Ginkel)

Figure 5 (above). This photograph of architects from the office of Affleck, Dimakopoulos, Lebensold, Architects includes two of Québec's earliest women architects, both of whom emigrated from eastern Europe: Tiuu Tammist O'Brien (B.Arch. '58), on the extreme left, and Eva Vecsei, who did not graduate from McGill, third from the left. (*Montreal Star*, 16 September 1969, courtesy of Eva Vecsei)

20 See E.G. Faludi and Catherine Chard, "The Prefabricated House Industry," *RAIC Journal* 22, no. 3 (March 1945): 56-62; and Catherine M. Chard, "What is an Architect?" *RAIC Journal* 19, no. 2 (February 1942): 30-33.

21 There are several sources on the sexist nature of architectural education. On McGill in particular, see Anne Drummond, "Women in the McGill School of Architecture," unpublished paper, April 1978; on the Canadian schools, see Sarah Baker, "Professional Architectural Education: Women Articulate Masculinist Values," paper presented at the Canadian Women's Studies Association Conference, St. Catharines, Ontario, May 1996.

22 Personal correspondence from Lemco van Ginkel, dated 9 July 1993.

23 Personal correspondence from Balazs Pollowy, dated 23 August 1994.

24 Annmarie Adams, "Building Barriers: Images of Women in Canada's Architectural Press, 1924-73," *Resources for Feminist Research* 23, no. 3 (fall 1994): 11-23.

25 I am grateful to Lemco van Ginkel who pointed out this trend to us, noting that there was less prejudice against women in this "new field." Personal correspondence from Lemco van Ginkel, dated 9 June 1995.

26 Personal correspondence from Chard Wisnicki, dated 24 January 1996.

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