

# The W@ARCH.PT as an Ongoing Feminist Research Project in Architecture: Contextualizing Initial Reflections

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**ABSTRACT** - *In Portugal, the participation of female architects in the development of the profession – in the broad sense of the word: project, research, education, criticism, and policy – is far from having been identified, problematized, and disseminated. The research project W@ARCH.PT (Women Architects in Portugal: Building Visibility, 1942-1986) strives to give visibility to female architects – revealing “who?”, “when?”, and “how?” – and contribute to expanding the history of Portuguese architecture, as well as developing feminist studies and ideas within the discipline. The strategies chosen to carry out this ongoing research intersect with feminist theories and epistemologies, outside and inside architecture. The issues raised require a critical understanding of the processes that sustain the silencing of female architects’ voices, imposing limitations on how we understand the profession in its many facets. The feminist historical reflection that we propose is based on the idea that combining the production of knowledge and professional practices is crucial to change gender biases and women’s oppression in both fields.*

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**Keywords:** feminist historiography, Portugal, women architects

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In 1973, the American architect Denise Scott Brown presented a lecture for the Alliance of Women in Architecture, in New York, on sexism and the star system in architecture. Sixteen years later, when she wrote about her participation on this subject, among other interesting observations, she stated that the first context – sexism – caused her to be seen as the “scribe, typist, and photographer” of her husband, Robert Venturi, while

the second – the star system – turned the staff into “second bananas” or “pencils.”<sup>1</sup> The relationships that characterize the various partnerships within architectural practices are traditionally founded on extremely hierarchical power relations, which have consequences in terms of work recognition both inside and outside the profession. The critical and thoughtful narrative she produces is a lucid cry about a commonplace reality that is still not sufficiently discussed within the profession. She starts by telling about who she was and her status before marrying and working with Venturi and ends with the process of becoming an architect’s wife in the eyes of most magazines, criticism, and history. In the 1970s, those multiple hierarchies and power relations had particularly damaging repercussions for female architects’ lives, and the same is true today.

## CONTEXTS

Not all women architects have the historical and critical consciousness shown in this text written by Denise Scott Brown. From the normalization of worsening difficulties to the omission of the real obstacles keeping women from wholly embracing their profession, the individual stories indicate a multitude of strategies for minimizing these constraints, at both a personal and collective level. Even if this reflection is situated in a western context, there are transnational and transcultural aspects of these stories that are, and still represent, the “natural” path of any woman architect. The ongoing research project W@ARCH.PT (“Women Architects in Portugal: Building Visibility,” 1942-1986) initially stemmed from an awareness about these systematic omissions.

In Portugal, the contribution of women architects for the progress and development of the practice, research, and education is far from being properly identified, reflected on, and disseminated. Moreover, the lack of attention paid to them in the historiography of architecture, both nationally and internationally, gives rise to a flawed conception of the discipline, maintaining the inequalities between peers and hindering the recognition of these professionals.<sup>2</sup> Portuguese feminist research on architecture and cities is equally rare, creating a fragmented, insufficient, and unsystematic universe of contributions concerning the practices and reflections of women architects. Considering this context, W@ARCH.PT generally strives to consolidate this purpose, both preparing arguments and contents that contribute to the democratization of the history of Portuguese architecture and the expansion of feminist studies of the discipline, and engaging in an effective effort to give visibility and disseminate the contributions of women architects as references.

Given Portugal’s geographical and cultural specificities – a small, periphery country in Southern Europe, which has experienced almost five decades of dictatorship in the first half of the twentieth century – this research project has two specific goals. On the one hand, it aims to outline a critical feminist methodological framework that can be applied to the history of architecture,

questioning the historiographies and theories thought as a classic. This approximation entails the production of a situated body of knowledge (i.e., the construction of a critical feminist view that takes the Portuguese context into account and intends to create alternative perspectives and practices). On the other hand, based on the previous point, it attempts to identify “who?”, “when?”, and “how?” Portuguese women architects contributed to the construction of the discipline, between 1942 and 1986, and what effective impact they had in the architectural discourses that followed. The period researched begins in 1942, when Maria José Estanco, the first woman to obtain a degree in architecture, completed her studies in the School of Fine Arts in Lisbon.<sup>3</sup> It concludes with 1986 when Portugal joined the European Economic Community, a crucial year in the history of the country when there was an explosion and mass proliferation of public and private architecture schools. Within this timeline, there are important events in the history of 20th-century Portuguese architecture, namely, in 1948 when the National Architecture Congress took place, or, in the post-revolution period with the SAAL (Ambulatory Service for Local Support) housing projects of 1974-1976. The role of women architects in these and other events, for the most part, has not been mapped, analyzed, and problematized yet – an absent presence in the dominant disciplinary discourses. Without a better understanding of who intervened and who was rendered invisible in the architectural context, a real development of the discipline remains impossible. Knowledge is essential if we want to give visibility to the silenced and expand their right to become an integral part of what it is to be a male or female architect. In this reframing of women as protagonists of history, it is crucial to consider other lines and processes of approximation to the data, facts, and actresses/actors.

Taking place over the following two years, the procedures of W@ARCH.PT are directly related to the intended results and dissemination.<sup>4</sup> In this first phase, we will perform basic tasks, such as outlining and implementing the various platforms of digital communication (website, social media, mailing list, etc.), drafting agreements with archives and other institutions that make primary research possible, as well as designing and testing the biographical database. Although it was not in the original plans, at the end of the first year of work, we co-organized the summer school “Cities and Gender: Perspectives and Strategies” (Fig. 1). The brainchild of the W@ARCH.PT and two projects created by the Women in Architecture association – “Gender at School!” and “ACTION! Gendered Cities Workshop” – the summer school strives to intersect the various invisibilities found in city spaces – of the women who create them, and of those who live in them – with the reactions to this partial existence of bodies and lives in collective spaces. Under the theme “invisibilities and representations” W@ARCH.PT was responsible for the organization of the first day of work. Besides a lecture on the W@ARCH.PT’s goals and contributions in rescuing Portuguese women architects from oblivion, the architect and researcher Daniela Arias, who was a consultant on this project, has also participated.<sup>5</sup>

She discussed the more general effacing of women in the twentieth-century international histories of architecture, which are considered classic and still dominate the bibliographies studied in universities.

In the second part of the project, we will undertake tasks that implement and develop the fieldwork. On the one hand, we will perform archival



Figure 1. Cities and Gender Summer School: Perspectives and Strategies' poster.



research as extensively as possible. On the other hand, we will begin interviewing trained Portuguese women architects, with their different practices, whom we have highlighted in our chronology (Fig. 2). We will first interview older women, as well as those whose life and work experiences deviate more strongly from the mainstream examples. Combining institutional data with interviews is crucial for perceiving and



Figure 2. Helena Roseta being interviewed, Lisbon, November 2019.

understanding the nuances and diversity found in these narratives, thus counteracting the aforementioned hegemony that characterizes the history of architecture. This intermediate period will close with the organization, at the end of 2020, of the V International Congress of Architecture and Gender – “Action! Feminisms and the Spatialization of Rights.” Since our team has participated and/or helped organize these congresses since their origin in 2014 in Seville, Spain, this opportunity to share strategies, areas of interest, and research work done by professionals and academics from different continents and backgrounds will lead to a critical improvement of the W@ARCH.PT’s strategies and goals, in a context of development that combines gender issues with architecture and the city.<sup>6</sup> The expansion of national and international networks has always been an essential piece in consolidating large work fronts, as well as playing a crucial role in the moments of isolation to which these studies are sometimes subjected within academia and the profession at large.

Finally, the project will end with the dissemination of the different outputs regarding women architects, the narratives studied, and the general results obtained with this research. As mentioned before, since reaching diverse audiences is a priority for W@ARCH.PT, the gathered data will be publicized in equally diverse formats. This includes an exhibition with an accompanying bilingual catalog – Portuguese and English – and documentary which will take place in tandem with the uploading of contents onto our website. These four productions will interact with each other, but we also hope they will assume autonomous existences and have the capacity to engage in a dialogue with diverse audiences. To these results others will be added, more academic in nature, which we expect to be produced along the way: dissertations and theses, articles and chapters, conferences and books. Here, too, the digital platforms will be essential in guaranteeing the dissemination of all these productions.

Since it was conceived in different phases and over several years, a few relevant decisions concerning W@ARCH.PT's goals and methodologies arose almost intuitively, resulting from the identification of flagrant omissions and lacunae. A first draft of the problem, which resulted in the initial work program, happened gradually and empirically. However, if we look at it from a distance, it also reflects a transference of methodological experiences involved in developing an architectural project. The production of knowledge and architectural and urban solutions involves answering complex problems, founded on multiple variables that are difficult to objectify. Composing historical narratives about gradual trials and errors, by gathering emanations from the world and intersecting with a subject and a particular worldview often depends on methodological approaches to the making of architecture.

The explanation of the goals, strategies, and research output, even if brief, is critical in understanding the issues this article is trying to reflect on.

The relationship that is gradually formed, as a work in progress, between these three dimensions — goals, strategies, and outputs — is grounded on concepts, theories/epistemologies, and methodologies that strive to offer a possible answer to the question of what is feminist historiography, in this case, applied to the Portuguese context.

## PATHS OF REFLECTIONS AND ACTION

Going back to Denise Scott Brown's voice and 1973 lecture, one form of oppression mentioned by the American architect is what she calls "the growing experience with incorrect attributions."<sup>7</sup> She found it both in practice and in the theoretical production of architecture, areas where she developed a significant and prolific body of work. Over four decades later, at the beginning of 2019, when the Portuguese architect Célia Gomes was asked by the Portuguese magazine *arqa* about the lack of visibility of women architects in specialized media, she answered incisively, turning the question and attributing responsibility back to the interviewer. In this

way, she questioned the magazine about its editorial criteria and lack of preoccupation with equal representation in the work that it publishes.<sup>8</sup> In the issue dedicated to women architects, these fundamental provocations remain unanswered.<sup>9</sup> We cannot find self-critical discourses or strategies for overcoming the obvious “male bias” that gradually takes up the non-thematic issues of the magazine in either the editorial or the actual articles.

This exceptionality and superficiality in the treatment of patriarchal issues within the profession, instead of helping to change practices, serve to absolve consciences. Hence the pressing need to make the feminist roots of our critical thought and action clear, to counteract the silencing and appropriation of struggles, as mentioned by Jane Rendell. Or, as she noted, quoting the Guerrilla Girls, the danger of “seeing your ideas live on in others,”<sup>10</sup> as an appropriated thing, flags seized opportunistically and superficially. Intersecting the chronological time that separates these two architects’ statements with the strangely perennial questions raised by both, we identify a paradox: five decades might feel like too long for those who fight, and still not be enough to reach results and conquests. Therefore, reinforcing everyday experiences of sexism, as well as public ones in regard to what is established, published, and disseminated, the seed of effacement takes root and makes clear the current relevance of the demands and experiences narrated in the early 1970s. Part of this research will take place between these two spheres: the inner and private experience of the profession, and its exterior and visible experience. Building everyday life as a possible space of repeated exposure to oppressive situations,<sup>11</sup> like sexism or even misogyny, here we give visibility to narrated experiences. Naturalized oppressive conditions should never be considered as mere anecdotes. Instead, the so-called small stories must have absolute relevance, through the voices of the interviewed subjects.

The permanent exposure to these has consequences in the visible space of the profession. Recognition and existence in the context of the media, decision-making positions, and the portrayal of architects as “experts,” reflect power structures prevailing inside and outside of the profession. Plus, this is also true in the teaching of architecture as the continuation of professional practices that in turn contribute to their perpetuation. The relations between academia – research and education – and practice are close and feed off each other. When it comes to the intersection of feminism and space, they are still very conservative and impervious to the issues created by them, at least in the Portuguese context. Therefore, as we have mentioned before, one of our defining strategies is the consideration of subjects as fundamental voices. The proposed historiography, among other variables, demands that these primordial subjects be women architects.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, this work follows a theoretical tradition that “privileges women’s issues, voices, and lived experiences.”<sup>13</sup> It unequivocally places itself along a line of historical feminist thought, framed by Judith M. Bennett’s clear definition, according to which feminist history is that whose work of

making history is traversed by a preoccupation with the past and present of women's oppression.<sup>14</sup>

The inclusion of women architects in the history of the profession, if seen as our only goal, could be reduced to a tradition strictly aligned with a feminist empiricism that fights against androcentrism and the "male bias."<sup>15</sup> Even though this is an important and relevant part of our work, we intend to go beyond this level of critique to the production of knowledge within the discipline. Another critical perspective pertains to the positivist belief that truth rests on two fundamental principles: the objectivity and universality of knowledge.<sup>16</sup> The latter is increasingly called into question and its relevance to the creation of knowledge dismantled, when we consider the diverse universes on which we reflect and act. The former demands a more thorough analysis. On the one hand, we will briefly follow the historian Joan Scott, who mentions the need to unpack the ideological dimension of the "male bias" present in objectivity, underlining the incompleteness and exclusivity of the "mainstream history" that it entails.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Sandra Harding critically and propositionally says that objectivity is a supposed guarantee of neutrality in science and the production of knowledge. But, for this author, what it does is reinforce a bias that strongly supports male and Eurocentric policies.<sup>18</sup> Instead of proposing relativism as an alternative to objectivity, she defends the idea that neutrality is not only unnecessary or unhelpful but, on the contrary, can be an obstacle to the maximization of objectivity. In the end, it results in the distortion that multiple and unchallenged biases can bring to research work.<sup>19</sup> Without developing these critiques of objectivity, we stress, however, the need to redefine and propose other objectivities, which we mention here.

As for the positivist perspective, we also believe that the dichotomy rational/emotional reduces the complexity that preoccupies us and that presents itself in a system of nuances at multiple levels. We expand this critique to all the binaries that appear, in various ways, in this research, such as exterior/interior, or public/private. Besides the issues intrinsic to the oppositions themselves, as creators of reductions, it is also crucial to question the hierarchy that generally organizes this dichotomous way of understanding reality. The reason behind the need for dichotomies will have to be deconstructed and understood too. The conception driving the organization of the world into poles will be analyzed in itself; moreover, we will try to understand if these poles are seen as complementary or opposite. All of these conceptual constructions organize specific ways of viewing the world and the subjects, and, for this reason, their problematization will be one of the issues addressed in our work.

Based on the arguments of Joan W. Scott, we are interested in a history that goes beyond description. We prefer a history that is inspired by theoretical analyses and questions, or, as the author says, we want to use history to think theoretically.<sup>20</sup> For Scott, the historical proposal must emerge as a critical operation, which interrogates concepts and strives to



question the present.<sup>21</sup> This is the only way we can understand academic work as relevant: making histories always with the goal of using “gender as a lens through which to focus on the social issues.”<sup>22</sup>

As we have learned with Denise Scott Brown, among others, feminist questions have intersected with the field of architecture for over four decades now, even if not as fast or as intensely as in other areas of thought and knowledge. A change in the development of this critical and disciplinary intersection took place at the end of the twentieth century. There has also been a progressive geographical expansion in language visibility, with the inclusion of other spaces besides the western Anglosphere – where most of the studies on this issue are produced – which contribute with new perspectives on this intersection.

As mentioned by Jane Rendell, the 1990s were marked by feminist projects in architectural practices and ideas, with essential and extensive contributions for the discipline.<sup>23</sup> We have directly inherited some of the concerns that these new ways of questioning and acting have brought to architecture: among others, on the one hand, the practice of procedures informed by a political understanding of subjectivity and, on the other hand, a critique of rigid disciplinary borders. Moving forward to the twenty-first century, and still following Rendell, we identify with the conditions of current relevance and need for a future presented by this author in 2011, which are still fundamental and urgent today. Firstly, the recognition of the international aspects of feminist struggles, when faced with a transglobal power, either by domination or resistance. This gives rise to the relationship between macro and micro-scales, the north and south of feminist struggles. In this context, the legacy of feminist actions needs to establish itself in three main spheres: ecology, energy, and economy.<sup>24</sup> Less than a decade after this text, we realize how essential and interconnected these spheres are. The urgency and assertiveness of feminist struggles against the intersection of these fronts are proven every day – one only has to read the news. Looking at Brazil, we find side by side, the criminal destruction of the Amazon rainforest, the expansion of large-scale agricultural businesses that profit from deforestation, and the struggle of indigenous and rural women. All of these took place in a dramatic moment and call for resistance: the Margaridas’ March or the first March for Indigenous Women are good examples. If the forces at play are seemingly very unequal, the transglobality of resistance mentioned by Rendell gives the Brazilian women who marched in the country’s capital, in August 2019, a unique, symbolic power – but that is not all.<sup>25</sup> These fights made visible in Brasília, a territory of power, by women who defend their vital and communal space, the forest and the rural spaces where they live, but who also draw attention to the need to stop destroying the planet, can be the most powerful and inspiring image for future feminist actions and reflections.

## BRIEF AND NOT-SO-FINAL NOTES

Returning to the Portuguese history of architecture and considering that the identification and reflection on women architects, cities, architectures, and women, only appear (rudimentarily and as an autonomous subject) since 2010,<sup>26</sup> this ongoing research project is going through a particularly challenging moment. International experiences, as well as various feminist theories and epistemologies inhabited by historical and architectural questions, are a fertile and stimulating field. The production of a history of architecture that eschews the established commonplaces (e.g., the idea of unique authorship, the star system, and so-called exceptional work as the only one worthy of making it into the history of architecture) together with the fight against the silencing of women architects, are some of the issues that we intend to contribute to through our studies and reflections. Besides expanding and diversifying references in terms of who the makers are, it is equally important to expand and diversify the references concerning what the profession can be and how it can be practiced.

The experiences of the subjects should be given the same importance as institutional or other similar data, rejecting the condition of (irrelevant) exceptionality, usually relegated to a secondary role in academia. In this way, we want to build continuity between spheres that are still seen as subjective, and therefore invalid, and those considered relevant thanks to their supposed objectivity. Archives, studies, and publications have historically made invisible, in various ways, a significant part of those who have contributed to the profession, including women. Believing these are the only forms of gathering material for historical construction is to condone the reproduction of the patriarchal worldview as the only acceptable one. The full existence of the physical and intellectual bodies of women architects, as well as the production that emanates from these bodies, are the driving forces behind this work. Besides being identified, seen, heard, and introduced to the world, we must understand the many ways in which these contributions have been silenced, both in the past and in the present, and how they operate. Only by understanding the mechanisms at play, by looking at the institutions and individual bodies/voices can we build a historical and theoretical analysis capable of acting on the reproduction of various forms of oppression.

## Notes

1. Denise Scott Brown, "Room at the Top?," in *Architecture. A Place for Women*, ed. Ellen Perry Berkeley and Matilda McQuaid (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 237-46.
2. See Daniela Arias Laurino, "La construcción del relato arquitectónico y las arquitectas de la modernidade: un análisis feminista de la historiografía" (PhD diss., Technical University of Catalonia, Sp., 2018).
3. For more information on Maria José Estanco see: Joana Roxo, "A Senhora Arquitecto: Maria José Estanco" (master's diss., ISCTE-IULisbon, Port., 2016).
4. Team: Patrícia Santos Pedrosa, Anália Torres, Lia Antunes, Maria Helena Souto, Jorge Figueira, Rita Ochôa, Eliana Sousa Santos, Luís Urbano, and Filipa Roseta.
5. "Cidades e Género: Perspectivas e Estratégias. Escola de Verão," *Facebook*, accessed July 20, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/EVCidadesGenero/>.
6. See Nuria Alvarez Lombardero et.al., "Congresos Internacionales de Arquitectura y Género: Innovando y Reconectando - International Congresses in Architecture and Gender: Innovating and Reconnecting," *Hábitat y Sociedad* 11 (November 2018): 239-47.
7. Scott Brown, "Room at the Top?"
8. Victor Neves, "Reflexões para a profissão no feminino," *arqa* 134 (April-June 2019): 97.
9. Ibid.
10. Jane Rendell, "Critical Spatial Practices: Setting Out a Feminist Approach to Some Modes and What Matters in Architecture," in *Feminist Practices. Interdisciplinary Approaches to Women in Architecture*, ed. Lori A. Brown (London: Routledge, 2011), 40.
11. Grada Kilomba, *Memórias da Plantação. Episódios de Racismo Quotidiano* (Lisbon: Orfeu Negro, 2019), 82.
12. Given the historical context of this research, the work on "women" as subjects seems crucial. The use of binaries is assumed as part of strategic and contextual decisions, not as an absolute and definite stance.
13. Sharlene Hesse-Biber, "A Re-Invitation to Feminist Research," in *Feminist Research Practice. A Primer*, ed. Sharlene Hesse-Biber (London: SAGE, 2014), 3.
14. Judith M. Bennett, "Feminism and History," *Gender and History* 1, no. 3 (Autumn 1989): 253.
15. Nancy Naples and Barb Gurr, "Feminist Empiricism and Standpoint Theory: Approaches to Understanding the World," in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, ed. Sharlene Hesse-Biber (London: SAGE, 2014), 16.
16. Hesse-Biber, "A Re-Invitation," 4-5.
17. Joan Scott, quoted by Nancy Naples and Barb Gurr, "Feminist Empiricism and Standpoint Theory," 18.
18. Sandra Harding, "'Strong Objectivity': A Response to the New Objectivity Question," *Synthese* 104, no. 3 (September 1995): 331-49.
19. Harding, "Strong Objectivity."
20. Claudia Bacci and Joan Wallach Scott, "Historia, feminismo y política: una entrevista con Joan Wallach Scott," *Rey Desnudo* 2, no. 4 (Autumn 2014): 106.
21. Ibid.
22. Hesse-Biber, "A Re-Invitation," 3.
23. Rendell, "Critical Spatial Practices," 19.
24. Rendell, "Critical Spatial Practices," 41.
25. See, for example: Júlia Zaremb, "Marchas de mulheres indígenas e camponesas se unem em pressão a Bolsonaro," *Folha de São Paulo* (Brazil), August 14, 2019, accessed September 1, 2019, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2019/08/marchas-de-mulheres-indigenas-e-camponesas-se-unem-em-pressao-a-bolsonaro.shtml>.
26. In 2010, the magazine *Joelho* published an issue dedicated to women, edited by Jorge Figueira. That same year Patrícia Santos Pedrosa published "Being a Female Architect in Portugal: A Short Introduction to a Long Ride." See: *Joelho: Mulheres na Arquitectura* 1, University of Coimbra, Port. (March 2010), and Patrícia Santos Pedrosa, "Being a Female Architect in Portugal: A Short Introduction to a Long Ride" (CD of papers, 1<sup>st</sup> International Meeting EAHN European Architectural History Network, Guimarães, Port.: CHAM, EAUM, EAHN, 2010), 234-40.

## Acknowledgments

The research project W@ARCH.PT (Women Architects in Portugal: Building Visibility, 1942-1986) [PTDC/ART-DAQ/32388/2017] has financial support of FCT (Fundação da Ciência e Tecnologia /MCTES-Port.).

## Credits

Figure 1: Poster by Margarida Ornelas, 2019.

Figure 2: Photo by José Nuno Pereira, 2019.

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