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A New Research Project on Gender and Practice

Riesto, Svava; Steiner, Henriette

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Feature

Women in Danish Architecture: A New Research Project on Gender and Practice

Svava Riesto and Henriette Steiner, Section for Landscape Architecture and Planning, University of Copenhagen

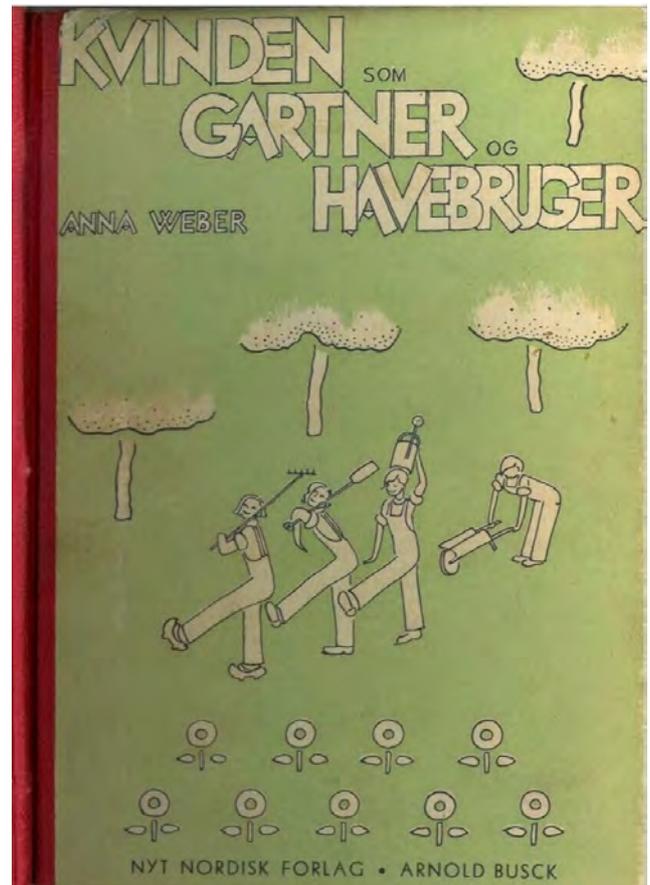
The role played by women design professionals in shaping the modern Danish welfare state has long been ignored, while a select band of male architects is ceaselessly glorified. This alternative archive aims to recover their contributions in all disciplines – bringing to light parallel career paths, collaborative work practices and rejection of gender boundaries – but it also hopes to inspire diverse, equitable and sustainable spatial practices for the future.

During the 20th century, Denmark became internationally known for its architecture, design, landscapes and planning. Design professionals created an entirely new built environment, designing everything from furniture to urban spaces for the new life of the modern welfare state – designs that most Danes still use every day. These designs were made by many different kinds of people: men, women, practitioners from different design fields. Thus, the buildings, landscapes and cities of 20th-century Denmark were born of diverse collaborations.

This makes us wonder why history books about Danish architecture are usually dominated by one kind of person: male architects. According to the historians, a small group of men – including well-known figures such as Arne Jacobsen, Jørn Utzon and Kay Fisker – seem to have created all of these striking furnishings, buildings, urban spaces and landscapes all by themselves. The narrow scope of this history is surprising considering that Denmark is often hailed for its gender equality and its role in the women's movement.

In our research project *Women in Danish Architecture* (University of Copenhagen, 2020–23), we want to widen the scope of this story. Our focus is on the contributions of the many women design professionals whose work has been largely forgotten. We research the period from 1925 to 1975, when the first generations of women entered design fields in Denmark. These women were diverse, and their work brings to light alternative stories of architectural practice that do not emphasise individual creativity alone as a driver of change. Instead, they highlight alternative career paths and collaborative work forms.

Our research task is urgent. The legacy of the 20th-century Danish welfare state is currently being restructured and often demolished. We believe that a more just and comprehensive understanding of the forces that massively changed Danish cities and landscapes in the 20th century will enable us to make better choices regarding that legacy's future: how to adapt it to meet future needs, take account of inclusivity and social and environmental justice, and promote more equitable spatial practices.



Weber's study, *Kvinden som Gartner og Havebruger*, shows that although women may be marginalised in written history, they constituted a diverse and active group in the fields of gardening and garden design during the early 1930s.

Queering the Story of Danish Architecture and Design

Once we started digging in the archives, seeking documents that would tell us about women's contribution to the design disciplines, a book from 1933 caught our attention. Like us, this book examined questions of gender and landscape practice. Its author, horticulturist Anna Weber, taught garden art on the same Copenhagen campus where we work today on the academic landscape-architecture programme. Weber's book is called *Kvinden som Gartner og Havebruger* (*The Woman as Gardener and Horticulturist*) and it asks whether women can be gardeners. Practical knowledge of gardening was a prerequisite for would-be garden designers at the time, just as a crafts education was a prerequisite for architecture students.



Glad og tilfreds i Overalls.



En i Plus four og en i Overalls.

*'Contented and satisfied in overalls'; 'One in plus fours and one in overalls'. In her book, Weber asked her female colleagues, 'What outfit do you consider most appropriate for work?' 62 of the 75 women preferred menswear over the traditional dress and white coat. By menswear, they primarily meant overalls and plus fours. Picture from *Kvinden som Gartner og Havebruger*, p. 53.*

Weber's book shows that there were already many women in the field. She interviewed 89 women gardeners - one of them a garden designer - along with their male colleagues. These women wore overalls like men (much more practical for work than dresses, as they note in the book), and they did not want to be labelled 'weak': they felt they were just as agile and skilled as men were. They told Weber that gardening required a willingness to do hard physical labour, of which they were perfectly capable even though it did not fit feminine stereotypes. But they also said that it required empathy with the natural world - a trait not widely considered 'masculine'. Thus, Weber's book resists the stereotyping of women and men, and discusses what we today might call queer or non-binary gender. The book demonstrates that although women are marginal in the profession's written history, they comprised a diverse and active group in the field of gardening - and increasingly also in garden design - during the early 1930s. This leads us to assume that the same applied to other design fields in Denmark at this period. It is high time to continue Weber's call for an emphasis on women's contributions to the history of Danish architecture in the 20th century.

A New Story About Danish Welfare Architecture

In our preliminary research, we have found that large numbers of women contributed significantly to the massive realisation of affordable housing, public institutions, new public landscapes and large-scale planning that began between the two world wars and took off during the 1960s and 1970s. Women architects helped to shape the Danish welfare state as we know it. They worked on all scales, from new kitchens to large park systems and motorways. They contributed as planners and educators, activists and publishers, promoting new types of spaces for contemporary living.



Architects Ragna Grubb, Karen Hvistendahl and Ingeborg Schmidt (left to right) with their winning proposal for a new floor plan for families with multiple children in Kantorparken, Copenhagen, 1937.

Illustration: Royal Danish Library and Aftenbladet.

The aim of our project is not to add these women to the list of hero figures that we know from many established architectural histories. We want to write a history that is more diverse and nuanced. To begin, we will unearth and share stories about women who were active in the design disciplines, including disciplines that are sometimes considered less prestigious, such as horticulture and landscape – the disciplines of Weber’s interviewees. We will show that women architects’ contributions grew out of a context that was at once historical,

political, personal, natural and ecological. We propose to bring to light alternative practices and ways of thinking about architecture that are hidden in the period's untold histories – alternatives which, like those in Weber's account, transgress binaries such as either/or, useful/useless, sustainable/unsustainable or male/female. Alternatives that are inclusive, considerate, messy, rich, and maybe even queer.

Creating New Archives

As architectural historians, we use archives, written documents and built structures as sources for our research. So what can we do when the documents of the past are missing from official archives? In this project, we will build our own alternative archive. For example, we will collect oral histories through interviews with people who worked in architecture, design and planning during the period under study, or who knew women that did so. We will document buildings and landscapes through film, photography and sound. To do this, we will rely on collaborations. We have brought together a fabulous multidisciplinary team, and we are reaching out to the public and the international research community. By acknowledging that designs grow out of wide, collaborative contexts involving many different people and forms of practice, we believe that we can promote and inspire more diverse, equitable and therefore sustainable spatial practices for the future.

We look forward to sharing our work with you as it progresses. You can follow it on our website www.womenindanisharchitecture.dk, where we will share our archive, showcase our ongoing research, and invite you into the process.

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The project is co-led by architectural historians Svava Riesto and Henriette Steiner. The project team comprises visual designer Liv Lovetand, architectural historian Jannie Bendsen, communications officer Mathilde Merolli, and research assistants Frida Irving Soltoft and Mathilde Lundt Larsen.



Sources

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Women's History Month • Feminist architectural history • Queer History • Danish Architecture • Anna Weber • Garden Design • Women in Danish Architecture

