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# A 'powerful, creative history': the reticence of women architects to donate their professional records to archival repositories

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*This paper arose in response to observing the frustration expressed by researchers that there were so few accessible documents from which to write biographies of early women architects, planners and designers. As an archivist, it is a disheartening experience to explain to users that, because of limited donations, few such records exist in archival collections. Exemplifying the current predicament is the absence of the architectural work of the first woman officially qualified in South Australia, Beverly Bolin, from any archival collection in her own name. Moreover, extant items that were uncovered about Beverley Bolin, following months of searching, spoke more of her personal, than of her professional life. This led to the question: where are the professional records of women architects and why have they not donated their records to archival repositories? Through a survey of literature and the author's own direct observation as manager of an archival collection specialising in architecture, this paper discusses possible reasons and offers potential strategies to attract future donations.*

**Keywords:** women; architects; archives; history; acquisitions; drawings

## Introduction

'No documents – no history';[1] these words of French historian Fustel de Coulanges were often quoted by American historian Mary Ritter Beard, who, in the 1930s, attempted to create a World Centre for Women's Archives, in order to preserve the documentary heritage of women.[2] Indeed, the archive's motto was to have been: 'No documents – no history', however, a failure to raise enough support ended the attempt in 1940. In her later book *Women as Force in History*, published in 1946, Beard illuminated her belief in the need for such preservation of documents, with an argument that:

> Women have been active, assertive, competent contributors to their societies, but … [t]he very idea of women's oppression takes hold of women's minds and oppresses them. But women could be freed from the ideological bondage by discovering their own powerful, creative history and using that knowledge to create new social relations.[3]

Mary Beard's published works were significant in their demonstration of the integral part that women had played in the development of the world's history. Among such

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women were those in South Australia, who were given both the right to vote and the opportunity to stand for election to the House of Assembly in 1895. Moreover, women in South Australia were graduating from university from 1885 onwards.[4] Yet, within the sphere of the architectural profession, women seemed to be missing.

## Finding the gap: the extent of the problem

Bronwyn Hanna opened her PhD thesis on the historiography of early women architects in New South Wales with the words: 'Early women architects are virtually absent from architectural history in Australia'.[5] She further noted, 'even highly-educated people may still struggle to come up with the name of a single woman architect in the history of the world'.[6] Following a search of the established Australian architectural history texts, journals and magazines from the twentieth century, Hanna found 'very few mentions of Australian women architects'.[7] While lists of graduates, registered architects, members of the institutes of architects and census statistics allowed Hanna to catalogue women architects, it was only through the conduct of oral histories and formal questionnaires that she was able to shed light on the women identified. Given the absence of other resources, this is a common recourse by historians of women and their work.[8]

Architectural historian Julie Willis recorded that '[t]he involvement of women in architecture in Australia has long occurred in an amateur sense, but in a professional capacity only since the start of the 20th century'.[9] In South Australia, this emergence was later than the other states, which has the unintended benefit that several of these women are still alive and practising their profession. The main published architectural history for South Australia is Michael Page's 1986 *Sculptors in Space: South Australian Architects 1836–1986*, the text of which only names Beverly Bolin, Elizabeth Wood, Ruth Finlayson, Marjorie Simpson and Mrs JM Fritzsche as women in the profession. Page noted that there were 'only 12 women practitioners out of 322 architects on the active list in 1984'.[10] This can be seen to be representative of the situation in South Australia, as it wasn't until 1948 that the first woman architectural graduate, Beverley Bolin, gained a qualification from the combined South Australian School of Mines and Industries and University of Adelaide architecture course.[11] In 2011, of the 782 registered architects in South Australia, 116 were female – a proportion of 15%.[12] The historical 'Architects of South Australia' online database currently contains the biographies of 89 architects, but only two of these are women.[13]

There is a growing recognition of women architects' contributions to the history of our built environment. In addition to Brownyn Hanna, scholars working to correct the record include Leonie Matthews, whose work focused on women architects in Western Australia;[14] Judith McKay, who wrote an article on early Queensland women architects;[15] Julie Willis, whose PhD thesis presented a description of the careers of women who had qualified as architects in Victoria between 1905 and 1955[16] and, more broadly, Willis's 1997 statistical survey of registered women architects in Australia.[17] In the recently published *Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*, of the 563 entries on individual architects, 16 were of women. Notable entries included Marion Mahony Griffin, co-designer of the city of Canberra, Florence Taylor, architect and publisher of the popular journal *Building*, and Ellison Harvie, hospital architect. Also included within the *Encyclopaedia* was an entry on 'Women in Architecture'.[18]

Unlike most women architects of the past, the two Australian pioneers, Florence Taylor and Marion Mahony Griffin, did leave substantive archives for future generations to examine. As Hanna noted:

> Of all the women architects studied in this thesis, only the first to qualify, Florence Taylor and Marion Mahony Griffin, produced extensive autobiographical writings, suggesting that they both had an acute awareness of their role as 'pioneer'. None of the women architects in NSW following Taylor and Griffin have so far involved themselves in comparable practices of self-representation. Indeed few seem to have made or kept documentation of their careers or achievements in any form.[19]

Thus, with past women architects having been reticent to leave papers, there is little precedent to follow for those practising today.

## What are architectural records and who uses them?

Architectural records comprise drawings, specifications, photos, slides, practice or business records, personal papers and ephemera. Architectural drawings are important, as they can 'reflect the social, economic, personal and cultural factors at work during a building's creation'.[20] They have been said to be able to 'reveal the state of mind of the drawer and the state of graphic and spatial perception of the contemporaneous culture'.[21] As such, they are widely accessed by a number of different users of archives, from family, local and house historians to heritage architects, building owners and social and cultural historians. Barbara Van Bronswijk believes that this is due to 'the key role of buildings in our society and the multiple layers of information contained on architectural drawings'.[22]

### *General preservation challenges*

Although architects produce copious amounts of documents, especially with the increasing ease of production availed by digital plan printing over the last 15 years, many of these sets of drawings and specifications do not reach the archives. Sets of drawings used for development approval lodged with statutory authorities that demonstrate the intended building at planning stage are often held as current records for a time, but may not achieve permanent record status. Copies used during the construction phase on-site become muddied and damaged and are usually disposed of once the builders and contractors have finished construction. The client's copies are held during the life of the building, which may be as short as 30 years. Often they are disposed of or become lost when the building changes owners or tenants. Large architectural firms, which can afford recordkeeping staff and bulk storage, vary in the range and age of documents they keep. Some hold 'heritage' drawings collections, while some dispose of records once they are legally able to do so. Smaller architectural practices may keep their records while their partners are intact, but on dissolution, records are often divided, and many architects take them home to be stored under the house, in the shed or in the spare room. However, the sheer size and bulkiness of rolled or flattened plans mean that the drawings are often the first records to be disposed of once the architect has passed away or moved house. An additional problem is that records that are not printed, but which are stored digitally in computer aided design (CAD) files, may become difficult to access once CAD software becomes outdated.

### *Australian repositories collecting architectural records*

In Australia, the only archives devoted solely to the collection of these specialist records is the Architecture Museum in the School of Art, Architecture and Design at

the University of South Australia. The Architecture Museum was established to acquire, collect and preserve documents and related material relevant to architects, planners and associated professionals. Currently, the Architecture Museum holds some 200,000 documents relating to over a hundred individuals and firms, including drawings, personal papers, photos, slides, practice records, books, journals, ephemera and draughting equipment. In South Australia, other repositories housing privately practising architects' records include the State Library of South Australia, as well as local city council archives, such as the Adelaide City Council Archives. The State Library of South Australia included 'architectural plans and drawings' as a collection priority in its *Collection Development Policy*.[23] Aside from these larger institutions, many small multipurpose archives belonging to schools, churches, businesses and other interest groups also hold architectural records relating to their own organisation. Some architectural practices also maintain their own archives, such as Woods Bagot Architects in Adelaide, whose historic collection dates back to the nineteenth century. The collections of work by government architects fall under the auspices of the State Records of South Australia or the National Archives of Australia. Many of the organisations that collect architectural documents are members of the International Confederation of Architectural Museums (ICAM) Australasia – a body which meets annually to exchange information about collection policies, activities and other matters of common interest.[24]

Architects, and more broadly built environment professionals, are familiar with the concept of cultural heritage, especially as it pertains to buildings, sites and landscapes. They are also often users of archives in their search for the documents related to these places, such as plans, specifications, photos, correspondence and papers of the creators, knowing that, with these documents, a richer story can begin to be told. Here, future researchers' priorities are dependent on architectural collections: it could be about the knowledge state of the era regarding climate or materials; it could be about the expression of ethnicity within and across place; or it could be how, based on planning, a community's health was improved or worsened. Equally, the researcher may seek to examine issues of power and its structuration within a society, a profession or a family, or they may be involved in writing a biography of the creator of an architectural work. Archived documents can enhance all these stories.

## Traces of South Australian women architects

At first, it appears that the Architecture Museum has only two women represented in its named collections – Marjorie Simpson, whose records are held in the Simpson and Simpson collection, and that of draughtswoman Margaret Wollaston, whose student work is held within the Wollaston collection. Yet, by digging a little deeper, glimpses of the influence and representations of women appear in other collections of the Architecture Museum. Evidence of women involved in the designing of the built environment is also scattered throughout the collections of other repositories not specifically focused on this subject matter, these being libraries, galleries, archives, universities and museums.

The earliest reference to a South Australian woman in professional practice is a 'Girl Architect' from Burra, Mabel Dunstan, who began studying architecture with her father, builder and architect John Dunstan, in 1903. According to press reports, by 1913, she had 'acquired such proficiency that she takes sole charge of the office in her father's absence', and 'Mr Dunstan thinks his daughter's skill and quickness in creating designs for desirable houses justifies his leaving the domestic architecture to her … Her

father, … is a firm believer in women architects'.[25] Around 1904, Mabel arrived in Sydney with her father to work as an architect designing 'houses with labour-saving details for women who will cast aside sex prejudice and accept a woman's advice'.[26] By 1924, it was recorded that Mabel Dunstan was a draughtswoman at the Newcastle Steel Works.[27] However, as Mabel Dunstan received no formal training and appears not to have joined any institute or become registered, the empirical evidence is unavailable, add this to a lack of any personal or professional documentation lodged in her own name in any archives or library, and the record of her work over at least 20 years of her career is invisible. To date, all that has been discovered are three newspaper reports accessible through the National Library of Australia's digitisation of Australian newspapers website.[28]

Of those who did follow the path of formal training towards becoming an architect in South Australia was Esther Legoe, who attended the South Australian School of Mines and Industries from 1917, receiving an award for best student work. She was also an articled pupil in the office of Woods, Bagot, Jory and Laybourne Smith, who, in a letter to her father, expressed the partners' 'entire satisfaction' that she did 'better than we expected' and had an 'excellent attitude towards the routine of the office'.[29] Despite this, architect Louis Laybourne Smith expressed reservations, voicing his concern that 'she must be prepared to meet the various grades of people employed in the Building Trades, and to face any slight disabilities attendant on inspection of works, such as mounting scaffolds'.[30] Though such concerns were long employed as a rationale to curtail the entry of women into the profession of architecture, in 1907, Robert Haddon wrote in the *Arts and Architecture* magazine of the triviality of such an argument, stating 'it is questionable whether it is necessary to go up a ladder to become an architect'.[31] Yet, during this period, such justifications abounded for women not becoming architects.

Esther Legoe worked in the office of Woods, Bagot, Jory and Laybourne Smith for four-and-a-half years,[32] before leaving the profession, believing that women would never be admitted to the Institute of Architects. Later, albeit under her married name – Esther Baylis – she went on to become a well-respected photographer, with some of her photographs held in the collections of the National Gallery of Australia and the South Australian Art Gallery.[33] Archival documents relating to Esther Legoe are held in the Louis Laybourne Smith and Gavin Walkley collections at the Architecture Museum. These include traces of Esther, including correspondence, a photographic portrait of her, a watercolour of her desk by a fellow student in the office and her certificates.[34] However, what these documents do not reveal is how her design drawings looked or the specific buildings that she worked on while an articled student.

Traces of a more recent female architect can be found in the Architecture Museum as part of the Jack Cheesman collection, where a series of documents, including brochures, letters, newspaper clippings and meeting minutes of the Small Homes Service of South Australia, are held.[35] The Royal Australian Institute of Architects, the Master Builders Association and the Timber Development Corporation sponsored the Small Homes Service in the 1950s and 1960s. The intention of this service was to provide better-designed housing for those who would not normally engage the services of an architect.[36] Architect Marjorie Simpson was offered the directorship of the Small Homes Service over five others who were also seeking the post. During her time as Director of the Small Homes Service, most of her activities involved administration, report writing, attending meetings and, significantly, public relations and media liaison. John Chappel, a fellow architect, believed that it was her 'dedication and ingenuity that

kept these services alive'.[37] Marjorie Simpson was awarded a Life Fellowship of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects in 1993. On receiving this accolade, she expressed the view that 'it is an award for your contributions to architecture. Now for me, who through life has had certain snubs and been made to feel that I was in an undeserved situation, I found that very rewarding, very rewarding indeed'.[38]

Marjorie Simpson examined the records that Jack Cheesman had held onto in the 1970s. On returning them, she wrote a note to thank him, saying: 'I hope you will be able to keep them as complete as they are, because these are now the only record of some of the activities, long forgotten and unsung, of the Small Homes Service'.[39] This note sums up not only the importance of maintaining women's archival collections, but alludes to the importance of writing and speaking about these contributions. Perhaps because of this awareness, Marjorie donated further correspondence files of her own relating to the Small Homes Service to the Architecture Museum.[40] The Simpson and Simpson collection encompasses the work of her business partner and architect husband, Peter Simpson, as well as her own. Unfortunately, she was reticent to donate her own solo work or student work, self-deprecatingly saying: 'you wouldn't be interested in that'.[41]

## Why do women architects' records matter, and why are they reticent to donate them?

Women architects' archives are important, in order to enable women to become aware of the 'powerful, creative history'[42] of those who have gone before them. It has been said that '[i]n some circles, even in the early twenty-first century, there is still the perception that women keep memories and that men use archives'.[43] In the experience of the Architecture Museum, it is evident that men donate their own records, while women are reticent to do the same. This creates two problems, the first being the limited creation of women's histories; the second problem, which is, perhaps, just as worrying, is that a group of buildings are going unrecorded, as the architects of these buildings are not donating their records – in this case, they happen to be women, though they could easily be any minority group. During her work towards a World Centre for Women's Archives, Mary Beard wrote: 'women are inclined to destroy their own documents, while carefully preserving the letters and other materials of their fathers and brothers'.[44] Other archives, including the Archives of Women in Science and Engineering (WISE) at Iowa State University, have faced this problem. When interviewing women chemists for oral histories, it was observed that, '[w]hile these women may have paper collections, they have not necessarily seen their experiences as historically significant and for the most part have not donated their papers to an archival repository'.[45]

As a consequence of women's reticence to donate, future researchers who may want to research a building type, suburb or time period may be able to access a range of documents, drawings and photographs relating to works by men, but those equally as pertinent to the research topic, but by women, may be absent, simply due to the fact that the documents were never saved, creating a false sense of the overall state of the architecture of the time. Through their absence, this group of records cannot be examined, and, if the buildings themselves are no longer extant, there may be no 'traces that remain'[46] of certain parts of our built environment. It cannot be overestimated how important documents are to enabling people to speak across generations. To be able to read the words of Esther Legoe, expressing her belief in the Institute's reluctance to admit women, or the feelings of Marjorie Simpson, in relation to the undeserved nature

of her success, sends a powerful message that resonates with women working in a male-dominated arena.

**Documenting history: reaching current practitioners**

The role of archivists as active shapers of the content of their collections and as such active shapers of the historical record should be a hotly debated topic, not only within our own professional circle, but also within the wider community. Archivists need to be ensuring that those who are shaping our world are aware of the importance of the documents that they create during this process. As Mason and Zanish-Belcher have pointed out, '[a]rchivists do not work in a vacuum; they interact with scholars and other researchers and respond to and encourage new areas of research'.[47]

While women are not a minority within general society, women architects remain a minority within the architectural profession. In coming together, they can provide support for those who will follow them. Women's archives began to become popular in the 1970s, based 'on the premise that women's lives and activities were not being adequately documented in traditional repositories'.[48] In the United States of America, the International Archive of Women in Architecture was established by Milka Bliznakov in 1985 at Virginia Tech, in order to:

> document the history of women's contributions to the built environment by collecting, preserving, storing, and making available to researchers the professional papers of women architects, landscape architects, designers, architectural historians and critics, and urban planners, and the records of women's architectural organizations.[49]

While this is one way of ensuring women's records are kept, ideally, the goal should be to ensure equal representation in all archives.

While women architects may be reticent to donate on the basis that no one would want to write about them, it is important to explain that there may be historians who are interested in exploring aspects of social and cultural history from a bottom-up perspective and, as such, rather than seeking information on the architects themselves, they may be searching archives for evidence of the buildings as embodied expressions of society. To explain to potential donors that the history of, for example, an organisation for which they had designed premises, could be enriched by the researcher being able to access the drawings of the building may function to encourage women to donate their records. As archivist Joanna Sassoon wrote: '[a]rchives have the power to shape memory, how a community remembers and how a community forgets'.[50]

In the following list, strategies are given to help collecting institutions inform potential donors, in the hope that they may encourage donations of the records of women architects:

- Ask the question: are you actively making a record of your practice as a design professional? Potential donors may then need prompting with steps they can take to ensure there is a record that remains.
- Suggest tasks that are accomplishable, such as making a photographic record of their built works as one way of starting this process.
- Provide a list of tips, such as the importance of labelling photographs and drawings with the place or building name, client, date, address, people involved or keeping brief notes on the project.

- Architects could be encouraged to make sure they have an accessible set of drawings of their projects, either paper copies or stable digital formats, which should be labelled as drafts, with version numbers, or as built.
- Architects may be encouraged to gather biographical information about themselves and people in their practice.
- Potential donors could be prompted to think about the future, by talking to a collecting institution, their family or their business partners about their records and deciding what they would like to eventually happen to their records.
- Issues of digital records should be discussed, as they are becoming more pressing, with technological advances shaping the way that architects create born digital records, which, unless saved in a stable and universally readable format or printed onto paper, may be lost within the lifetime of the building.

### *Development of archival outreach programs*

Archivists need to engage the professions – in this case, the design professions – and venture into their territory at professional meetings, conferences and public forums. The University of South Australia Architecture Museum's outreach program includes such community engagement. Activities encompass a monthly article in the Australian Institute of Architects (SA Branch) magazine; open days and tours of the Architecture Museum; meeting with an advisory board, which includes representatives of the profession; staff speaking engagements at conferences and events, such as 'Women with a Plan';[51] provision of content for websites other than our own, such as the 'Women's History Month'[52] and 'Parlour'[53] websites; the mounting of exhibitions; publishing of monographs and academic journal articles; collaborating with individual architectural practices and the teaching of students in the School of Art, Architecture and Design. While the women who graduated in the 1950s and 1960s are still working, there is reason for optimism that carefully designed outreach programs will pay dividends in the near future, as women retire and consider where to lodge their papers.

## Conclusion

As has been shown, women architects and their contributions in Australia are poorly represented in the archival record. The fact that there are women working in the design professions surely should be reflected in the archives of the design professions, and, as Mary Beard pointed out, women's archives are vital 'to secure a more balanced picture of humanity in the interests of historic truth'.[54] The gap in the record may be closed if more archival repositories review their acquisition strategies and become active shapers of their collections. This paper hopes to have made a step in that direction, by informing and creating awareness in the archival community concerning the need to preserve the legacy of women architects and their records.

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