

My memory of the moment when I knew that my decision to become an architect was the right one still elicits a visceral response. I am sitting at the back of a darkened classroom full of restless, first year would-be-architects anxious to learn about our next studio assignment. The project brief is to design a staircase; not just any staircase, but a new unit for an apartment in the Unité d'Habitation (1946-1952), "the first manifestation of an environment suited to modern life,"¹ according to the project's architect Le Corbusier in 1952. Not only are students asked to intervene in a landmark building by a modern master, but they are challenged to work 'in the manner' of another architect, to explore another's architectural voice. In a curious twist to what might seem a traditional exercise, the brief asks male students to choose their inspiration from a list of women architects, and female students to choose from an albeit much longer list of men. Sitting on hard wooden lecture chairs in late fall with our minds in sunny Marseilles, we are on a visual tour as our introduction to this canonic brutalist masterpiece. The slide shifts, and suddenly we stand on the rooftop, in the shadow of an enormous undulating ventilator shaft.

In this moment, my heart grew with the kind of pride available perhaps only to an architecture student at McGill, and a woman at that. Not weeks before, I encountered this same image as research for an entry on the Canadian architect Blanche Lemco van Ginkel for an online encyclopedia on North American women architects.² In the world of Canadian architecture, van Ginkel is a national treasure. As an architect, planner, educator and author, she resonates as a leading figure in modern architecture since

graduating from McGill's school in 1945. One of the first women admitted to the program in the early 1940s, this was the first of many firsts for van Ginkel as a woman and an architect, including the honor of first woman elected officer (1972) and then fellow (1973) of the RAIC.

In 1948 after graduating, van Ginkel moved to Paris to grow her professional experience in the Atelier Le Corbusier. Out of this moment in her esteemed career came the rooftop design for the Unité in Marseilles, including the iconic forms of its ventilator shafts, two whimsical free-form sculptures of cast concrete that narrowly escaped their fate as a single, monotonous column. What an opportunity van Ginkel's experience was, I thought, working in the manner of her mentor Le Corbusier, a pointed example of what can happen if we suspend our own notions of personal expression, and explore the potential for empathy in architectural practice.

But the slide shifts again, whisking us into a two-story Unité flat without mention of van Ginkel or her work.

Le Corbusier's oeuvre has proven fertile ground for feminist architectural scholars working to uncover the lengths this modern master has gone to erase, appropriate, defame, even brutalize the work of women, perhaps most significantly in E-1027, Eileen Gray's modernist gem. But here we were continuing rather than questioning his tradition. As my heart fell heavily in my chest, I wondered "How can we do better?"

I am not a typical architecture student, but not by virtue of my gender, ethnicity, race or class, rather because I have been here before. After graduating from Waterloo University in 2005, for a brief 4 years I was among a small proportion of interns who completed the lengthy, onerous track to architectural registration in British Columbia who are women. Suspending my licence in 2013 to return to school, I reflect now as a full-time student and 'retired' architect (with the possibility to reinstate).

That fall morning in 2014, from the back of the classroom now as a tutor rather than a student, I began collecting moments, alternate versions of architectural histories passed down to me like talismans, moments such as Denis Scott-Brown's challenge to the Pritzker Prize committee for crediting Robert Venturi exclusively for their work. I learned that *Farnsworth* describes not only Mies' minimalist glass box that I visited as a second-year student, but also Edith his client who sued him for fraudulently representing himself as "a skilled, proficient and experienced architect,"³ and wondered why I had assumed for so long that Charles and Ray Eames were brothers rather than husband and wife. For me, these moments of dissonance complicate questions of authorship and professionalism, the hallmarks of our discipline, and inspire a much broader conversation about how architectural legacies are made and sustained.

Last spring, Dame Zaha Hadid's untimely passing prompted our profession to revisit the question of diversity in architectural practice, and recent articles in journals and newspapers confirm that although Canadian women architects continue to work against institutional and professional barriers, we prefer to be recognized for our

strengths and successes rather than our challenges. As this competition evidences, however, ideas about what an architect is and does are well-conditioned before we cross the threshold into practice. The classroom and studio, too, are spaces where gender identities are constructed and naturalized, and hopefully with encouragement and openness also contested and renegotiated.

The moment when I knew that my decision to become an architect was the right one was not, as you might expect, a moment when everything came together. In many ways, it was the moment when everything fell apart, and the fragments like the story of van Ginkel's glorious ventilators threatened to slip through the cracks of architectural history, to disappear untold. Thankfully, this is also the moment that I sensed my own potential to collect some of these fractured, falling pieces and to rebuild them in a different form.

¹ <http://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr>. This excerpt is from an address by Le Corbusier to the Minister of Reconstruction and Town Planning, 14 October, 1952.

² <http://www.bwaf.org/portfolio/pioneering-women-of-american-architecture/> This entry is co-authored with my supervisor Annmarie Adams.

³ Alice Friedman, "People who live in glass houses," in *American Architectural History*, ed. Keith Eggener. (London: Routledge, 2004), 326.



Rooftop and ventilator shaft of the Unité d'Habitation Marseilles.
Photo Credit: Peter Cook in Jenkins, David. *Unité d'Habitation Marseilles: Le Corbusier* (London: Phaidon Press, 1993), 40.