Organization of Women Architects

40th Anniversary 2013

History of OWA
This 40th Anniversary 2013 History of OWA booklet is a work-in-progress, compiled and edited by Jean Nilsson.

It draws on archived materials available on our website, including newsletters, images, and Inge Horton’s history articles; founding member Wendy Bertrand’s 2012 book, Enamored with Place: As Woman + As Architect (eyeonplace press, San Francisco), and contributions from other long-time OWA members.

Thank you to all these women.

For more information, visit our website: owa-usa.org.

To contact our Steering Committee with contributions to this History project, corrections, comments, further information on graphics or text, please email:

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In November 1972, a small group of 12 women – among them Wendy Bertrand, Mary Laleyan, and Mui Ho – gathered to discuss their experiences as women in architecture at the university and in the workplace in the San Francisco Bay Area.

1973 Within months, some 80 women had come to their meetings, and the group had enthusiastically formed an organization and a steering committee of coordinators – a horizontal organizational structure for working cooperatively by consensus.

The group identified 5 areas of shared responsibility: Public Relations and Liaisons, Education, Employment and Affirmative Action, Finance and Legal, and Newsletter Production.

The group drafted by-laws and incorporated as a non-profit, choosing the name “Organization of Women Architects” (three key words until 1978 when “and Design Professionals” was added). Hundreds of women have since joined OWA, contributing to, and benefiting from, its active 40-year history supporting women in architecture and the design professions.

From its inception, OWA has supported the whole person, not only her career in architecture. In the first years, monthly meetings in members’ homes began with introductions of all participants to facilitate networking and sharing experiences as women in a male-dominated field.

At monthly meetings, women architects presented their work, and members discussed issues of the day – flexible work schedules, job-sharing, hiring, and childcare.
Among early speakers, Dolores Hayden shared her experience of founding a similar organization in Boston (Women Architects, Landscape Architects, and Planners or WALAP) and San Francisco architect Beverly Willis offered advice on how to improve skills for job-hunting at an early 1973 meeting. OWA held seminars to review portfolios, improve public speaking skills, learn about money management, and educate each other about women’s health and occupational hazards.

OWA members took field trips to recently completed buildings as well as construction sites (as we still do). Members found new and often better jobs through the OWA job referral service. They found encouragement, support, and resources for getting licensed.

**OWA Newsletter 1973**

As Mui Ho, OWA’s first newsletter coordinator, remembers, “My portion of work at that time was mostly to follow up with sending all these women our newsletters. As you might remember, our earlier newsletters were one page Xerox copies, hand addressed to all our colleagues.

“I had promoted the use of newsletters and had been the newsletter’s editor for the first couple years—using a cut and paste method. I still have some of the originals.

“Since many women at that time were either too tied down with work and family or too timid to join a women’s group, my thought was that they could just read about us and then put the newsletter and OWA on the back burner and take it out to reach us when they needed to.

“Many of the women had requested to have the newsletter sent to their home and not their office – there was still an element of worry about joining a women’s group.

The importance of the newsletter was to keep the larger group of women architects informed on our activities and to let them know that we were doing something that interested them.”

The Newsletter announced the upcoming monthly meeting and its location, and it offered a wealth of information and ideas. Reflecting the horizontal structure and goals of the group, the editor rotated quickly (over 100 editors by 1985) and for many years the design of the newsletter was up to the editor and so it also changed often.

**OWA at AIA Convention San Francisco, 1973.**

A significant early action was OWA’s unforgettable presence at the 1973 national American Institute of Architects Convention held in May of that year in San Francisco, where their
booth and its 8’ tall, life size photo of 50 local women architects welcomed AIA members from across the country to San Francisco. Howard Friedman, a local architect and professor at UC Berkeley, who had never had a woman architect working in his office prior to this time, arranged for the convention booth to be donated to OWA and also hired one of the women.

OWA’s AIA booth was featured in a San Francisco Chronicle article ‘Women Architects in the Flesh’, and the action drew national attention to women architects and their determination to be a vital part of the architecture profession.

**OWA Interviews Bay Area Architecture Firms 1974-1975.**

Another action that early members of the group remember as important was conducting interviews and compiling a survey of employment practices in the Bay Area. Fourteen early members participated and were very courageous in talking to heads of architecture firms who, at the time, refused to hire women architects. Ilana Rosenfeld was credited with the idea, and “Bobbie Sue Hood was the ringleader of this action,” as Lucia Bogatay remembers. “I was one of the people who went and interviewed architects, and as I recall, we simply asked them if we could interview them about their affirmative action programs, and often they agreed to talk to us (they probably didn’t know what we were doing, or what an affirmative action plan was). The one I remember most vividly was an interview [with two architects] whose body language suggested extreme defensiveness – hands in front of mouths, etc.”

As Bobbie Sue Hood describes, “Our goal for the structured interviews was to find out how many women were working in various offices, the attitudes toward hiring/promoting/working with women, and, by coincidence, to familiarize those interviewed with how qualified we were as architects/programmers/designers/and savvy marketers. A by-product was presenting each OWA interviewer as a capable young architect to interesting potential employers.

“In addition to learning about how principals viewed potential and existing women employees, we also learned why they were worried about hiring women - obvious in retrospect, but an amazing discovery to me at the time.

“We had a strong strategy of how to dress, how we were to present ourselves personally, and how to follow up on comments during the interviews.

“We went to engage potential employers, not to challenge or confront them. The questions themselves were structured, but the methodology was open ended to allow each interviewer to learn some of the
most interesting, non-structured, information. Both types of information were fascinating.”

Architect Licensing Mock Exams 1974
One of OWA’s early outstanding contributions began with Rosemary Muller’s initiative to develop a Mock Architectural Design Exam, intended to prepare and train for California’s difficult Architect licensing exam. The mock exam continued annually for many years and was so successful that OWA sold it after some years to the American Institute of Architects.

Health Insurance Plan
In 1976, Janet Crane investigated and set up a health insurance plan for OWA members—available to all interested architects and designers—providing a significant service to small offices and the design community.

OWA House Tours -1980s
In the mid-eighties, OWA held successful House Tours that showcased buildings and landscapes designed by local women architects.

The History of Women Architects Exhibit 1987
Inge Horton remembers the 1987 exhibition The History of Women Architects, which OWA co-sponsored with the AIA San Francisco Chapter, as an important event.

The exhibit, she describes, “was created by the Berlin Chapter of the Union Internationale des Femmes Architectes and featured about forty European women in architecture, interior design and landscape architecture.

“Also available was a catalogue with essays by the German organizers of the exhibition and biographical information about the women in the exhibit.

“The festive opening night on August 17 featured a short lecture by Helga Schmidt-Thomsen, one of the creators of the exhibition and my college friend, and a panel discussion of couples in architecture.

“Among the panelists were Janet Tam and Kit Ratcliff, Helen and John Villet, Janet Crane and Rod Freebairn-Smith, Pearl Freeman and Bill Colyer, and others. It was a great evening!

“The event had a lasting impact on me. As we were hanging the exhibition panels in the gallery, one of the OWA members helping with the installation remarked that she was jealous of the European architects as they have so many role models and we have only Julia Morgan. This startled me because [I felt] Morgan must have been part of a movement of women entering the professions in general and architecture in particular. This event was the beginning of my long search discovering the lives and work of early women in architecture who were contemporaries of Julia Morgan and who tried to enter the male-dominated field of architecture and paved the way for us. It resulted in 2010 in the publication of Early Women Architects of the San Francisco Bay Area: The Lives and Work of Fifty Professionals, 1890-1951.”

Annual OWA Retreats - 1988 to the present
The annual weekend retreat at the lovely Westerbeke Ranch in the wine country north of San Francisco was first organized in 1988 by Marda Stothers. Originally the all-day retreat marked the transition in Steering Committee coordinators, and later it focused on mid-career. Now members at all stages of their careers, from education through retirement, gather to renew friendships, relax, reflect, and enjoy personal and professional growth in community with 50 women design professionals.

OWA Annual Holiday Benefit Party
OWA holiday gatherings provide another opportunity each year to get together informally and also collect gifts for the Hamilton Family Center, the largest provider of shelter and services for homeless
families in San Francisco, with a focus on returning families to independent living and assisting in maintaining their housing.

2009 OWA Reception/Exhibit at AIA National Convention, San Francisco

When the AIA Convention returned to San Francisco in 2009, OWA hosted a reception and exhibit to showcase the work of OWA members. The function, held at the Educated Palate Restaurant on the downtown campus of City College, featured an exhibit of 30” x 30” boards and a slide show of members’ work.

OWA Book Circle

New OWA programs have emerged over time, such as the recent book circle, initiated by Wendy Bertrand “to read and discuss books and articles that link women and architecture in cultural ways, including history of, planning for, gender issues, client relationships, feminist theory and writing.” The small group discusses and reviews books, makes them available for check-out to OWA members, and donates copies to school and public libraries.

owa-usa.org

OWA’s Website

Established as a goal by a few members during its 2003 anniversary year, OWA now has a strong and well-designed internet presence to support its members. The website includes member directories, Forums, and Portfolios, member news and resources such as events, articles, books, current and past Newsletters, programs offered by OWA, and a growing archive of OWA materials.

2012. The Missing 32%: Where are the Women in Architecture?

The importance of OWA’s history and work and its continued relevance today and into the future, are highlighted by the topic of this October 2012 symposium.

AIA San Francisco, OWA, California College of the Arts, and several local architecture firms jointly sponsored The Missing 32% to consider the fact that – still today – only 18% of licensed architects are women, although 50% of architecture students are women. Where are the missing 32%?

And what will be the role of women in architecture in the 21st century?
2013. Celebrating 40 years of the Organization of Women Architects and Design Professionals (OWA).

March 16 Gala Celebration Dinner and dance, Venetian Ballroom of the Berkeley City Club (Julia Morgan, Architect).

April 13 Symposium Architecture: Gender Matters at UC Berkeley, Wurster Hall auditorium. Open to the public and students. Speakers, discussion, reception and exhibition of OWA members’ work.

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