



Sophia Hayden



PIONEERING WOMEN ARCHITECTS

Lecturer PhD. Arch. Ioana-Maria PETRESCU*

Hardly one-and-a-half century has passed since a woman was first awarded a Professional Diploma in Architecture. In 1878, Mary L. Page, a student of the University of Illinois, took her architect degree, thus officially opening the women's path in what was long thought an exclusively male profession.

Shortly, other young women having a penchant for architecture followed in her footsteps, many of them being genuine pioneers in the field. We just mention here Margaret Hicks, graduate of the University of Cornell in 1880, known as the first woman architect who published her works in specialised print media, Louise Blanchard Bethune, educated in an architectural office and not in an architecture school, the first woman member of the American Institute of Architects and Sophia Hayden, the winner of the competition for the Women's Building at 1893 World's Columbian Exposition.

While the architecture schools in the United States had started to open their doors to women, Europe denied them the right to practice this profession. The same year when Hicks was granted the architect degree, Marie Bashkirtseff, an Ukrainian artist settled in Paris, denounced the French system's discrimination against women, denying them free access to education, thus preventing them from pursuing the chosen profession.

The arts and especially architecture education in France long resisted the women's emancipation movement. For over 15 years, H el ene Bertaux, founder of the Union of Women Painters and Sculptors, stood up for the young women admission to the  coles Nationale Sup erieure des Beaux-arts in Paris. Her efforts paid off only in 1896 when women had access to the library and they were allowed to attend anatomy, perspective and art history courses. A year later, American Julia Morgan – graduate of Berkley College of Engineering in 1894 – would pass the admission exam and became the first woman who studied architecture at the prestigious Parisian institution.

However, reluctance to women's education in architecture schools was not Europe-wide, the Northern countries proved to be more open in this respect. Thus, in Finland, the young women were allowed to attend architecture courses much earlier than in France. In 1888, Signe Hornborg would be admitted to the Polytechnic Institute in Helsinki and took her degree two years later, "by special permission". Besides, Finland is known in history as the first European country granting women the right to vote.

In the Romanian Old Kingdom, the young women would openly display their penchant for architecture not earlier than in the first half of the 20th century. Virginia Andreescu Haret – the niece of the painter Ion Andreescu, married to the nephew of the scholar Spiru Haret – would take her architect degree in the summer of 1919. Although succeeding Ada Z ag nescu – student of Ion Mincu and probably the first female graduate of the School of Architecture of Bucharest – Virginia Haret is still reminded as the first Romanian woman architect.

* Lecturer PhD. Arch. Ioana-Maria Petrescu: Spiru Haret University, Faculty of Architecture, Bucharest, Romania.

As expected, other young women followed Ada Zăgănescu and Virginia Haret. Among the women who dedicated themselves to this profession, a special place is held by Henrieta Delavrancea Gibory, the youngest daughter of the writer Barbu Ștefănescu Delavrancea, who was inspired even as a child by her father's good friend, Ion Mincu, to pursue this profession. Being one of the most remarkable Romanian architects of the 20th century, Henrieta Delavrancea is not only the most famous woman architect in Romania, but also one of the greatest modernist architects in our country.

In time, the number of women architects increased significantly, yet their endeavours remained unknown, being often in the shadow of their partners. This was the case with Lucia Dumbrăveanu, the cousin of Henrieta Delavrancea and wife of Horia Creangă, the first Romanian graduate of the renowned Écoles des Beaux-arts in Paris.

Although few women architects have got fame, the role they played in this field cannot be questioned. Holding an important position in education and research, having an active part in heritage protection-related fields, expressing their point of view in career-related critique, women have been exerting an obvious influence on the built environment architecture.

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