



Photo: Genie Lemieux, Evanston Photo

Founders, from left: Gertrude Kerbis, Gunduz Dagdalen, Cynthia Weese, Jane Jacobsen, Nancy Abshire, Carol Barney, Laura Fisher

Founders Event

by Kim Haig

In January of 1974 the women architects of Chicago received an intriguing invitation: “Come and Meet other Female Architects re Coalition –all invited- “. This past January, Chicago Woman in Architecture started their 40th Year Celebration with a collection of founders, past presidents and members chatting in cozy groups, echoing the original gathering in Gertrude Kerbis’ office. Much has changed in the 40 years since the founding of CWA, but the reasons for its genesis still remain- the need for a group to support and advocate for women in the professional world of architecture.

The first president of CWA, Carol Ross Barney, claimed that she’s “not really a founder, and I didn’t know what I was doing at the first meeting. Maybe I went because I wanted to meet Gert Kerbis. Nothing prepared me for meeting that many women architects at one time.” Carol was the only woman architect at Holabird and Root at the time, but told how John Holabird, one of her mentors, became fairly close to her and supplied funding for one of the groups’ first endeavors- an exhibit at Artemisia Gallery. Another founder, G_unduz Dagdalen, described how the exhibit came about. In an era where architectural exhibits had become very popular, -groups such as the beginnings of the Chicago 7, a Miesian exhibit and a Women’s Architectural exhibit out of NY were being staged-, CWA felt a need to put a public face on the organization. During this time, Cynthia Weese asked Stanley Tigerman why there were no woman architects in any of these exhibits. His reply was “Well that’s because there are no women worth being in these exhibits”, which made Cynthia very mad, so she went to Gunduz and said “We have to do something about this!”

Cynthia happened to be complaining about the situation while viewing an exhibit at the Artemisia Gallery and the owners promptly offered their gallery for the first CWA exhibit. Several founders described the difficulties in pulling together the exhibit, particularly because women architects were still struggling for recognition for their work in big offices and few had ventured out on their own at that point. Gunduz said, “They were all in responsible positions but not in charge of projects.” The technology did not exist to create graphics as it does today. But they came up with a dramatic and attractive format for displaying the work and the exhibit won an AIA award from the State and City for service to the Profession.

Several of the founders described the obstacles they faced to even becoming an architect. Jane Jacobsen told how she settled on architecture to study in college, though it wasn’t even offered as an option by her High School counselor. She said, “Little did I know what it would be like, that all the architects were men.” She said she was the only woman that graduated from the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana in 1952, but she wasn’t deterred and worked for the Army Corp of Engineers for many years.

Nancy Abshire related how she faced a similar struggle. During her first degree at Northwestern in interiors she was exposed to quite a bit of architectural history and toured sites like Taliesin and some of Sullivan’s work on weekends. Nancy said that at her first job at CF Murphy she noticed another woman who was an architect and became determined to go back to school for architecture. When she started working at SOM, there were three other women architects, including Natalie Deblois. And when

the conversation came up about starting CWA, Natalie was sitting right across from her. They knew all the other women architects in town since there were so few and felt a need to band together.

Laura Fisher said she’s honored to be considered a founder of CWA, “until people start to do the math” she added with a laugh. When she attended Virginia Tech her class had 10% women, which was considered huge. So she was used to being around a lot of men. She worked at SOM during her 4th year at school for a work study program and met Natalie Deblois. One day Natalie came by and said, “You have to come to this,” meaning the CWA meeting. So she went to the meetings that year while she was in Chicago.

Gertrude Kerbis, who sent out the first invitation, was very familiar with the struggles of being a woman architect. Though she was the 10th woman in the US to become a Fellow in the AIA, she said, “I never received correct pay, wasn’t listened to. But I had confidence that my opinions were as valid as those of the typical male architect.” After working at SOM for 5 years and CF Murphy for 5 years, and designing some significant buildings at both firms, she took the course that many frustrated women architects have taken since- she opened her own firm. Her introduction to architecture seemed rather serendipitous. While putting herself through the University of Wisconsin she happened upon an article about Frank Lloyd Wright in Life magazine. When her house mother mentioned that Wright had designed a farm just down the road, Gertrude hitch-hiked to Taliesin and spent the night there after crawling through an open window. But she had to transfer to the University of Illinois and work her way through school to get an engineering degree. She was still hoping for an architecture degree so she went to Harvard for a time, followed by IIT. She finished by saying, “So you last until you’re 88 and you’re still fighting! But you should be truly proud that CWA is still going after 40 years. It continues on and that’s really, really important.”

When asked how they balanced work and personal life, each founder had a different answer. Gert talked about her struggles: “You have dreams you aspire to but sometimes it doesn’t work.” Nancy talked about trying to stay involved with



Gertrude Kerbis talking to some young CWA members

Photo: Genie Lemieux, Evanston Photo

other things, such as helping form the Chicago Architecture Foundation. Laura said, “I prioritized my time. And when moving because of my husband’s job I had to reinvent myself.” Jane exclaimed that “Architecture is one of the best college subjects

you can take.” But she also spent quite a bit of personal time on photography.

Cynthia had a sensible philosophy about the balancing act: “I always thought you could do two things at once but not three. You could have your family and profession but not much of a cultural, social or charitable life. You really have to focus on those two things.” But she also recommended having kids early so there’s still time to branch out after they’ve left the house. Gunduz shared her secret to balance: “you just didn’t sleep!” She said with a laugh. But she also described how she and her husband set up their office on the first floor and lived on the second floor so she could be available when her daughter came home from school.

Carol finished up with some sage advice: “You have to be who you are. I can tell you what I did but it may be totally wrong for you.” Then she described how she went to work the day she had her first baby. “I was supposed to go into a meeting and my water broke. I said, “I think I have to leave” and they said “Why? Well, I think I’m going to have my baby today. They were all running around bumping into each other and saying “Can I drive you?” Since I was such a rookie I said no I would take the train. So I did. I walked to Union Station and took the train out to the hospital in Hinsdale. It’s about being comfortable with who you are. If you’re not comfortable taking a train when you’re in labor then you shouldn’t. It will make you very, very unhappy. I think you have to listen to your inner self.” Good advice indeed.



Image: Balmori Associates

Diana Balmori Talk

by Charlene Andreas

Recently, CWA co-sponsored a lecture with the Art Institute of Chicago featuring Diana Balmori. Not only did Ms. Balmori come to speak to the audience about landscape architecture, but also more broadly about the materials and the exploration of nature and its ecosystems. Ms. Balmori’s talk started with the image of a brush-stroke of black streaking and fading across the screen to introduce her discussion of landscape architecture. Landscape architecture, she noted, was born out of landscape painting from groups like the Hudson River School. The initial intent of these landscape architects was to artificially create the effect of natural landscapes seen in the paintings. The profession then moved to inserting landscape into built environments, becoming more of a support for architecture than its own discipline. Ms. Balmori went on to say that it is evolving into a multi-disciplinary field that engages the sciences and the arts. In this vein, she has been serving as a professor at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies with prior positions teaching architecture at Yale.

In 1990, Ms. Balmori left the office of Cesar Pelli Associates to start her own firm Balmori Associates, which is an international landscape and urban design firm based in New York City. Over the years the firm has broadened its approach to landscape design and urbanism through the creation of its own internal lab. This, she noted, provided more opportunities to explore the discipline relative to others such as art and science.

As one of Ms. Balmori’s interests is to “put the city in nature rather than putting nature in the city”, the projects had a common thread in how they addressed natural systems and urban infrastructure, in many cases how to deal with water, whether it be flood waters or storm water. A key project for the firm is the recently completed renewal of a large urban industrial area in Bilbao,

Spain next to the Nervion River. The project looked at ways to reconnect the site to the river which had been separated from the City by the existing industrial fabric along with an expressway. The project created pedestrian routes to connect to the city and across the river to the University. Layered with this was a series of levels in the topography to address the flooding of the river- part of the natural cycle of the river. The levels allow the river to flood the park yet be useable space when the river is at its normal height.

Ms. Balmori presented several other projects that finessed the landscape into the urban fabric while still addressing the issue of flood waters from adjacent waterways. These included a study of Hoboken, New Jersey for strategies to address another storm surge such as that which occurred with Super Storm Sandy. By evaluating the existing topography and identifying high and low topography, the intent was to create zones for tidal surge to collect and then drain back to the Hudson River as the surge receded. In another project in New York City, the lab team set about to build several floating islands to send down the Gowanus Canal to explore strategies to clean up the pollution within the canal waters. Taking their cue from other cultures who have long utilized an intriguing layered system of floating plants, peat, and soil to create a floating island, the team used the same approach to create several small islands. In this case they selected plants which could clean the pollutants from the water.

In a more ambitious project, the firm won a competition to design a new city in South Korea. The master plan for a new public administration town, named Sejong, again utilizes the topography as a start point of the design exploration that led to a continuous ribbon of green to roof the multiple departments of the government essentially under one roof. The roof, set at a height of six stories above mean grade, creates a surface that allows pedestrians to move from one part of the city to another in a park-like environment. The added benefit is the reduction in storm water run-off.

As Ms. Balmori finished her last slide, Zoe Ryan, Chair and John H. Bryan Curator of Architecture and Design, sat down with her to discuss in more detail the impact of the lab on her work. Here Ms. Balmori described how she sees the environment around them. She expressed a keen insight, that by stopping and utilizing the art of a sketch to explore a place, one gains a deeper understanding of a place than with a photograph. Ms. Ryan shared her copy of Ms. Balmori’s sketchbook which highlighted the breadth of exploration techniques that inform the work of Balmori Associates.

MEMBER NEWS. UPCOMING EVENTS + MORE...

CWA Monthly Meeting - General Business Meetings are scheduled the second Tuesday of every month. Check our website, www.cwarch.org for location. Members and non-members are welcome to attend.

5:30 p.m. - Networking, 6:00 p.m. - Meeting

Check our website for other talks and events. Members receive regular email updates on upcoming events.

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