

## Scholarship as Activism: Doris Cole's and Susana Torre's Pioneering Feminism in Architectural History

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This paper examines the history and legacy of two early textual histories of women in American architecture: Doris Cole's *From Tipi to Skyscraper* (1973) and *Women in American Architecture* (1977), edited by Susana Torre. Both Cole and Torre were practicing architects, and their scholarship can be understood as a form of activism. As part of the feminist movement in architecture of the 1970s and early 1980s, their work contributed to the visibility of women's historic participation in the American built environment, and challenged the accepted architectural historiography of the time.

- <sup>1</sup> The history of the feminist movement in American architecture is the topic of my dissertation, which is currently in progress. I owe special thanks to my supervisor, Mary McLeod, for all her support and feedback, and to the women who agreed to be interviewed for the project.
- <sup>2</sup> The Alliance of Women in Architecture (AWA) in New York City, Women Architects, Landscape Architects and Planners (WALAP) in Boston, and the Organization of Women Architects (OWA) in San Francisco were all founded in 1972. Two years later, Chicago Women in Architecture (CWA) was founded. By 1977, at least a dozen organizations existed across the United States.
- <sup>3</sup> In 1974, two conferences were held: “Women in Architecture: A Symposium” in March at Washington University in St. Louis, and the “West Coast Women’s Design Conference,” in April at the University of Oregon in Eugene. The following year, the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles hosted “Women in Design: The Next Decade.” In Boston, “Women in Design and Planning Conference” was held at the Boston Architectural Center, and MIT’s Department of Architecture organized a conference on Sexual Politics and Design.
- <sup>4</sup> Records of the Women’s School of Planning and Architecture, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA. Also see my chapter, “Making Pedagogy Personal: The Women’s School of Planning and Architecture,” in the forthcoming publication by Penn Design on architectural pedagogy.
- <sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Kampen and Grossman for their insight that this scholarship was a form of activism which has helped me understand how it fit into the larger history of the feminist movement in American architecture.
- <sup>6</sup> “Historical Statistics of the United States.”
- <sup>7</sup> WALAP, “The Case for Flexible Work Schedules.”

At the beginning of the 1970s women in American architecture began fighting to change their profession.<sup>1</sup> Like that of other feminists of the period, their activism took many forms: they founded professional associations,<sup>2</sup> organized exhibitions and conferences,<sup>3</sup> and they even created an experimental summer program, the Women’s School of Planning and Architecture (WSPA).<sup>4</sup> Not all of the women involved in these activities defined themselves as feminist (and those that did often had different definitions of feminisms) but they were all motivated by the social changes happening due to the Women’s Liberation Movement. One important component of women’s activism in architecture was scholarship. It was practicing female architects, involved in women’s organizations and the broader feminist movement, who took up the research and writing of women’s histories as part of their feminist endeavors.<sup>5</sup> In 1970, women were less than four percent of practicing architects in the United States.<sup>6</sup> Before the creation of the women’s professional groups, it was not unusual for a female architect to not know any others. They often found themselves the only woman, or one of only a handful, in their class or in the office. They were unlikely to have any female teachers or bosses, nor did they learn about women architects during their education. For the most part, women were absent from architectural textbooks and survey courses, and there were no monographs written on any female architects in the US. Initially, the practitioners who wrote the first histories of women were searching for role models. In the face of discrimination, they soon realized that history could be used to challenge assumptions about female architects and their capacities, and promote their inclusion in the profession. This paper focuses on the first two histories of women in American architecture: *From Tipi to Skyscraper: A History of Women in Architecture* (1973), written by Doris Cole; and *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective* (1977), edited by Susana Torre, who also curated an exhibition of the same name.

Both *From Tipi to Skyscraper*, and *Women in American Architecture* were rooted in women’s professional organizations in architecture. Cole was a member of Women Architects, Landscape Architects and Planners (WALAP), which was founded in Boston by Dolores Hayden in 1972. When interviewed in 2013, Hayden remembered WALAP as primarily a discussion group. Although the organization was short lived, the members soon became active in challenging the status quo of the profession. One initiative of the group was a paper on flexible work schedules, published in the *Architectural Forum*. In it the authors argued that for women to succeed in architecture, offices needed to change the culture that equated commitment with long work hours.<sup>7</sup> Another initiative by some WALAP members was to start an all-women’s architectural practice, the Open Design Office. Similar to many feminist organizations of the period, the firm rejected the hierarchical structures of traditional offices. It aimed to serve those who ordinarily would not have the means to hire an architect, especially community groups,

<sup>8</sup> Doris Cole, interview with author.

women's organizations, and lower-income families. As a member of WALAP, Cole contributed to advancing the position of women – her definition of feminism – by writing *From Tipi to Skyscraper*. The impetus came from an interaction with a male colleague who one day asked her: “What are you doing here, Doris?” The question prompted her to ask herself “Hadn't we been architects before?”<sup>8</sup> Through writing the book, she was able to demonstrate that women had indeed been involved in architecture from before the country had even existed. Although *From Tipi to Skyscraper* was not overtly polemical, one of Cole's objectives was to encourage more women to become architects.

<sup>9</sup> Regi Weile, interview with author.

In contrast to *From Tipi to Skyscraper*, the *Women in American Architecture* project began as a group effort, one intertwined with the Alliance of Women in Architecture (AWA). Regi Goldberg, an architect and teacher at the Cooper Union, founded the group in New York. She was eager to find out more about the history and current status of women in the profession having hit a barrier in her career. Around 1970, when she assumed that she would supervise the construction of one of her projects, her employer told her “We don't send blacks or women to the site.”<sup>9</sup> After some pressure from Goldberg, her employer relented, on the condition that she had to present to him examples of women supervising construction. She responded by collecting a list of as many women she could find practicing in and around New York City, and then proposed an exhibition and series of seminars and lectures. She, and eight other women she recruited, established the AWA after an open meeting in May of 1972. The group hoped to provide education and support for women in practice. They launched a monthly newsletter and formed a number of subcommittees to address different issues, including: education, discrimination, and licensing. The members also wanted to reach a public audience in order to foster a broader interest in architecture. In March of 1973, the AWA announced an upcoming exhibition to be held at the Architectural League of New York in the fall. A committee began meeting to plan the exhibition. Although they continued to report back to the AWA coordination committee occasionally in 1973 and 1974, the committee organized the exhibition independently of the group. In September 1973, the League provided Susana Torre, by then the official curator of the exhibition, a seed grant of \$3000; this officially launched the Archive of Women in Architecture, which was the basis for the exhibition and book. Torre was never a member of the AWA; however, she was involved in the Women's Liberation Movement through her participation in a consciousness-raising group, which included her neighbor, the feminist art critic Lucy Lippard.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Torre, Lippard and other members of the CR group, went on to found the feminist art and politics magazine, *Heresies*.

Through their work, both Cole and Torre showed that women, despite many obstacles, had helped shape American architecture, both as professionals and in other roles. Cole's book, published in 1973, was a

- <sup>12</sup> Essays by Judith Paine, Susan Fondiler Berkon, Sara Boutelle, Mary Otis Stevens (who was the publisher for Doris Cole's book), Doris Cole, Jane McGroarty and Susana Torre.
- <sup>13</sup> Essay by Suzanne Stephens.
- <sup>14</sup> Essays by Torre. Ellen Perry Berkeley also contributed material.
- <sup>15</sup> Essays by Lucy R. Lippard and Torre.
- <sup>16</sup> Venues included: Hayden Gallery at MIT (May 6 to June 18, 1977), Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center (August 11 to September 6, 1977), Houston's Public Library (November 1 to 22, 1977), the ArchiCenter in Chicago (January 10 to February 28, 1978), and the Woman's Building in Los Angeles (April 28 to May 26, 1978). The exhibition was displayed at least three additional times in the United States before travelling to the Netherlands. In many venues, exhibitions of regional women's work were mounted in conjunction with the traveling exhibition.
- <sup>17</sup> The term 'exceptional' as applied to women in architecture, was used in the 1955 Booklet "Should You be an Architect?" written by Pietro Belluschi, which Ellen Perry Berkeley quoted in 1972. Ellen Perry Berkeley, "Women in Architecture," *Architectural Forum* 137 no. 2 (1972): 46-53. Gwendolyn Wright, in an article published the same year as *Women in American Architecture*, identified "exceptional women" as one of four roles women in the profession used to cope with the challenges they faced. Gwendolyn Wright, "On the Fringe of the Profession: Women in American Architecture," in *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession*, edited by Spiro Kostof (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977): 284. The term was still being used by the AIA in 1988, when it organized an exhibition, called "That Exceptional One," in honor of the 100th anniversary of Louise Blanchard Bethune's membership. American Architectural Foundation and the AIA Women in Architecture Committee, "That Exceptional One, Women in American Architecture 1888-1988," (Washington, D.C.: American Architectural Foundation, 1988).

modest volume, consisting of five chapters. It presented a brief social history of women's contributions to the American built environment, from the colonial period to the twentieth century. By focusing on the social context of women's lives, she demonstrated that many did not become architects because they lacked talent but because of social factors, most notably because practice was not considered a suitable pursuit for women. By showing how the women who did succeed in practice were often channeled into certain fields – namely domestic and landscape architecture – as well as demonstrating how they actively resisted this, she provided the evidence female architects could use to counter the stereotypes that restricted their choices in practice.

*Women in American Architecture* expanded Cole's work by adding biographies of individual women to the historical record, as well as new topics not covered by Cole. The catalogue was divided into five sections: women as designers and writers of domestic environments in the nineteenth century;<sup>11</sup> practicing women architects from the nineteenth century to the 1960s;<sup>12</sup> women architectural critics;<sup>13</sup> practicing women architects in the contemporary period, including a history of feminism in architecture to date;<sup>14</sup> and "Women's Spatial Symbolism," which addressed spatial ideas in women's art and constructions.<sup>15</sup> When the exhibition opened at the Brooklyn Museum in February 1977 (Figure 1), a sea of almost 100 panels confronted visitors and provided visual evidence of women's long history of participation in architecture. There were three categories for the panels: blue for practitioners, brown for domestic writers and reformers, and red for the women's buildings. The practitioners' boards profiled both historic and contemporary women, following the categorization used in the book. After the show closed in April, it toured around the United States for close to a decade, and was also brought to the Netherlands.<sup>16</sup>

Torre, in her introduction to the exhibition catalogue, called for an in-depth analysis of the social and institutional context of women's contributions to architecture. Unlike Cole, who did not have an explicit theoretical framework for her book, Torre was galvanized by Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking 1971 article, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Nochlin argued that the question was actually a trap that feminists should try to avoid. Such a pursuit would only reinforce the assumption that women were not capable of significant accomplishment. Her point was that "greatness" was not innate but produced by certain conditions at particular periods in time, conditions that excluded women. Torre took up Nochlin's call to investigate those conditions and institutions in architecture. Reflecting retroactively on the exhibition and book, Torre recalled that the group, by focusing on context, wanted to counter the tendency to elevate the rare female practitioner to the status of 'exceptional woman.'<sup>17</sup> For Torre, the concept meant that the occasional woman was accepted by the male

<sup>18</sup> Susana Torre, Review of *The Architect*, 81.

power structure as an “honorary male,”<sup>18</sup> but only “one at a time,” something she had, in fact, experienced in her own career. Without the historical background and analysis, a juried show of contemporary practitioners might have reinforced the idea that only a few women had the talent to be considered “good” architects; it would not have helped women overcome their minority status in the profession.

<sup>19</sup> Some women architects, like Louis Blanchard Bethune, were well recognized during their lives, but their careers were not considered important enough to be recorded by the historians.

In trying to add women to the architectural canon, *From Tipi to Skyscraper* and *Women in American Architecture* also challenged accepted methodologies in architectural history. The lack of scholarship on women architects at the time, and the fact that early women practitioners were rarely recognized as successful<sup>19</sup> or “great,” forced Cole, and the authors of *Women in American Architecture* to take new approaches. As a practitioner, Cole wrote independently from any academic institution, and so did not feel confined to traditional methods. For instance, she used etiquette books as a major source of evidence. The very idea of a social history of women in the profession was at odds with much of the scholarship at the time, which still consisted largely of monographs of individual architects, buildings, or styles.<sup>20</sup> Torre, by including the essays by historians – such as Hayden and Gwendolyn Wright – on pioneering nineteenth-century domestic reformers, also expanded our understanding of architecture as more than public monuments and avant-garde manifestos. Further, by commissioning essays by a team of women, Torre challenged the single-author format of most architectural history publications at the time. *From Tipi to Skyscraper* and *Women in American Architecture* initiated decades of feminist scholarship, including more research on specific female practitioners.<sup>21</sup> Starting with Hayden and Wright, feminist historians expanded the research to include writers and domestic reformers, female clients and patrons, gender and spatial relations, representational strategies, race and sexuality, and other topics previously not addressed in architectural history.

<sup>20</sup> See Marvin Trachtenberg, “Some Observations on Recent Architectural History,” *The Art Bulletin* 70, no. 2 (June 1988), 208-241.

<sup>21</sup> Louise Bethune, Julia Morgan, Marion Mahony Griffin, Mary Colter, and Eleanor Raymond have all received monographic treatment. Other American women architects who are overdue for monographs include: Anne Tyng, Norma Merrick Sklarek, and Natalie de Blois.

Both books, and the exhibition, were well received and reviewed in architectural and general publications. Most reviewers of Cole’s book congratulated her efforts with only a few criticisms of its brevity and lack of depth. The most thoughtful review was by Hayden, written in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*. Like most of the other reviewers, Hayden acknowledged that the ambitions of the text were greater than what was possible in “one slim volume,” but she praised it as a “significant, pioneering effort.” As a historian, she commended Cole’s use of untapped primary materials (the etiquette manuals) and methodologies (interviews and oral history), and thought the book was a “good beginning” for subject “long overdue for recognition.”<sup>22</sup> *Women in American Architecture* also received mostly positive reviews. Because it was an exhibition, as well as a book, it was also covered by newspapers. The *New York Times* critic, Ada Louise Huxtable, called the exhibition “a first-rate history” and a “fascinating” story, although she criticized the lack of original drawings,

<sup>22</sup> Dolores Hayden, Review of *From Tipi to Skyscraper*, 362.

<sup>23</sup> Jane Holtz Kay, "Architecture," 474.

<sup>24</sup> John Morris Dixon, letter to Susana Torre, May 6, 1977, Susana Torre Architectural Collection.

<sup>25</sup> "Historical Statistics of the United States."

<sup>26</sup> National Center for Education Statistics.

<sup>27</sup> Susana Torre, interview with author.

and bemoaned that most of the work available historically to women was the design of houses. The most common criticism of the show was how much reading was required. Jane Holtz Kay reviewer described the organizers as having "virtually spread the pages of their newly published book [...] in space on the museum's fifth floor."<sup>23</sup> John Morris Dixon, editor of *Progressive Architecture* also expressed concern with the amount of reading. However, he was impressed by the content and design of the exhibition. He wrote to Torre: "For my part, the insistent arrangement of rows and the extensive text seemed intended to emphasize the seriousness of the subject and the mass of individual contributions from which you refused to extract a few 'stars.'"<sup>24</sup> In contrast to Dixon and others, John Lobell, in *Artforum*, praised the extensive text which made the exhibition easily understood by non-architects, a stated aim of the committee. Clearly the text-based approach worked to make the content accessible, as most of the reviews focused on highlighting some of the women featured in the show, and expressed genuine excitement to learn about their work.

Both *From Tipi to Skyscraper* and *Women in American Architecture*, as part of the feminist movement in architecture, contributed historical visibility to women and made it clear that it was not so unusual to be a woman in architecture. Along with the other efforts by women's professional groups, like WALAP and the AWA, to fight discrimination and transform the profession to make it more welcoming to women, these histories legitimized women's presence in architecture schools and offices. Women who read the books or visited the exhibition, could look at the historical models and see themselves as architects. Employers could no longer claim that there was no precedent for women's full participation in all aspects of practice, including supervising construction. In addition, the publicity surrounding the exhibition and reviews in the general press helped make the public aware of the role that women had in shaping the built environment. By 1980, the number of women in practice quadrupled,<sup>25</sup> and the percentage of women receiving degrees in architecture increased significantly.<sup>26</sup> They were still a minority in the profession, but thanks to the activism of feminist architects, they were no longer isolated and they had historical role models to look to. When a woman encountered the reaction "Oh, I didn't know there were any women architects,"<sup>27</sup> she could now respond by pointing to the long history uncovered by Doris Cole, Susana Torre, and others.

#### *Postscript:*

Since the publication of *From Tipi to Skyscraper* and *Women in American Architecture*, a multitude of feminist subjects and methodologies have been introduced to architectural scholarship. Given this work, and the nearly forty years of unearthing the histories of women, the continued near-absence of women in architectural textbooks and survey courses is shocking. Architectural pedagogy, at least at the undergraduate level in the United States, still focuses on the "genius" architects, and the buildings designed by them; and as a rule, these geniuses are still men, with very few "exceptional"

- <sup>28</sup> Notable exceptions were Jean-Louis Cohen's *The Future of Architecture, Since 1889* (New York: Phaidon, 2012) and Gwendolyn Wright's *USA, Modern Architectures in History* (London: Reaktion, 2008).
- <sup>29</sup> Catherine W. Zipf, "Surveys, Seminars, and Starchitects," 2011.
- <sup>30</sup> <http://dna.bwaf.org/pioneercollection>; <https://undiaunaarquitecta.wordpress.com/>; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject\\_Women\\_Wikipedia\\_Design](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Women_Wikipedia_Design). The WikiD project was launched in response to Despina Stratigakos's article "Unforgetting Women Architects: From the Pritzker to Wikipedia," *Places Journal*, June 2013, <https://placesjournal.org/article/unforgetting-women-architects-from-the-pritzker-to-wikipedia/#0>.
- <sup>31</sup> For example, while studying architecture at Harvard, Caroline James and Arielle Assouline-Lichten drew attention to the under-representation of women by launching a petition to have Denise Scott Brown recognized for the 1991 Pritzker prize awarded only to her partner and husband, Robert Venturi. <https://www.change.org/p/the-pritzker-architecture-prize-committee-recognize-denise-scott-brown-for-her-work-in-robert-venturi-s-1991-prize>

women.<sup>28</sup> When I searched for a textbook to teach my first survey course on European and American architecture in 2015, I could find only a few that included more than about a dozen female names.<sup>29</sup> Women are rarely discussed in class and few essays on women are assigned as topics for research papers. Efforts such as the Beverly Willis Architectural Foundation's *Pioneering Women of American Architecture*, *Un día | una arquitecta*, and the international project *WikiD*, led by *Architexx*, *Parlour* and *n-ails*, are making the history of women more accessible through online platforms.<sup>30</sup> One of the tasks for the current generation of feminist architectural historians is to rewrite the course syllabi and textbooks to finally include the rich history unearthed by previous generations of architects and scholars. Fortunately, students at some schools today are starting to demand the inclusion of women, and other minorities, in the curriculum.<sup>31</sup>

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Figure 1 *Women in American Architecture* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, February–April 1977 (courtesy of Susana Torre).