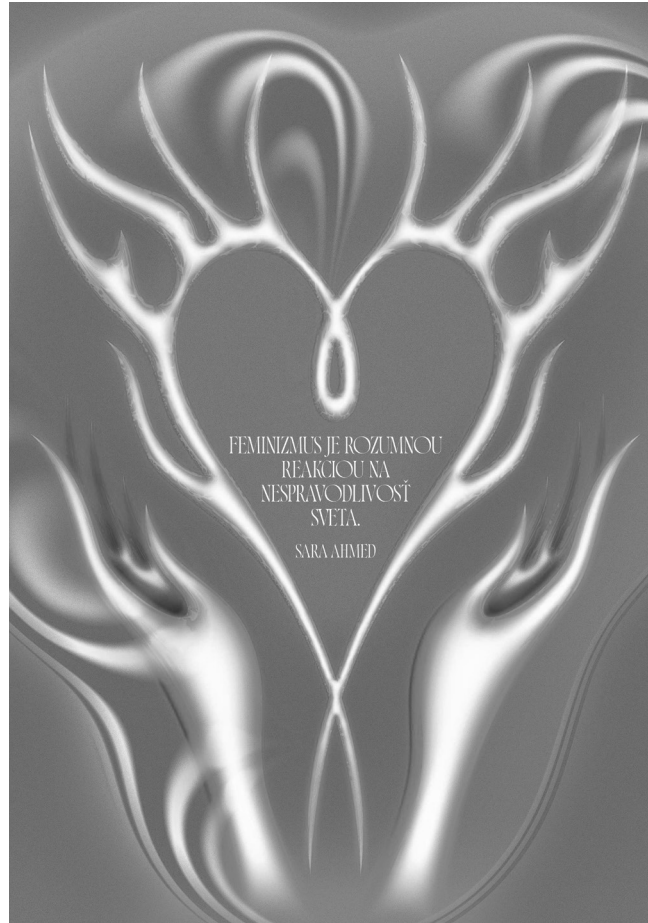


Care – Architecture – Feminism

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Liberated Space:
Care – Architecture – Feminism¹
21 September 2023 – 28 April 2024
Bratislava City Gallery

Curator: Petra Hlaváčková
Curator of artistic interventions: Nicole Sabella
Graphic design: Alina Matějová
Exhibition architecture: Janica Šipulová (Consequence Forma Architects), WOVEN

For a long time, the idea of women becoming architects was genuinely unthinkable. What prevented them from doing so was mainly the broad range of societal expectations that held them captive in domestic roles and discouraged them from pursuing demanding careers in fields like architecture. Another barrier was the restricted access to formal education, as until the mid-20th century, many architectural schools and professional societies either refused to admit women or did so in very limited numbers. Today, architectural training is perfectly accessible to women, in fact they often outnumber their male colleagues. However, they still face many systemic factors that put them at a disadvantage in the profession. The current exhibition at the City Gallery of Bratislava discusses what a space (both mental and physical) freed from biases and discriminations could look like. Entitled “Liberated Space: Care – Architecture – Feminism”, it maps not only the past battles and ongoing struggles but also future challenges in architectural practice.

Curator Petra Hlaváčková, together with the architects of the exhibition, chose an appropriate form to capture the outlined issues in all their complexity. A collage of several sub-themes is fluidly intertwined in the space of a single floor. While the main line of the exhibition consists mainly of personal stories presented through installations or artworks, the theoretical layer itself serves primarily to provide additional context. The cross-sectional character of the exhibition is matched by the great number of (mostly female) contributors. With its collective approach, the exhibition format thus stands in opposition to the myth of the individual creative genius, still strongly present in architectural practice itself. In its form and content, the exhibition, by contrast, emphasises the modern principles of feminism based on collaboration and sharing.

The introductory part of the exhibition aims to draw attention to female personalities in Czech and Slovak architecture. It reveals the reasons for their restricted visibility while in parallel questioning the principles that have shaped the traditional interpretation. The seeming female vacuum in national historiography is redressed by the video projection “Women in Architecture: Architecture and Emancipation in the Czech Republic after 1945”, displaying a unique database of more than 50 female architects including their work. A deeper insight is presented by audio recordings of the interviews with selected Czech and Slovak architects. In their personal reflections, the architects comment on topics such as the practice of the architectural profession, the education of women architects, the balance between professional and private life, and recognition of their work.

The age difference of the interviewed female architects indicates an interesting shift in the perception of gender equality. Almost all female architects admitted, in some way, their disadvantage in the world of men, yet only the latest generation perceives a systemic problem behind it. Women architects practising during socialism

viewed their career opportunities differently. Although they were often given less attractive assignments (Daniela Fenclová) or were denied authorship (Zdenka Nováková) they were not aware of discrimination. Even admitting that it was difficult for them to combine work and care for their relatives (Viera Mecková), they did not question their role and raised their children “under the drafting table” (Míllica Marcinková).²

A partial explanation of the dissociation of an entire generation of women architects from the feminist movement is offered by the second part of the exhibition, entitled *Emancipated Woman*. This section deals with the gender culture of socialist Czechoslovakia, which provided women with a certain version of emancipation, but as it later turned out, one that was in many ways only illusory. Women’s equality was one of the key pillars of socialism intended to distinguish the new egalitarian society from the bourgeois First Czechoslovak Republic or the conservative interwar Slovak state. As such, the socialist regime introduced a series of progressive measures at the outset. In terms of gender equality (and maximisation of the labour force), the regime also pushed for the inclusion of women in the workplace, and Czechoslovakia soon registered one of the world’s highest rates of female employment.

Women’s increasing participation in the labour market undoubtedly led to their economic independence, but it has not been matched by any greater involvement of men in childcare and household duties. After work, working mothers, daughters and wives assumed at home what came to be termed the “second shift”.³ Yet they often humbly accepted the double burden as a price for equality. Thus, under the guise of emancipation, the socialist regime in fact maintained the continuity of traditional gender roles.⁴ In the exhibition, this paradox is explicitly documented by Michaela Janečková and Barbora Šimónová’s image and text collage of historic materials. The representation of women in Czechoslovakia is also the subject of Denisa Nečasová’s installation, using selected photographs from period magazines to illustrate the transformation of the role model of a socialist woman. Depending on the economic situation, sometimes she was a dedicated labourer, or other times a caring and well-groomed housewife, preferably both at the same time. It is therefore this artificial concept of the socialist superwoman that many identify as the origin of the unrealistic expectations placed on women until today.

After this extensive introductory section, the exhibition gradually shifts from a situation-oriented to a solution-oriented critique. Reflection on current topics is enriched with examples of good practice, opening the possibility of different approaches. In the section on city planning, the concept of care genuinely takes on a spatial aspect. As urban planning has long been the domain of white able-bodied heterosexual men, public space often fails to meet the needs of its many other users. The exhibition sees the answer in so-called sensitive

planning that aims not only to involve women in planning processes but also to bring general sensitivity towards a diverse society.

A particularly striking moment of the exhibition is the part devoted to the gender inequality of work opportunities. The section entitled “Her Own Room” refers not only to Virginia Woolf’s key feminist text “A Room of One’s Own” but equally to the famous essay “Room at the Top? Sexism and the Star System in Architecture” by Denise Scott Brown.⁵ Scott Brown, whose work has been continually misattributed to her partner Robert Venturi, experienced the hostility of a male-dominated architectural environment repeatedly. In her critical text, she described the difficulty of entering the professional elite, as if there was no room at the top for women architects.

In the exhibition, the imaginary room at the top that Brown wrote about is embodied as an actual physical room. The lounge-like space serves to thematize the phenomenon of “gentlemen’s clubs”, where profitable job opportunities are contracted within the well-networked circle. Not surprisingly, women architects, as usual primal caregivers, often do not have time to participate in informal events. And even if they do, they still tend to be excluded from activities such as football matches or afterwork drinks. As the exhibition highlights, women’s absence from these meetings has a significant impact on their work opportunities.

As a consequence, the exhibition emphasises the importance of initiatives such as Architektky (Architects), a Czech platform aimed at networking women in architecture. One highly significant feature of the exhibition

is a large-scale fabric installation made up of quotes of the members of this platform. Placed under the ceiling, this textile object uses the room at the top to name the desires of women trying to succeed in architecture despite gender inequalities. The installation thus complemented the issue of precarious working conditions, as recently presented in the Czech pavilion of the 18th International Architecture Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, by enhancing the specific female experience.⁶

The narrative of the exhibition makes it clear that the common aim should not be to teach women to survive in the competitive masculine world but to reform the character of the architectural profession itself. The last part of the exhibition therefore deals with architectural education. After all, the school environment is the primary location for the opportunity to guide future architects towards a collective approach instead of an individualistic one, towards the awareness of different perspectives, and towards the many diverse areas of the profession, not only the prestigious ones. Such a non-hierarchical, informal and open concept of architectural education is presented in the installation “Never-Never School” by the Slovak collective Spolka.⁷

One of the aims of the exhibition was to present care as an everyday activity and social responsibility. After correcting the historical canon and presenting current issues in the architectural profession, the exhibition concludes with a return to its main message. It leaves visitors with an awareness of the urgent need for caring designers and planners, instead of starchitects, while pointing to feminism as a practice to be embraced.

1 Authors: Menna Agha (EG/CA), Brady Burroughs et al. (SE), Alžběta Brůhová (Platforma Architektky, CZ), Klára Brůhová (CZ), Stanislav Biler (CZ), Monika Bočková (SK), Helena Huber-Doudová (DE/CZ), Katarína Csányiová (SK/AT), Petra Hlaváčková (CZ), Tomáš Hlaváček (CZ), Michaela Janečková (CZ), Ziliä Qansurá (Bashqortostan/AT), Alina Matějová (CZ), Šárka Malošiková (CZ), Henrieta Moravčíková (SK), Markéta Mráčková (COSA, CZ), Denisa Nečasová (CZ), Martina Pouchlá (CZ), Emília Rigová (SK), Barbora Řepková (CZ), Nicole Sabella (DE/AT/CZ), Spolka (SK), Julischka Stengele (DE/AT), Šárka

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2 More in MORAVČÍKOVÁ, Henrieta. 2015. Invisible Architects: The First Generation of Women in Slovak Architecture. *Architektúra & urbanizmus*, 49(1-2), pp. 82-103.

3 A term used by the American sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild in *The Second Shift. Working Parents and the Household*

Revolution. New York: Viking 1989, republished 1997 and 2012.

4 ŠKORVANKOVÁ, Eva and DŽAMBAZOVIČ, Roman. 2024. Socialistická rodinná a populačná politika na Slovensku. *Kapitál* 8(3) [online]. Available at: <https://kapital-noviny.sk/socialisticka-rodinna-politika/> (Accessed 13 May 2024).

5 SCOTT BROWN, Denise. 1989. Room at the Top? Sexism and the Star System in Architecture. In: Berkeley, E. P. (ed.). *Architecture: A Place for Women*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press. pp. 237-246.

6 “The Office for a Non-Precarious Future” by Eliška Havla Pomyjová, David Neuhäusl, Jan Netušil, commissioned by Helena Huber-Doudová

7 More in GREŠÁKOVÁ, Lýdia, TABAČKOVÁ, Zuzana and RÉVÉSZOVÁ, Zuzana. 2020. Mapping with Care as an Outline for Post-neoliberal Architecture Methodologies - Tools of the “Never-Never school”. *Architektúra & urbanizmus*, 54(1-2), pp. 6-19. doi: 10.31577/archandurb.2020.54.1-2.1