ARCHITECTURE AND CARE:

Public Office and Assistance Identity of the First Generation of Chilean Women Architects

In comparison to design tasks, other aspects of architecture such as assistance and care work have been historically underestimated, categorizing them as part of the sphere of female duties. Paradoxically, tasks have been key to the integration of women into work through public and administrative positions. This article studies the first generation of women architects in Chile, recounting their conflicts with the profession and the roles that, even today, affect those who practice it.

It’s very big
and very uneven,
it has a different surname:

Department of the Mayor
Department of Public Works
Department of Legal Affairs
Department of Control and many more.

And so they all go on;
we will focus
for a bit, in the Dept. of Public Works
and within it, Building

This family is made up
By a boss, Mr. Maldonado
two children, Maria Cristina
and Traverso

Violeta del Campo (1991:13)
The author of this poem, Violeta del Campo, was one of the first women Architecture graduates in Chile. She studied at Universidad Católica, graduated in 1944, and in the 1950s began working at the Department of Public Works of the Municipality of Santiago, an institution in which she remained for 39 years. An amateur poet, Del Campo self-published a series of books of poems in which she recounted her experiences in that workspace. In the verses of "Municipal Family," she narrates two experiences that seem to exceed her individual experience and reflect that of a generation of women architects: on the one hand, she represented the figure of the Architect-Public Official, with whom a large part of her contemporaries can be identified; and on the other hand, her writing expresses how their identity was marked by gender stereotypes that were reinforced during the first half of the twentieth century, where women and femininity were associated with domestic chores. In this sense, the poem which depicts office coworkers as a 'family,' seems to be located at that intersection between the workspace and the domestic space.

Despite the imaginary of the architectural profession being often associated with the image of the creative person who works in their individual studio, the first generation of Chilean women architects was mostly dedicated to this other field of working in public institutions. Why did the first women architects occupy this space? How did their presence in public institutions compare to that of male architects? This text addresses the relationship between femininity and public office within architecture in the 1930s and 1940s in Chile. It also investigates the possibilities of interpreting this phenomenon from the perspective of the ethics of care, which recognize the value in actions and decisions driven by the common good, benevolence, recognition of the other and their care (Gilligan, 1982). In this sense, we seek to interrogate the past role of women architects in the field of public service, looking to assess the significance of their experiences in our current conceptions about architectural work. These tasks are less associated with the creative development of architects and more with the possibilities given by collective and assistance-oriented action of state policies.

Female Architects in a World of Male Architects

The historiography of Chilean architecture between the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century shows a process of professionalization of the discipline in which it is possible to identify the emergence of the ‘Chilean architect’, which until 1930, always referred
to a man. From the year 1930, when Dora Riedel, the first Chilean woman architect, graduated from Universidad de Chile and was promptly followed by dozens more in subsequent years (Peliowski et al., 2019), the masculine identity of the architectural trade was contested.

Three decades later, in 1962, the lawyer Felícitas Klimpel published her book *La mujer chilena*, where she analyzed the conditions of the professional women of her time, including architects. Her diagnosis concluded that “the Colegio de Arquitectos has 99 women registered. A large part of them work as Architects in state agencies. This is a career that attracts women.” (Klimpel, 1962: 173) Here, Klimpel acknowledged the importance of the public service market for women graduates.

This ‘public office phenomenon’ that Klimpel identified on a national level can also be found in other countries, reflecting a globalized historical trend. This has been pointed out by several researchers who have recognized the importance of public service in the first generations of women architects, for example, in the United States (Wright, 1977), Spain (Molina & Laquidáin, 2009; Agudo & Sánchez, 2011; Matesanz Parellada, 2014), the United Kingdom (Fowler & Wilson, 2004), Scotland (Shepard & Kosmala, 2012), and Argentina (Daldi, 2018). An echo of this trend has also been found in the current situation of women architects.

To illuminate the case of Chile, it is useful to highlight some theses derived from these international studies. According to sociologists Bridget Fowler and Fiona Wilson, for example, women architects have historically developed a series of “survival strategies,” such as a “resigned accommodation” and “appropriated male identity” in order to adapt to a labor world that is marked, in Bourdesian terms, by a male “habitus.”1 These habits are related to some particularities of architecture work: first, since it identifies with the artistic world, the ethos of the fusion between life and work tends to prevail, which validates excessively long workdays, while also making it difficult to reconcile professional work with reproductive work and domestic care – which is traditionally assigned to women. Secondly, since its work structure depends on project commissions and open calls, it is a profession for which working conditions are usually precarious, and even more so for women who often have responsibilities of less importance or are seen as an economic burden due to their potential motherhood. Finally, architecture conforms a professional field marked by the Roarkian2 figure – the figure of an architect who identifies with traditionally masculine traits such as competitiveness, risk-taking, authority, creative autonomy and even aggressiveness (Fowler & Wilson, 2004; Shepard & Kosmala, 2012; Molina & Laquidáin, 2009; Agudo & Sánchez, 2011).

In this sense, public office – in the past and even today – offers a different experience that entails other types of habits and ethics: it groups together routine and technical tasks, less competitive tasks (often characterized as ‘aids’ by male colleagues), which are also mostly based on relational, affective, and expressive
skills. At the same time, public office jobs embody the experience of economic stability, regular schedules, and less discriminatory selection processes, which allow women to better balance professional and domestic life (Molina & Laquidáin, 2009; Agudo & Sánchez, 2011).

In response to these observations, Klimpel’s early diagnosis allows us to interrogate the causes and effects of the incorporation of Chilean women architects into the labor field of public institutions, in the first half of the twentieth century.

Women Architects in Public Office
In Chile the incorporation of the first generation of women architects into public institutions coincided with several historical processes. In the architectural field, it ran parallel to a context of sanitary urban problems and demographic increase, which demanded greater housing responses and a controlled expansion of cities. This led to an expansion of the public role of architecture. This originated the creation of different public institutions such as the Caja de la Habitación Popular (1936), the Sociedad Constructora de Establecimientos Educacionales (1944), and mortgage institutions for financing real estate investment. There was also a push to integrate the principles of Modernism in architecture, particularly within the reconstruction of southern cities after the great Chillán earthquake of 1939, which in the same year promoted the creation of the Corporación de Reconstrucción y Auxilio, another public institution with building faculties (Eliash & Moreno, 1989).

In the social and political sphere, this concurred with the consolidation of feminist movements in Chile, driven by the demand for women’s suffrage, policies to improve the living conditions of women, and their integration into the professional workforce. Central to this consolidation was the role of the Movement for the Emancipation of Chilean Women (MEMCH), founded in 1935, which capitalized on women’s demands while representing their participation in the rise of the Frente Popular (Popular Front), which led many of them to join public institutions, once the Frente joined the government. Finally, another factor that contextualizes the phenomenon of women architects in public office was the formation of the Chilean middle classes in the twentieth century. As Soledad Zárate and Elizabeth Hutchinson (2017) have demonstrated, the expansion of the developmentalist state between the 1920s and the 1970s, which essentially sought the industrialization of the country and the strengthening of public institutions, generated a significant amount of state employment. Thus, the middle classes of bureaucratic identity had a rapid growth, comprising 30% of the Chilean population between 1940 and 1950, reaching a structural cohesion that gave them the capacity for political pressure and participation. In turn, the state significantly absorbed the growing number of women technicians and professionals, resulting in the stimulation of higher education in women. On the other hand, the expansion of state coverage of services related to tasks of the
reproduction of life – such as education, health, and the protection of old age – entailed a reduction in the load of feminized work in the private sphere, freeing women’s time and allowing them to develop other activities, such as work, political involvement or recreation.

In this context, women were recruited to occupy state positions, preferably those that required assisting other people or those associated to skills such as organization or cleaning and taking care of people, which have traditionally been attributed to a presumed feminine – domestic and maternal – nature. Thus, teachers, midwives, nurses, and social workers embodied the inclusion of women in the professional workforce in that period, while also representing the emblematic assistance of the Chilean welfare state (Zárate & Hutchinson, 2017).

Most women employed by the state were professionals from those feminized fields. But also women educated in administrative techniques – typists, stenographers and secretaries – were massively incorporated to public services, fulfilling functions associated to fine motor skills and the ability to manage a home. These tasks, according to the standards of the time, were typically associated to women (Queirolo, 2019). However, women workers who did not comply with the feminine stereotype were also employed, as not an entirely insignificant number of accountants, engineers, and architects also joined the state.

In her book about Chilean women, Felícitas Klimpel offers a list of those women architects who worked in public institutions in the first half of the twentieth century (Klimpel, 1962). By comparing this enumeration with the graduate records of Universidad de Chile and Universidad Católica (Strabucchi, 1994; Basáez, 1999), it is indeed shown that most of them were incorporated into the space of public institutions. In this context, the ‘first generation’ is considered as the group of women architects that graduated between the years 1930, when Dora Riedel received her diploma, and 1949, the year that precedes the beginning of a different period. In fact, beginning in 1950, women architecture graduates began to significantly participate in various work fields. This was the case for several names that have gone down in history due to their notorious careers in private practices or in the academy, such as Raquel Eskenazi, Myriam Waisberg, Ana María Barrenechea, Angela Schweitzer or Hilda Carmona, who all graduated in the early 1950s.

Between 1930 and 1949, 46 women architects graduated from the two universities that taught the degree in Chile – a number that does not represent the effective number of women students, since several enrolled in the courses but never graduated. Of these 46 women architects, we have employment information for 31 of them. We also know that 29 women architects worked in public office at some point in their careers, particularly in the technical, architectural or works directions of the Ministry of Public Works, the Ministry of Development, the Fund of Public Employees and Journalists, the Fund of Private Employees, the State...
Railway Welfare Fund, the Reconstruction and Relief Corporation, the Housing Corporation (Corvi), and in various municipalities and provincial offices (Klimpel, 1962; Hecht, 2000; Darmendrail, 2020) [FIGS. 1, 2].

Several of these women architects combined their work in public office with their work in private practices, but it is interesting to note that most of the time this work occurred in association with their husbands. For example, Inés Frey worked together with her architect husband in Concepción, designing several private buildings. When she separated from him in the 1950s, she worked in the Technical Office of the National Health Service and later in the Fund of Private Employees. Luz Sobrino collaborated with her engineer husband, also in Concepción, although she also worked for a long time in the Fund of Private Employees of the same city. Berta Cifuentes, on the other hand, partnered with her architect husband to design privately commissioned buildings in Chillán. A similar case was that of Victoria Maier, who worked from 1943 in the Cooperative Department of Health Works and then dedicated herself to private projects with her architect husband. However, in 1954 she began working in the Housing Corporation and between 1960 and 1980 she was a technical inspector in the Department of Housing, Urbanism, Public Works and Transport of the Comptroller General of the Republic (Hecht, 2000; Darmendrail, 2020).

Incorporation into public institutions also concerned men, although the phenomenon differs in that a
significant percentage of the men of that generation were partially or exclusively dedicated to the entrepreneurial sphere of architecture, exercising the liberal function. And, unlike the women architects, men graduated by the hundreds during those two decades [FIGS. 3, 4]. By crossing the information of men graduates of Universidad de Chile and Universidad Católica (Strabucchi, 1994; Basáez, 1999) with the Diccionario Biográfico de Chile (Figuroa, 1953-1955), we can point out that between the years 1930 and 1949, 542 of the total 588 qualified
architects were men, among which 119, a relatively much lower proportion than the women, worked in public office at some point in their careers.

**Testimonies of Contradictions**

The architects of the first half of the twentieth century, both in Chile and in other regions, built a narrative that represented them as creative professionals. Through this identity they sought to differentiate themselves from the practical and scientific mentality of engineers, with whom they shared the labor market and university faculties during the nineteenth century, and from whom they had wanted to become autonomous since the turn of the century (Peliowski, 2020). Moreover, the creative identity was associated with the free exercise of the profession, as opposed to the more technical and administrative work offered by public office. This mentality is reflected in an article that was published in the *Boletín del Colegio de Arquitectos de Chile* which recorded the disciplinary discussions, addressing and depicting the figure of the 'public office architect' as the professional who "fails in freely exercising the profession or does not dare to undertake it, and seeks a salvation job," since "most architects exercise freely and, in doing so, they believe that they can really create, that they can give to society the best of themselves, realizing their vocation, where they can be realized" (Boletín del Colegio de Arquitectos, 1957:20-21). In this context, how did women architects perceive their work regarding this disciplinary vocation? Some testimonies from members of the first generation of women delineate a conflictive relationship with their professional identity which was caused by the difficulty of satisfying the work imaginary that, as we will see, was not only artistic, but also masculine.

For example, in an interview published in 1987 in the Universidad Católica's *Revista Universitaria*, architect Aída Ramírez referred to her years of study suggesting that the creative abilities of female students were treated as suspicious:

> There were extremes in which they believed us less capable than men [...] It was hard for some teachers to trust us. I remember several occasions when I arrived with a drawing or project and they asked me who had done it for me (Revista Universitaria, 1987:74).

Two other women architects of the same generation who were employed in the Works Directorate of the Municipality of Santiago, parallelly produced some works of literature – as amateurs – which represented the same figure of the woman architect who faces obstacles. In the novel *El monstruo que crece caminando*, by Graciela Espinoza (under the penname 'Eponina'), the protagonist is a young upper-class woman architect who sacrifices her work in her private practice which she ran with her brother, to take care of her stepdaughter. The daughter is her husband’s, from previous marriage, who, in addition, forbids her to work. Justifying this sacrifice, Sylvia, the protagonist, expresses her pride in deciding
to dedicate herself to parenting, comparing the little girl to a building: "I had the satisfaction that there was my grain of sand kneaded with some tears, which gave more consistency and value to that new building," because "to build is the motto of my life" (Eponina, 1979: 7). The novel takes place between dramas and sufferings, exposing the conflicted emotions of a woman torn between her professional passion and love for art, and the maternal vocation she feels with her stepdaughter.

On the other hand, in Violeta del Campo’s poems – including "Municipal Family" that introduces this article –, it is possible to identify signs of boredom with the routine, as well as resignation and resentment for the lack of recognition of her sacrifice at work and her contributions to the office, in addition to a contempt of her peers for the fact that she is a woman. In "Secretary Gladys" she complains that "[...] she complains to me / for passing to her / something to write / but yes, she declares / if it was Mr. Travers / she doesn’t mind / doing fifty or more / Is it because he is a man? / Is it because of his looks?" (Del Campo, 1991a:21). Here, she is pointing out the differences in treatment she and her male colleague receive. In "The End of Municipal Life," on the other hand, she regrets that her work: "was not recognized / they kept me down / they robbed me of 2 degrees / and a chiefdom" (Del Campo, 1992:70). This conflict appears several times in other verses indicating the presence of contradictory emotions regarding her hierarchy in the office. In "The Memory," the architect finally seems to reject her identification with the sphere of the sensitive – that is, satisfying the traditional feminine trope of emotionality – by warning that "I did not come looking for love / I came looking for work / I said and I retired / sadly" after a male colleague said to her "'Retire already', no one / wants you" (Del Campo, 1991b: 18).

These stories resonate in some way with the strategies of resistance identified by Bridget Fowler and Fiona Wilson, deployed by women architects who, in a markedly patriarchal professional culture, must resign themselves to distrust and be kept in lower positions of labor hierarchy, or usurp male behaviors to survive in the office. Thus, they point out an apparent inequality between the male and female experiences of the architectural labor field.

**Healthcare Identity and Political Agency**

The sources of this period tend to draw a professional panorama in which two areas of architectural work – that of competing artist-entrepreneurs and that of the architect in public office – seem to have corresponded to a differentiated, or sex-based, distribution of professional roles. This distinction proves the thesis of the sociologist Anne Witz (1992), according to which the modern professional market has had a binomial structure that separates the occupations that have been feminized (following maternal, caring and administrative conditions) from those attributed to the masculine
world (associated with physical strength, leadership, and intellect). In the architecture field, this is the traditional split “between geniuses and administrators” (Fowler & Wilson, 2004).

For Felícitas Klimpel, at the beginning of the 1960s, the main contribution that women could offer to the progress of Chilean society was to assume those tasks in which men would “waste their virility.” While she celebrated that women were entering the labor force en masse, at the same time she thought that they should limit themselves to replacing men in those “office, sedentary jobs, which were excessively easy for those who, like men, do not have the concerns of motherhood, parenting, and housekeeping” (Klimpel, 1962: 220).

However, the phenomenon of women architects in public office does not necessarily have to be interpreted as the effect of a resignation to minor jobs, since it can also be read as a place of female agency, a place in which lied the possibility of building an identity associated with social action and political participation.

The association with the political is indeed one of the characteristics of the new generation of middle-class professional women. As the historians Zárate and Hutchinson (2017:280) point out, the situation of women in developmental Chile is characterized by the “self-representation of women as an active part of the middle-class groups, protagonists of the modern project, of progress and reformism installed in the first half of the twentieth century in Chile.” In this sense, it is of interest to recognize some cases of political militancy and participation among the first generation of Chilean women architects, and even in some of the feminist movements of the time. Worth mentioning is the trajectory of Inés Frey, who became involved in left-wing activism, associating herself with the Communist Party. In particular, she attended the Women’s Congress of the Popular Republic of China in Beijing, as part of the Chilean delegation, together with the feminist Elena Caffarena in the late 1960s (Poblete, 1993). For her part, Inés Floto was part of the feminist circles of the late 1930s, exposing the improvement in the living conditions of working-class families through state housing, during the MEMCH’s First National Congress of 1937. In addition, she was part of the Women’s Committee that supported the presidential candidacy of the representative of the Popular Front, Pedro Aguirre Cerda (Olivares, 2020). Another case is that of Victoria Maier, who participated in the communist resistance against the Nazi regime during the 1940s in Austria. Maier was captured by the Gestapo and managed to be extradited to Chile in 1942, and joined the Communist Party for her return (Hochhäusl, 2020). They, and others, were also associated with resistance movements, and denounced human rights violations during the Pinochet dictatorship several years later.

Thus, public institutions seem to be a dichotomous space, functioning at once as a place for determination as well as of political agency for women; as a place of regression as well of professional progression. It is
there that women architects found both the assignment of a gendered labor role, as well as the possibility of actively participating in the management of a 'caregiver state,' where they constituted a significant percentage of the workforce. In this sense, there are two lines of thought that have conceptualized care as the axis of feminist thought in recent decades and that illuminate this dual phenomenon of women architects. On the one hand, the materialist approach observes the sexual division of labor, which establishes that caring and emotional development roles are a social construction assigned to women, conditioning them from childhood for tasks less valued economically and socially (Federici, 2013). On the other hand, the ethics of care assumes the existence of a feminine quality – although it is not exclusive to women – that is associated with the ability to care for others, proposing that the challenge is to overcome its undervaluation and stereotyping in society (Gilligan, 1982). Seen from both perspectives, the history of Chilean women architects in public office contributes both to making their work visible and also the sexualization of their professional roles. It also contributed to validating – throughout history and in the present – an ethos of architectural labor that is different from that of exercising the the role of an 'artist,' where technical, administrative, bureaucratic and routine works are conceived as fundamental elements of a public and caring architecture.

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Notas / Notes

1 "Habitus" refers to the series of habits, dispositions, and skills shared by people from the same environment in terms of social, labor, religious, ethnic, cultural, or other conditions. These habits are integrated by imitation and include the forms of socialization of individuals in a group, and the group expression of a collective culture.

2 The term 'Roarkian,' taken from the authors Dana Cuff and Mary N. Woods, references the architect protagonist of the novel The Fountainhead, by Ayn Rand [1943], named Howard Roark. He represents the artist archetype of who must fight not to compromise his individual vision in a world full of conventions and mediocrities. He also embodies the libertarian and individualist ideology of the author.

3 The research "Entre líneas. Una relectura del discurso moderno a través de las mujeres de la Escuela de Arquitectura uc" (Fondo Semilla uc 2010) revealed that, of the total 252 women that enrolled in the architecture career at Universidad Católica, 126 graduated between 1930 and 1979. Available at: <https://entrelineasarqu.uc.cargo.site/inicio>, accessed on June 17, 2021.
Bibliografía / Bibliography


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