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ADOPTING OR DODGING THE HEROIC MODEL: PROFESSIONAL TRAJECTORIES OF ESTONIAN WOMEN ARCHITECTS

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Abstract: The article focuses on gender-specific experiences of Estonian women architects in the late Soviet and post-Soviet Estonia. Architecture has been, and to a great extent still remains, a rather masculinist field, adhering to an image of heroic individualist creative genius and supporting a very demanding and uncompromising work culture. These preconceptions often make it complicated to forge different career paths or to appreciate alternative or more cooperational modes of practice. The article asks if and to what extent the unwritten rules and prejudices have affected Estonian women architects' experiences in studying architecture, establishing their careers, combining the responsibilities of professional and private lives, and building up their image as (women) designers in a general sense. Based on in-depth interviews with 16 professional architects aged 33–92, the article also highlights the differences and similarities of practising architecture as a woman in the Soviet and post-Soviet social and economic contexts, mapping them onto findings of international feminist research in the context of both Western Europe and the former Eastern Bloc. Additionally, the article refers to the productive possibilities of oral history as a method to complement and challenge the conventional architecture historical writing as well as the intersubjective character of the narratives thus constructed.

Keywords: architecture, feminism, late Soviet, post-Soviet, oral history

The mainstream discourse of architecture involves certain prejudices and encompasses a number of myths, one of the strongest and most pervasive of these being that architecture is not an ordinary discipline but a special calling, a heroic journey of self-realisation that surpasses all other aspects of life. In the centre of this myth stands the architect, a highly innovative creative individual with a unique vision and an ability to grasp with equal competence the deeply philosophical considerations of space and habitation as well as the

very technical aspects of constructional engineering. Although designing and constructing a building is a complex endeavour that involves input from a large number of people with different professional competences, the public discourse of architecture is still centred around a single individual as the heroic creator of the new. Needless to say, such a heroic genius is a masculine trope, defined by qualities such as boldness, independence, toughness and vigour – all of which have been coded in Western culture as masculine traits. Additionally, in public this image of the profession as centred around unique creative individuals and their singular chefs-d'oeuvre is being held up by a canonical narrative that presents the professional genealogy as "'a lineage of great men', laying out both the 'masters' from whom he has descended and the impressive followers in his wake" (Stratigakos 2016a). Regardless of a decades-long tradition of feminist critique and a quest for alternative approaches to the conceptualisation and practice of architecture (Matrix 1984; Shonfield 2001; Brown 2011; Awan & Schneider & Till 2011), the mainstream combining the "mystique of architectural authorship" (Stead 2006) with a "naturalization of the masculine domination in the field" (Heynen 2017: 262) still results in a profession with a strong bias towards the masculine in both its intellectual and social values as well as organisational and working culture – a tendency that seems to be universal regardless of the differences in nuances related to whether the context is Western European, socialist Eastern European, Soviet or post-Soviet Estonian.

Based on in-depth interviews[1] conducted with sixteen Estonian women architects aged 33–93, the article aims to investigate their options in relation to accommodating to and fitting in or dodging and subverting this heroic model of architecture as a vehicle of creative self-realisation. The article discusses the professional milieu of architecture and the mechanisms of related cultural values, and the impact those conditions have had on women's studying and practising architecture during the Soviet and post-Soviet times. Did the experience of studying architecture differ in those eras? What kind of cultural and professional values and conceptions of work ethics were imprinted through the studies? What have been the available paths of entering professional life, and what has it taken to establish oneself as a (woman) architect? What kind of creative goals have different women architects set to themselves? Do they believe that female authors have a specific type of creativity or certain preferred modes of working, or do they, on the contrary, consider the gender aspect irrelevant? What does it mean to balance the roles of a creative professional and a mother in the context of architecture? What role, if any, have feminism and women's emancipation played in their identity formation and professional and personal choices? The interviews took place from autumn 2018 to winter 2019 as part of the preparatory process for an exhibition "A Room of One's Own: Feminist's

Questions to Architecture" (2019) at the Estonian Museum of Architecture.[2] The interviewees were selected based on their creative and social activity and public acknowledgement and chosen so as to represent as broad an age spectrum as possible to cover both Soviet and post-Soviet working contexts. The qualitative interviews were based on an open set of questions concerning their experiences with architecture studies, conditions of setting up a career, family background, work and life balance, and reception of their work. The oral interviews generally took an hour to an hour and a half and were recorded, involving the interviewees' consent to use the video recordings and transcripts for public display. In a shortened and edited form, the recordings were used for a one-hour film displayed at the exhibition and broadcast on the YouTube channel of the Estonian Museum of Architecture.

ORAL HISTORY IN ARCHITECTURE

The productive potential of oral history in architecture has started to be more widely acknowledged only recently (Gosseye & Stead & van der Plaat 2019). However, it promises to provide a valuable and much-needed supplement to the traditional methods of architectural research with a potential for mending the gaps in the existing canon and providing various counter-narratives to the prevailing high-profile mainstream discourse. From the perspective of the gender issue and the more or less marginalised authors, producers, co-producers and users of architecture, the conventional methods of the historical research of architecture could present certain specific pitfalls. The published primary material and available archival sources may be highly biased – it is a widespread practice for successful architects and architecture practices to finance the research of their own work and publishing of their monographs (Stratigakos 2016b: 66), while the archives of architecture museums and similar archival institutions are mostly based on material gifted or bequeathed by architects who wish to preserve their heritage for public knowledge and access (Harris 1989: 15), which results, due to a combination of gendered prejudices and women architects' low self-esteem, in hindering them from offering their material to the archives, to the collections comprised predominantly of designs of men.[3] If the archival institutions are able to make acquisitions on their own, their preference goes to the heritage of "major critical practitioners" (Lambert 1999: 313), which reinforces the existing canon even further. The lack of archival material, in its turn, results in difficulties in including the work of women architects in museum exhibitions and curating solo or group shows of their oeuvre (Weissmüller 2017: 22). In this situation, and in tune with the rising

interest in subjective accounts of history accompanying the post-structuralist turn, oral testimonies have, since the 1970s, already contributed to research of practitioners who have been traditionally silenced out in architecture history narratives, resulting in various monographic accounts of the first generation of women architects. Nevertheless, those accounts tended to follow the conventional monographic model by simply substituting the character of the male genius with the figure of an extraordinary woman, rarely raising questions beyond the aspects of design. In the big picture of architectural historiography, interviewing the architects tended to be used mainly for the elaboration of the narratives of the modern masters already known all too well (Gosseye 2019: 13). However, the most productive potential of the oral history of architecture might lie in posing different questions, including a greater variety of agents, and investigating not only the results of the design process but also the different conditions of architecture production, the impact of networks of influence, professional regulations, or informal aspects of organisation in the field. Collecting and assembling oral accounts from contexts and regions that have been less covered with conventional historical research enables us to measure the existing research models and assumptions against a more global perspective that would reveal the local specificities of gender systems and the inconsistencies of standard models, helping to produce a more plural feminist architecture history (Burns & Brown 2020). In the context of Estonia, adopting, assessing, and adjusting the existing models of feminist architecture history involves entanglement of feminism and postsocialism and presupposes taking into consideration the historical geopolitical specificities that have influenced Estonian gender politics and practices both during the Soviet and post-Soviet eras (Annuk 2019). Oral histories also display an activist and political engagement, empowering hitherto marginalised groups, creating meaningful connections over the generations, and a communal bond with the public. The ability of oral history to produce counter-narratives of architectural history, which transgress not only the existing high-profile canon but also the entrenched geographical and cultural models, has a great activist potential, all the more if the stories told are presented in various forms of public display (Burns 2019).

At the same time, the specificities of oral testimonies must also be taken into consideration. A narrative account of one's working and private life is obviously never objective – it is not a mere presentation of a previously existing story but rather a means of constructing it in the process. It is a complex narrative performance whereby attention needs to be paid to the use of language, the deployment of narrative structure, the articulation of memory, and the context within which the life is narrated (Abrams 2010: 34). The contingency of the construction of a narrative through interviewing manifests itself especially with women: it

has been observed that instead of presenting themselves as independent selves leading a continuously progressing life unfolding in a linear manner, women tend to construct a picture of themselves primarily in relationship to various other agents (Abrams 2010: 44). A woman is always aware that she belongs to a group that has been defined by the dominant male – or patriarchal – culture. Women's accounts of their life stories are shaped by shared ideas, conventions, and dominant understandings of what these narratives should look like. One can only assume that in the context of architecture as a masculine field with deeply entrenched conventions, the horizon of expectations bears an even stronger than usual mark on the stories conveyed in the interviews. Such relationality may feel occasionally either as a supporting root network or as a restraining grid, but it is an inevitable background from where the individual's choices and actions emanate. Feminist theoreticians have interpreted the relational self in different ways, either as a part of a patriarchal encumbrance that should be gotten rid of, or as a certain strength, an intrinsic quality of a woman's identity (Kirss 2002: 17). Regardless, the testimonies deviating from an unilinear narrative and incorporating the relationality often result in more complex and fuller stories. Additionally, oral history involves intersubjectivity – there is no unmediated narrative but the presence of the interviewer together with their assumptions, prejudices and biases inevitably informs the account as well, showing that subjectivity is in a constant flux (Abrams 2010: 54). In the case of the interviews in question, this was confirmed by many respondents' admittance that they had never considered their professional lives from a feminist perspective, and that setting the questions from such a perspective prompted them to interpret their choices and actions in a previously unimaginable way.

STUDYING ARCHITECTURE AS A WOMAN

Since antiquity, the figure of the architect has had allusions of almost like a kind of superhuman, and the conception of architecture education has played no small part in this. Already Vitruvius, one of the founding fathers of architecture discourse from the first century BC, stressed the comprehensiveness an architect's education must display:

> *He must have both a natural gift and also readiness to learn. He should be a man of letters, a skilful draughtsman, a mathematician, familiar with scientific inquires, a diligent student of philosophy, acquainted with music, not ignorant of medicine, learned in the responses of jurisconsults, familiar with astronomy and astronomical calculations.* (Vitruvius 2002 [33–14BC]: 9)

Certainly some of those high ideals have lingered well into modern times. Additionally, the personality-forming character of traditional architectural studies has been equally acknowledged and appreciated. Architectural education plays the key role in disseminating particular social and cultural values to the future practitioners, thus reducing not only the possible differences between male and female students' modes of creativity, design goals and professional positions but also levelling out the different experiences of students from different social classes, encouraging to adopt a commonly held masculine and middle-class worldview and promoting a male-dominated practical model (Kuhlmann 2013: 43–45; Harriss 2016: 250–251). These are transmitted by curricula presenting architecture histories that have no place for women, neither as producers nor as conceptualisers of the discipline.[4] Sociological research has indicated that female students of architecture seem to be aware that they are entering a male domain even before initiating their studies (Women in Architecture 2018: 9). The general structuring of design education has been described as something like a boot camp, dominated by competitions, star systems, and high-risk gambles (Fowler & Wilson 2004: 106). The commonly used studio system works as a rite of institution whereby the design juries, comprised almost exclusively of male architects, assess the students' projects without much quantifiable or easily graspable evaluation criteria, resulting in a well-known academic syndrome, in which the students believe that mystery – or the neglect of rational teaching methods – is an indication of the mastery of the instructor (Fowler & Wilson 2004: 107). Paradoxically, to an extent, this might be part of the lure of the discipline.

In the Western European and American contexts, enrolling in an architecture school could present psychological as well as practical obstacles – for instance, in a large number of universities in the USA, architecture colleges were not admitting women until 1972, when an Education Amendments Act ended gender discrimination in federally funded programmes (Stratigakos 2016b: 21) although some private architecture colleges remained male-only even into the 1980s. In the Soviet Union and the Socialist Eastern bloc, the situation was different – incorporating women into workforce in all fields including technical disciplines was an ideological as well as a practical goal. Women's studying architecture was encouraged in numerous ways, even, like in the case of German Democratic Republic, by creating all-women classes with special schedules for seminars and exams to accommodate students with small children, or providing student dormitories with nurseries (Engler 2017).

Although no such generous measures are known from Estonia, the introduction of free higher education facilitated obtaining higher education for both genders, and the number of female students grew remarkably in architecture

as well. Thus, throughout the Soviet years from the 1950s to the 1980s, the numbers of male and female architecture students at the Tallinn Polytechnic Institute and the Estonian State Institute of the Arts (today the Estonian Academy of Arts) were practically equal, with women even slightly dominating in the 1970s.[5]

Nevertheless, studying and teaching architecture was and, to a great extent, remains in essence a masculine activity. In Tallinn Polytechnic Institute, where architecture was taught at the end of the 1940s, the curriculum included a compulsory summer practice at a construction site where women were expected to bear equal workload with men. In the 1960s, the first year of architecture studies at the State Institute of the Arts meant half-days at the construction site with lectures and design classes taking place in the evenings. Regarding the lectures, seminars, and design classes, all the faculty staff during the Soviet years was male. None of the interviewees remembered having any female teachers, except the youngest ones studying in the 2000s, who were taught urban landscape design by Katrin Koov, a recent graduate herself. In 2019, the architecture department at the Estonian Academy of Arts had three full professors, all men, and woman to man ratio among the rest of the faculty was 13:56.[6] Furthermore, women among the faculty tend to teach supportive subjects and not the core subjects. This conforms to the international situation where recent examination of architectural training in Germany, the USA, and Canada by Marianne Rodenstein showed that the few female professors did teach subjects such as architectural history, planning, and environmental psychology, but that only a few of them actually taught architectural design (Kuhlmann 2013: 45).

The attitude of the male professors towards the female students was different depending on the personalities. While many legendary architecture professors were remembered as old-school gentlemen in spite of their certain quirks, almost all interviewees admitted to having experienced more or less open expressions of prejudice, diminishing, patronising or condescension:

> *It was common for the male professors to casually say that women did not know how to calculate. One of them declared that spatial geometry was essentially beyond a woman's comprehension. He left the impression that we shouldn't even bother. But this attitude was more common to teachers of construction engineering than to teachers of design.* (H, 69, personal communication, 15.10.2018)

Several others described more indirect patronising and an air of prejudice implied by small remarks like the professors' delight if the class contained only

two women among men, or conversely, their obvious disappointment on the first day in September when it turned out that the class consisted of predominantly women. The 'crits' – the feared and revered criticism and grading events whereby a design jury made up of several professors and teachers collectively interrogated and assessed the projects completed in the design class – often paid more thorough attention to the work of male students, especially if they were more eager to actively dispute the teachers' verdicts, and offered a more casual commentary to the female students, especially if they tended to be of a more quiet type. Such gendered behavioural patterns seem to be a universal problem, with a quantitative study involving 112 design juries of architecture schools in the USA concluding that not only were the female students given less time for presentation and discussion of their projects, but the female members of the juries were also interrupted much more frequently than their male peers (Kuhlmann 2013: 46). During the Soviet years, when there was a state system of job placement whereby all graduates were assigned a workplace in one of the centrally managed state design offices, the interviewees admitted that a kind of a pre-selection of the more promising male students took place during the study years, who were then offered job placements in the more creative and desirable EKE Projekt design office. In the post-Soviet decades, such a differentiation did not have any relevance anymore; however, now differences could manifest themselves in the context of design goals and solutions – it was pointed out that the male professors often expected bolder interventions and stronger architectural solutions, disapproving some female students' preference to work on a smaller scale and propose softer interventions, incorporating grassroots activism and community input. The latter confrontation certainly also sprung from generational difference as much as from a gendered one.

ESTABLISHING ONESELF IN THE PROFESSIONAL FIELD

While German and Anglo-American feminist scholarship has highlighted the difficulties women architects have had with getting commissions and establishing themselves professionally, and the wide-spread prejudices that women are only suitable to design dwellings or buildings related to nursing and care (Pepchinski 2017; Stratigakos 2016b; Scott Brown 1989), the labour system in the Soviet Union as well as in the socialist bloc in general included official job placement regardless of gender. Recent university graduates were officially assigned a professional position in the state design offices, which meant that soon women made up a significant proportion – up to half of the employees (Marciniak 2017: 65; Lohmann 2017: 178). At the same time, it also meant

that working was a constitutional obligation for both genders, and the location or position of the assignment – hence also the projects to work on – were generally not for oneself to choose. This situation meant that women architects were active in a very broad range of typologies and tasks, and apparently no discrimination based on building typologies took place. A brief typological survey of the production of Estonian design offices in the 1960s–1980s generally confirms this[7] – women architects authored all kinds of design projects ranging from industrial architecture, infrastructure, and urban planning to housing, hospitals, and schools. Still, there are remarkably fewer women architects who have designed the most representative public buildings, the commissions of which were usually directly assigned to a handful of top male architects in the offices. Also, women rarely rose to key leadership positions in the field in any of the countries of the Eastern bloc (Pepchinski & Simon 2017).

In the post-Soviet era, the legislation has mostly required open anonymous competitions for public buildings resulting in a number of remarkable projects by women architects or offices with female leaders or partners. At the same time, commissions of housing, office and commercial buildings are now increasingly driven by the real estate developers, a predominantly male-dominated field with its own power networks. The interviewees, professionally active in the recent decades, confirmed that all their private and corporate clients have been men, and that getting a hold in the respective networks has taken certain effort. Project negotiations and design meetings often include patronising situations, and one of the most common assumptions is that a woman in a design team would be only responsible for interiors:

> *Whenever I have been introduced as an architect at a meeting, the men at the table assume I deal with interior decoration*. (S, 75, personal communication, 29.09.2018)

> *It was taken for granted that the smaller details like stair railings, interior doors or anything like this were given to women architects to produce drawings for.* (A, 37, personal communication, 12.11.2018)

> *At school already, the male students were mocking that you would be the one to choose curtains*. (P, 33, personal communication, 15.10.2018)

> *There was a meeting concerning an urban planning project, and a municipal official asked me if there were any men coming to actually talk to.* (B, 42, personal communication, 6.12.2018)

> *At the beginning of the career, surely many a tear was secretly shed because of such pressure from the men at the negotiation tables.* (K, 45, personal communication, 9.11.2018)

> *It is frustratingly common that men from construction companies assume that you are incompetent simply based on your looks*. (L, 60, personal communication, 11.01.2019)

> *It was openly declared that such a responsible project could not be entrusted to young women because surely they would soon take the maternity leave and probably disappear after that.* (R, 73, personal communication, 15.11.2018)

Regardless of the age of the architect, the interviews brought out a number of such occasions of casual sexism, with most of the occurrences taking place during the post-Soviet era. At the same time, the respondents did not assign particularly great importance to those events but rather seemed to accept them as something inevitable best to be ignored. While accepting the given conditions in the professional field, there is a strong conviction that architecture is meritocratic: success only depends on personal talent and hard work. Instances of patronising and sexism are interpreted as singular occurrences and gendered discrimination is not seen as a structural problem – women practitioners want to believe that the problem can be addressed only in historical context and is surely something that has been left behind by now (Clark 2016: 16–19). The interviews confirmed that this attitude prevailed among the Estonian women architects as well – while admitting the instances of discrimination, they still firmly believed that it could and had to be overcome by proving oneself through talent and hard work. It is common knowledge that architecture is a discipline in which the culture of long hours is deeply entrenched and even glorified (Fowler & Wilson 2004; Burns 2016). In the Estonian context, this is exacerbated by cultural norms whereby women have traditionally seen work (either domestic or professional) not only as an obligation and self-justification but also, paradoxically, as a source of vital power in its own (Kirss 2002). Correspondingly, most of the interviewees stressed dedication and extensive working hours as an inevitable guarantee of high-quality design and success as an architect, internalising the masculinist values of exceptional effort and endurance, and often presenting the fact with pride:

> *Being an architect is not a job, it is a lifestyle. It requires full devotion. There are never nine to five workdays, but long evenings and weekends, unexpected extra tasks and changing deadlines to deal with*. (L, 60, personal communication, 11.01.2019)

> *Architecture is a profession of all or nothing. Surely you could also choose to just have a desk job at somebody's office but if you consider architecture your calling and a means of self-realisation, you have to devote yourself fully*. (V, 46, personal communication, 12.11.2018)

> *I have worked for more than forty years and during that time I have never taken longer holidays than a week. But mostly from Thursday to Sunday*. (R, 73, personal communication, 15.11.2018)

> *One of my children said that whenever she came home, regardless of the time of the day, she found me sitting at the desk*. (H, 69, personal communication, 15.10.2018)

Quite few respondents acknowledged the dangers of such singular devotion and expressed the need to find alternative working modes – albeit still secretly worrying that it could have a negative impact on the design results:

> *It all takes its toll. With running a design practice, position as the president of the architects' union, and small children to raise, I acquired extra abilities for multitasking. But it could happen that I did not have time to talk to my husband for days. He said he read the newspaper to get to know my whereabouts*. (M, 52, personal communication, 16.11.2018)

> *For the last years, we have tried to pay attention to the issues of mental health at the office. We have taken a conscious decision not to go crazy with the work. But of course, maybe the results would be better if we did, if we really pursued the extremes with each design consideration*. (A, 37, personal communication, 12.11.2018)

> *Somehow I have managed to pay a lot of attention to my family and children as well, in addition to design work. Although sure, if I had devoted myself more, I could probably have achieved more as well. But not everybody can be the prize winner. It is unhealthy to cultivate the culture where only the first prizes are of value.* (T, 48, personal communication, 12.12.2018)

> *The aim of the experiment [establishing an all-women design office] was to find alternative working modes where design work could be sensibly combined with having a family and raising children. But I have to say it did not really work out. You have to concentrate on designing 100%.* (K, 45, personal communication, 9.11.2018)

One of the problems is the lack of diverse modes and possibilities of being an architect. The prevailing heroic all-or-nothing attitude prevents working part-time, which is universally regarded with suspicion and strong prejudice (Burns 2016: 66). There is an overall lack of female role models in architecture (Women in Architecture 2018: 10), and especially when it comes to addressing the practice in ways deviating from the mainstream norms:

> *When I teach, there are as many girls as there are boys in an architecture class nowadays, and I can confirm that they are no less talented or hardworking than their male peers. But when they enter the job market, a radical difference comes in. This means that there must be some significant failings in the course of the education – we are not providing them with adequate models and tools to build up a career as a woman*. (V, 46, personal communication, 12. 11.2018)

So, women architects model their practice on masculine examples ingrained through studies focused on individualistic male masters, and on a later exchange with peers carrying on similar values and ethics. Failing to live up to these standards would be considered a weakness, and only very few acknowledge the necessity to challenge the standards themselves, let alone from a feminist position. It is characteristic that while high-achieving, successful and emancipated, practically all the interviewees were reluctant to associate themselves openly with feminism. Although seemingly paradoxical, such a stance was widespread already during the Soviet period when women felt deep ambivalence towards the feminist label and perceived emancipation as yet another directive forced upon them by the state (Moravčikova 2017: 49). A need to dissociate oneself from official Soviet ideology to support cultural and personal identity that would be based on resistance hindered appreciating the more empowering aspects of a feminist agenda. In the post-Soviet era, the reasons have shifted – now the prevailing reason for keeping away from feminism is the fear of being placed into a kind of handicap category:

> *Every time I get an invitation to present at a symposium or be included in an exhibition or a book, it has to do with me being a woman. Usually the organisers have trouble achieving gender balance, and I feel that I'll be filling a gap.* (V, 46, personal communication, 12.11.2018)

> *I have often found myself in situations where I get some kind of advantages or am being preferred to other candidates because I am a woman and they have a quota to fill*. (P, 33, personal communication, 15.10.2018)

> *I refuse to label myself as a woman architect – I am an individual. Sure, I find the issue interesting in a general sense, but I do not see it as my personal issue. No external labels can define me*. (A, 37, personal communication, 12.11.2018)

> *In my long career, I have often found myself as the only woman among ten to fifteen men around a negotiation table, and I have never thought that I should think of myself as different from them*. (R, 73, personal communication, 15.11.2018)

The handicap fear is universal; when in 2017, a list of 50 inspiring women architects was published by a popular design site dezeen.com to mark the international women's day, it provoked a passionate letter of objection from one of the included, Dorte Mandrup, stating, "I am not a female architect, I am an architect" (Mandrup 2017). A fierce discussion followed across the web and social media. Mandrup finds that as soon as a designer or a project is set into a "female" category, it ceases to be seen as a serious piece of work, and is presented as something beautiful and harmless, removed from the "real world" of "architecture of men" – the "female architecture" encompasses no corporate commissions, no tough competition, no skyscrapers, etc. And once a year, on the International Women's Day, the achievements in this handicap category will be praised, to be relegated to the margins for the rest of the time (Mandrup 2017). Other international female star architects have expressed similar sentiments, most significantly Zaha Hadid, the only woman to have individually received the most prestigious Pritzker prize,[8] who has also decisively rejected the attempts to address herself as a woman architect (Stratigakos 2016b: 64). The situation is definitely problematic and quite similar to the one in the arts scene where it has been observed that especially artists born around the 1980s–1990s do not want to associate themselves with the feminist label for fear that it would be marginalising and would work rather as a hindrance to the institutional recognition they are trying to achieve (Diaz Ramos 2016: 20). However, Karen Burns has pointed out that women practitioners' reluctance to embrace such categorisation should not be interpreted as a betrayal of a feminist position but that it can also be seen as a conscious choice to define oneself on one's own terms (Burns 2012).

As the general consensus in the architecture world supports the "all-or-nothing" concept of the discipline, it is easy to deduct that the reasons women often fail to make it to the top are to be found in their naturally smaller ambitions. Justine Clark has called this one of the most dangerous myths surrounding women's self-realisation in architecture (Clark 2016: 23). Her three-year

research project mapping women in Australian architecture clearly brought out both how commonplace and how ungrounded the assumption was – it is not the natural lack of ambition but rather the practical difficulties with attaining the necessary experience to proceed, the impact of gender bias in estimations of potential and competence, and the impossibility to build up a career in a way that would enable for periods with greater and lesser intensity that present the greatest obstacles to women's advancement (Clark 2016: 21). However, the interviews conducted with Estonian architects revealed that many women do share this assumption, at least to some extent:

> *A woman is a woman, maybe she is just not so ambitious. There are also very few women in politics, aren't there. Maybe they just do not want all that responsibility?* (M, 52, personal communication, 16.11.2018)

> *Women are nurtured to be modest. Often women do a lot of work in the background but for the public eye they prefer to push somebody else to the forefront. It's a shame, really.* (K, 45, personal communication, 9.11.2018)

> *If you look at other cultural fields, it's the same. Take music – a woman conductor is a rarity. There must be a reason – maybe it's a psychological problem?* (H, 73, personal communication, 15.10.2018)

For some women, the tendency to remain, more or less voluntarily, in the background might have to do with a very widespread pattern to work in tandem with their husbands or partners. Establishing a practice together with a husband has been a common choice for Western women architects since the early days of the Modern Movement (Colomina 1999; Marciniak 2017),[9] and when in the post-Soviet era the Estonian architects started to establish private practices, creating a small enterprise of a husband and wife was also fairly common. As only three of the sixteen interviewees had personal experience with co-working with their husbands or partners, the current selection did not really enable me to comprehensively investigate the issue and the answers rather represented their general understanding of it. Nevertheless, some interviewees admitted that such a mode of working entails role division whereby women often deal more with managerial tasks and negotiations, and men concentrate more on actual designing – an arrangement that could leave an impression, even if only subconsciously, that the male partner would be entitled to a larger share of the authorship and honour. But such a role division is certainly not a universal rule.

Inevitably, a husband-and-wife design team also brings up the issue of balancing work with family life – a difficult question for any woman architect but

even more for architect couples where the responsibilities are shared in both realms of life. The stance that combining architecture with parenting is an impossible task dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century, based not on mere issues of logistics and time management but on a deeper conviction that the tasks require essentially opposing and contradictory characters (Stratigakos 2008: 284). Contemporary international research on these issues is divisive. Most of the surveys confirm raising a family as one of the major career obstacles – for instance, an overwhelming number of women architects in Australia pointed to remarkable difficulties within the architectural workplace once they had children (Clark 2016: 23). Family obligations mean that women have to consider their limited time resources very carefully, and in this situation they often decide to opt out of professional social life like after-work drinks, exhibition openings, and informal events, relinquishing the opportunities for networking and promoting their work to critics and journalists. Yet the architecture world is highly competitive and such socialisation, promotion, and building up one's public image is extremely important (Heynen 2017: 262). However, there is data that suggests that the situation is more complex than that and childcare cannot be the only issue to blame: a European survey pointed out that in France, where women are considered particularly good at combining children and work, only a third of the architects are women, whereas in countries where there is very little state support for families regarding childcare, like Bulgaria, Greece and Croatia, the proportion of women architects is the highest (Women in Architecture 2018: 12).

The assessment of this aspect in Estonia must take into consideration the specificities of the Soviet and post-Soviet context. The emancipated Soviet woman was a highly ambivalent construct: in the public and professional sphere, an equal contribution was expected from a woman but in the private sphere traditional and patriarchal expectations remained in place (Annuk 2015: 70). Thus, in reality, women were left with a double burden of work. For many, this was beyond their capacities, and inevitably left very little energy and time for the extra efforts necessary for reaching the top levels in architecture, such as successfully partaking in competitions, promoting their work in public, and participating in wider professional discussions. This could be the reason why even if the number of women architects working in the design offices was almost equal to men, only a handful of them have been recognised as canonical authors. While Valve Pormeister (1922–2002), the most successful and decorated woman architect of Soviet Estonia, highlighted for her exceptional work by several of the interviewees, was child-free, another high-achieving woman of the Soviet era, Irina Raud, enjoyed a highly unorthodox family model whereby her engineer husband took care of most of the domestic obligations, enabling

his wife to fully devote herself to self-realisation in the professional and social realms (Kaik 1991: 5).

In the post-Soviet era, there certainly has been movement towards a more egalitarian family model but the changes in cultural and social norms have been slow. The Soviet rhetoric of egality has left a problematic legacy – egality is often being conflated with Soviet ideology and thus seen as something unnatural, incurring scepticism and antagonism (Annuk 2015: 71). For the Estonians under occupation, the need to mentally dissociate themselves from anything related to Soviet ideology included a deep suspicion of feminism even if they benefitted from it in their everyday experience. At the same time, the post-Soviet transition meant a desire to turn back to pre-occupation, pre-war values and cultural norms, including the conservative gender roles of the 1930s. This combination still affects practitioners today and has made open and conscious embracing of feminism difficult even for those who actually share its principles. Needless to say, it deeply affects everyday practices as well. Most of the interviewees, both those having children and the child-free ones, admitted that in spite of the best efforts, the situation is still asymmetrical, and as a rule, women are bearing the bigger part of responsibility for children and family obligations.

DESIGN STRATEGIES AND CAREER GOALS

The question whether women have different design strategies or a different sense of space has been debated since the second wave of feminism. In the 1970s, the understanding that women have different priorities in designing and using space was inspired by concurrent feminist practices in the visual arts, one of the most influential being the Womanhouse project (1972), led by Judy Chicago, whereby a derelict dwelling near Los Angeles was filled with spatial installations by several artists exploring the ways how architecture and spatial organisation define gender norms and expectations, working as a means of discipline, normalisation, and patriarchal oppression. It has also been argued that women designers value more highly qualities like connectedness, inclusiveness, an ethics of care, everyday life, subjectivity, feelings, complexity, and flexibility in design (Franck 1989). A number of feminist designers from the second wave have also aimed at drawing inspiration from the female body, preferring round and curvaceous forms, designing spaces that embody aspects of enclosure and containment, and opposing rigid geometries and phallic towers. Significantly, practices defining themselves as feminist, with UK's Matrix as a pioneer, have explored alternative strategies of intervention into the built environment, employing a more inclusive approach, engaging future users in

the design process, contributing to consultancy initiatives, and bridging the gap between bureaucratic expert culture of planning and real estate development and the everyday level of the communities. They have also attempted at less hierarchical ways of organising the design process and managing the offices, aiming at various collaborative models and shared authorship. At the same time, developing feminist architectural practices has taken place in a lively dialogue with theoretical considerations, striving to relate feminist theory to architectural design and built practice to written text. Together, those initiatives have worked as an implicit yet powerful critique of architectural value systems. As a result, feminists have opened up definitions of architectural design to include process as well as product, drawing and writing as well as building, blurring the distinctions between design, history, and theory (Rendell 2012: 91). At the same time, naturally, the larger part of international women-led practices neither define themselves as explicitly feminist nor relate much to such aspirations, preferring to aim at succeeding in the mainstream architectural discourse. In those cases, claiming that there is no essential difference between how a man or a woman designs and what kind of space is being produced, often forms an important basis of their position (Mandrup 2017).

While none of the interviewed Estonian architects was ready to claim an openly feminist position, it was surprising to find out that the majority seemed to think that women do perceive space in a different way, that they often do emphasise and value different aspects of space than men, and that accordingly, they do approach architectural design in a slightly different way. The most commonly mentioned aspect was a certain sensitivity and a greater consideration of the existing context, in terms of historical as well as natural surroundings of the building being designed. Those qualities were equally highlighted either when talking about their own practice or when being inquired about the work of other, contemporary or preceding women architects whom they admired. The most common answer when asked about notable Estonian architects and specific qualities of their work was to point out Valve Pormeister, the most revered woman architect who has an undisputed place in the local architecture history canon as a modernist innovator from the 1960s–1970s. The Alvar Aalto-inspired work of Pormeister, offering a more nuanced, softer take of the Soviet modernism and integrating architectural spaces with considerate landscaping, definitely reveals a tactile sensibility and a keen eye for environmental and contextual aspects. But at the same time her position as the single most celebrated woman architect is somehow seen as standing in for all the women architects in general, as if her existence and universal appreciation would obliterate the problem of underrepresentation of all the others. She is sometimes seen as the ideal standard model for a woman architect whose design principles and

attitudes all the subsequent women should follow if they want to successfully fulfil the role. In the contemporary context, Siiri Vallner seems to have taken on the role of an undisputed model, the exceptional qualities of whose works are universally praised.[10] In both of their works, qualities like sensitivity, tactility, thoroughness, and consideration of the surrounding urban, natural and historical context were highlighted. Similar features were brought out also when talking about aspirations in their own work:

> *Sensitivity is extremely important. It does not mean that the new building should not be different from the existing ones and that it should completely blend in, but it should demonstrate a certain connection with its particular place. To design something only for the sake of standing out, of being trendy and eye-catching... okay, you might do that too, but you must be sure that it would also age well, otherwise it would be ridiculous in ten years already*. (T, 48, personal communication, 12.12.2018)

> *I am a nature lover, and when designing to natural surroundings you must blend in. But it is the same in urban context – each area, each urban district has its own character, its mood, and you should take it into consideration and try to maintain it. Direct contrast as a design principle is not something I would appreciate much. Sure, a scandal is always a way to get into the spotlight, but it is not sustainable*. (S, 75, personal communication, 29.09.2018)

> *I think women architects are more sensitive and take the existing context into consideration to a greater extent. To design a building that would fit into historical context with a certain conservatism is often a much bigger challenge than to create something new and outstanding. Maybe women are more ready to constrain their ego in this purpose*. (H, 69, personal communication, 15.10.2018)

At the same time, the "feminine" sensibility is paradoxically characterised with tropes that were often used by some of the modernist heroes themselves, such as mysteriousness, mood, and poetics of space, highlighting the subjective and even notoriously vague nature of architectural rhetoric:

> *The thing that I am looking for is a certain sensitivity, the plastic quality of space. We were taught to appreciate very rational floor plans but I don't think spaces should be all rational and rigid, I'm rather aiming at a hint of mysteriousness, a poetics of space. Spaces that have impressed me have*

> *not been rational at all but rather involve some arbitrariness that lends them a poetic feel.* (M, 52, personal communication, 16.11.2018)

> *What inspires me most is music, its ability to create a certain mood. Similarly, I strive for architecture that would be able to generate a mood, a distinct feeling*. (A, 37, personal communication, 12.11.2018)

At the same time it is acknowledged that contextuality and appreciation of softer values might not be characteristic to architecture designed by women but rather a more universal contemporary trend:

> *I think that our time has become, so to say, more feminine in general. Architects are more flexible, more open for cooperation, consideration of the user. This applies to many male architects as well*. (V, 46, personal communication, 12.11.2018)

> *There are feminine and masculine energies manifesting themselves, and nowadays certainly more feminine energies are to be seen in architecture – more sensitivity, attention to detail, less vigour and more indirect impact. It is not so important to ask if these aspirations come from a man or a woman*. (A, 39, personal communication, 18.10.2018)

The interviews also confirmed the stereotypical expectation that women are more willing to deal with the everyday aspects of space, and many of them consider this also something that distinguishes women's approach to design in general:

> *If a male client comes to commission a private house, he only describes the main rooms he sees necessary, like a large living room, a cabinet, a sauna. I always tell him that I also need to meet his wife who then details the spaces she needs, the aspects that are essential for convenient housekeeping*. (S, 75, personal communication, 29.09.2018)

> *Surely women architects think more of the small everyday details, like add the flowerpots to the balconies, or consider if there are enough playgrounds and places to hang around with kids*. (M, 52, personal communication, 16.11.2018)

> *The reason why I have always been interested in in-between spaces, the areas around and between the buildings, is that everybody uses these. Designing buildings can be quite elitist sometimes but space is actually*

> *an everyday phenomenon, something ordinary and practical that is meaningful for everybody. The everyday, democratic dimension of space should be appreciated more*. (K, 45, personal communication, 9.11.2018)

Another recurring aspect when discussing the design principles and attitudes towards work was the issue of ethics. Many high-achieving architects emphasised design as a social mission as opposed to design as a personal career, and many highlighted integrity as an important personal characteristic:

> *The social dimension of my work has been really important and I have devoted myself a lot to initiating, organising and managing things. But it has primarily been driven by a sense of mission rather than ego-driven career decisions*. (H, 69, personal communication, 15.10.2018)

> *When taking up a job as the city architect, it was most important to think strategically, to encompass a wider perspective of the city. I was invited to be part of the city government because I did not have political connections, I was independent in my decisions and would only consider the urban and architectural merit*. (R, 73, personal communication, 15.11.2018)

> *As a landscape architect you deal with environmental aspects, and it becomes clear really quickly that it is not only an issue of organising space for pedestrians or bicycles or cars on a certain lot but a part of a much bigger picture. And it is impossible to deal with these things professionally if you are not integrating all these considerations into your own personal life. You have to live what you believe*. (B, 42, personal communication, 6.12.2018)

> *We have a lot of projects that deal with social issues. It all starts with the choices as to what kind of commissions you take, what kind of competitions you choose to take part in. The deepest motivation for being an architect is the hope to change something for the better*. (V, 46, personal communication, 12.11.2018)

Thus, it may be deduced that women architects, regardless of their reluctance to openly associate themselves with a feminist cause, see the social responsibility as one of the primary motivations of their work, aiming at a more inclusive built environment. At the same time, their adherence to the view that women produce a more sensitive architecture possessing some kind of "everyday poetics" sustains an essentialist approach that contributes to continually delegating their work to a realm separate from male "mainstream" architecture.

CONCLUSION

The interviews with the Estonian women architects revealed that regarding studying architecture and establishing oneself in the professional field, many issues are universal and reflect the international situation. To a large extent, the masculinist architecture culture goes unchallenged, and the myths of the heroic individualistic creator and the belief in hard work and exceptional talent as the sole basis of success are mostly being universally accepted and also taken pride in. A certain suspicion concerning the open acceptance of the feminist position and the fear of finding oneself in a handicap category are also widely shared. At the same time, the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts add a specific twist occasionally resulting in paradoxical situations that bring out discrepancy between women's choices, actions, and rhetoric. Both Soviet and post-Soviet generations of women architects have a highly ambivalent relationship with feminism and with their possible options of defining and establishing themselves as architects and women. Cultural norms and attitudes rooted in the Soviet period have continued to affect the internalised expectations and self-perception of woman architects until today. In the Soviet period, the impulse to mentally dissociate themselves from anything related to Soviet ideology included a suspicion of feminism even if they benefitted from it in their everyday experience. Thus, the social conditions that seemingly celebrated women's emancipation did facilitate women architects' careers but in essence did not lead to substantial changes – neither in the masculinist architecture culture nor in the unbalanced canon. At the same time, the post-Soviet transition brought along a desire to turn back to pre-occupation values and cultural norms, including the conservative gender roles of the 1930s resulting in a peculiarly pervasive essentialism lurking beneath the surface. This combination still affects women's positions and attitudes today and can make conscious embracing of feminism difficult even for those who actually share its principles.

All the interviewed architects had been remarkably successful, yet while often finding themselves representing the minority in the higher ranks of architecture profession, they were reluctant to address it as a systemic problem – the achievements or failures of a woman architect were only assessed on an individual basis. Accordingly, extreme workload and difficulties of work-life balance were being accepted as inevitable in the profession, although the transition to post-Soviet period has brought along some acknowledgement of the problem. In terms of design principles and architectural qualities, there was a surprising consensus in seeing their approach as displaying characteristics that could be called feminine although it was also acknowledged that generally those characteristics are on the move to becoming more universally accepted, thus obliterating the need for distinguishing them as specifically feminine.

The interviews brought up a number of issues hitherto never addressed in the Estonian architecture discourse, such as gender parity, specificities of architecture education, gender-based networks of power in architecture, and the limiting effects of accepting the underlying myths of the discipline. They also constituted a highly instructive process of oral history production whereby in the course of the discussions, the interviewees often started to reframe their experience, considering for the first time their studies, career paths, and design processes from a feminist perspective. The knowledge produced was certainly intersubjective and pointed out both the relationality of the professional and private selves of the architects and the different possibilities of conceptualising their lived experiences. In that sense, interrogating the personal and informal aspects of architectural production and posing issues from a feminist perspective might help to start constructing a more nuanced picture of Estonian architecture culture and conditions of design production of the late Soviet and post-Soviet times.

NOTES

[1] All audio recordings and written transcripts of the interviews in the possession of the author. For the sake of anonymity, the interviewees are referred to by an intitial only.

[2] See https://arhitektuurimuuseum.ee/en/naitus/a-room-of-ones-own-feminist-questions-about-architecture/, last accessed on 8 January 2024.

[3] For the situation regarding gender balance and acquisition and donation practices at the Estonian Museum of Architecture, see Ruudi 2021.

[4] Various activist initiatives are aiming at correcting this situation; see https://womenwritearchitecture.wordpress.com, last accessed on 9 January 2024.

[5] The claim is based on the list of all graduates of the faculties of the Estonian Academy of Arts through the years as presented in the appendix of the book *Kunsttööstuskoolist kunstiakadeemiaks: 100 aastat kunstiharidust Tallinnas / From the School of Arts and Crafts to the Academy of Arts: 100 Years of Art Education in Tallinn* (Kalm 2014).

[6] Statistics gathered for the exhibition "A Room of One's Own: Feminist's Questions to Architecture" at the Estonian Museum of Architecture in 2019.

[7] Data and projects assembled for the exhibition "A Room of One's Own: Feminist's Questions to Architecture".

[8] Zaha Hadid was the first woman to receive this most desirable prize of the architecture world in 2007; later Kazuo Sejima (2010), Carme Pigem (2017) and Anne Lacaton (2021) have gotten the prize as one half of a design partnership, and Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara (2020) for their joint practice at Grafton Architects.

[9] For a more comprehensive overview of the tendency, see the website couplingstactic.com, an ongoing initiative for worldwide mapping of architectural husband and wife partnerships.

[10] See the list of Siiri Vallner's accolades attached to a profile story in *Maja: Estonian Architectural Review* (Kauge 2017).

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