

# ARCHITECTURE

## WORK BY WOMEN

*ARCHITECTURE — WORK BY WOMEN, an exhibition sponsored by the Women's Cultural Building Collective, was held at Artculture Resource Centre in Toronto from 2 April to 16 April.*

by Nancy Paterson

**T**he exhibition ARCHITECTURE — WORK BY WOMEN brought together over 30 women architects and students from Ontario and New York. The core of the idea originated from a Toronto group called the Women's Architecture League, an *ad hoc* group of women architects who periodically got together to discuss ideas and commonalities. The interest in the exhibition grew as Kerri Kwinter, the curator from the Women's Cultural Building Collective began to actively solicit work. The diversity of character represented in the exhibition ranged from students in third or fourth year right through to practicing women architects with their own firms. The women had their own particular ideas on the theme of Architecture and Feminism and contributed a small written statement displayed next to their work.

The women met as a result of assembling the exhibition and exchanged concepts and ideas on the design of the show. They exchanged a great deal in terms of mutual respect and admiration through assessment of each other's work as well as how well they worked preparing the exhibition.

Architecture is representative of the collective values of a society and the main interest that I had when approaching the exhibition was, what distinctive concerns did these women bring to their design drawings and plans? Bearing in mind that most work is executed for a male professor or employer, I examined every contribution to the show for its nuances and uniqueness. Ideas that I kept in mind while looking at the work were non-planned space, children's play space and less anthropomorphically-based architectural designs with their resultant oppressiveness arising from their obsession with the human form. I found as many different types of work as there were different kinds of women involved. Some claimed no difference in their work from men's and it showed. Some claimed a philosophical difference but were still working out the form and shape of it. Some were radical in their design approach. Instead of the expressions of feminine anger and rage that is seen in literature and music, I found a sense of making light of tradition and established order in design. A sense of humour, even a kind of mocking of ideas, procedures and methods in an effort to break free and work on ideas that were distinctively the woman's own, free of the constraints of ideology, expectations and economics. Many of the pieces exhibited questioned the validity and criteria of spatial representation and illusion. Architecture is one of the more difficult fields for women to break through as the practice of architectural design function in the very political realm of domestic, commercial and public architecture.

*Nancy Paterson is Associate Coordinator at the Artculture Resource Centre and Archives Assistant at Art Metropole.*

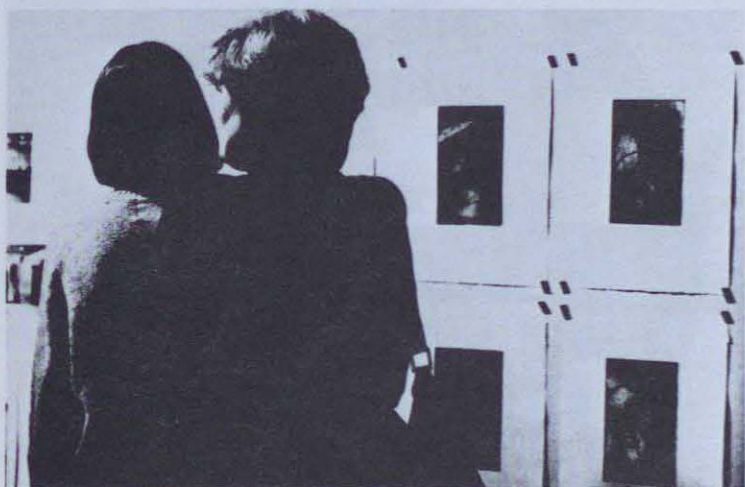


by S. Hero

Exhibits of architecture are rare enough in a city of this size and cultural ego to be appreciative of any attempts to forward the discourse. It is laudable that this particular exhibition included the work of non-established architects and students. The mounting of an exhibit such as this makes painfully evident the lack of public expression of interest in architecture, even from the Ontario Association of Architects. So it is almost extra-ordinary that an institution of this type and size would be interested in promoting and architectural discussion.

The exhibition included a range of work derived primarily from the Universities of Toronto and Waterloo, consisting of Fourth-year Study-Abroad projects. Thesis work, small-scale propositions, furniture design, graphic studies and some larger realized projects by established architects. Particularly impressive were models of room and furniture designs by Fifth-year Waterloo students.

On the whole however, the work lacked evidence of theoretical concerns, reflecting rather a preoccupation with programme-oriented issues. If there was any thematic content to the exhibit it was on a social rather than architectural level. The emphasis was clearly on women rather than on architecture. If the exhibit intended to merely confirm that women and men share equal ability or inability, it seems redundant. However, if more was intended,



that there exists some general difference in attitude between the sexes, the organizers would have been better advised to use a comparative format, though even then such a position would be difficult to take seriously. Architecture, as a creative profession, relies upon individual talent.

In the end the issue must be architecture, and the representation of work from a group composed through criteria which are non-architectural, risks being accused of equal bias, narrowness of scope, and ultimately irrelevance. One finds interesting the difference in attitudes among the participants as reflected through their written statements. Ellis Gallea wrote:

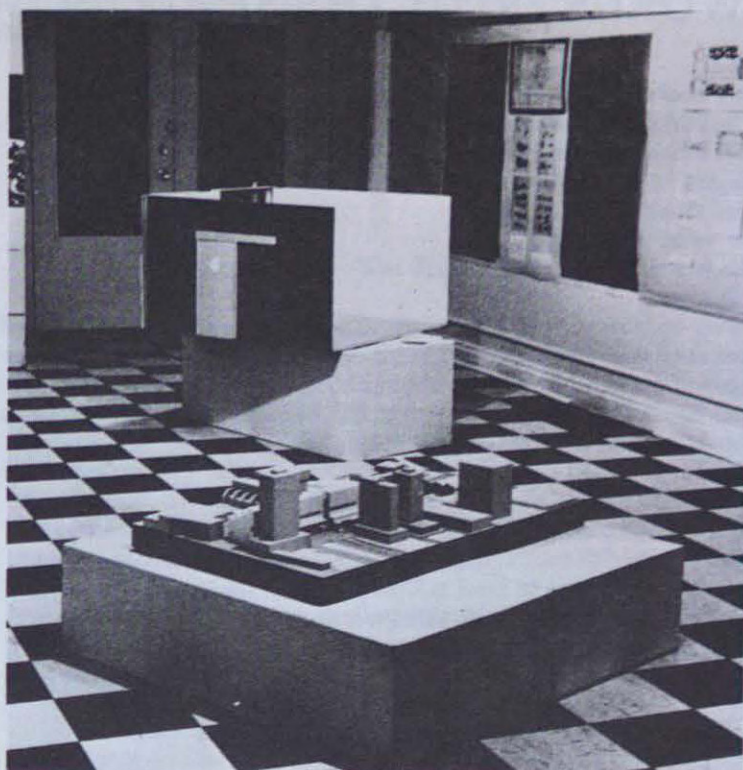
My ambitions as a woman architect: the same as a man's, not more, not less.

And Helen Vorster:

(I have) never been in a situation in which I worked in an office of only women.

Just as architecture in itself is autonomous from political positions, neither can it be sexist or feminist. We would be well-advised to let architecture be architecture, not propaganda.

*S. Hero is the pseudonym of a student currently studying at the Faculty of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, University of Toronto.*



## WOMEN'S CULTURAL BUILDING

### A competition for ideas

Feminism is not an aesthetic. It is a political analysis of being women in patriarchal culture. This analysis becomes a state of mind, a way of being and thinking when it is reflected in one's life. It can be articulated in art, and the art itself can contribute to the process of analysis and consciousness. If art and life are connected, and if one is a feminist artist — that is, one must make art that reflects a political consciousness of what it means to be a woman in patriarchal culture. The visual form this consciousness takes varies from artist to artist.

Harmony Hammond  
"horseblindness"  
*Heresies*

A competition for the Women's cultural building, 'women building culture', due Fall, 1983. Winning entries will be exhibited at A.R.C. gallery. For entry forms and the competition brief please contact: Sandra McKee 924-7846.

WOMEN'S CULTURAL BUILDING COMPETITION  
1 Homewood Avenue, Apt. 414  
Toronto, Ontario  
M4Y 2J8