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Memories of difference: architects' perceptions of professional regression and gender inequality in Pinochet's Chile

Architecture, as practised in Western countries, is one of the professions that has amply incorporated women in the last century, gradually encouraging equality in the workplace. But, as is common in other occupations, women architects have been and still are susceptible to experiencing gender barriers such as the so-called 'glass ceiling' and 'sticky floor', as well as a gender pay gap and overexertion with respect to men. Moreover, when considering historical trajectories, the fragility of gender equality in architecture becomes apparent as it is highly reactive to social and economic crises, demonstrating that, although labour conditions can advance over time, they can also regress. Based on oral interviews, this article studies the case of Chilean architects who were students and young professionals in the 1960s and early 70s — the years preceding the military coup led by Augusto Pinochet in Chile in 1973 — showing how an enhanced attention to collective action during those years of political reform and social fervour motivated impressions of gender equality. In contrast, the social crisis and abrupt cultural transformation prompted by Pinochet's military regime deeply affected women architects' perception of professional agency — that is, their ability to feel integrated and find rewarding jobs.


Introduction

This article discusses the case of architects in Chile who studied and worked as young professionals in the 1960s and early 70s, examining their recollections of the years preceding the military coup led by Augusto Pinochet in Chile in 1973 and the sharp contrast to their experience of the years that followed the coup. Building on the idea of memory as a critical category that allows for the imbrication of individual and collective experiences of the past — a reflection to which we will return in the final comments — we suggest that recollections of collaborative work and of a shared preoccupation with social issues during the years preceding the military regime foster perceptions of heightened gender equality, in contrast to periods of enhanced individualism, apparent in the years following the coup. Through the analysis of oral testimonies, we show how feelings of 'working together' during a period of extraordinary social commotion allowed for a general perception of parity between

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women and men architects, leading to a sense of agency in women trainees and professionals. The personal stories also convey a regression in these experiences of power and participation during the years under the military government, pointing to the vulnerability and insecurity faced by women architects in the workplace.

To what degree architecture has been practised individually or collectively is a recurrent theme in Western architectural history. Although architecture is a profession that has a long history of being narrated around individual and author-centred work, contemporary scholarship on spaces and cultures of practice has shown that, in their daily activities, architects collaborate and discuss projects more often than not, particularly valuing the collective aspects of their work. Various studies have demonstrated that close observation of workplace dynamics offers a counternarrative to the Renaissance-inspired stereotype of the individual genius,¹ showing instead that architects manifest a hybrid identity that is negotiated between respect for individual creativity and the unavoidable processes of collaboration, either with other architects or with specialists that contribute to the materialisation of buildings.² The centrality of collective work also characterises testimonies of architectural education. Rooted in the on-site transmission of knowledge of the construction guilds in the Middle Ages, and with the strong influence of the more recent Beaux-art model of the *atelier* or the contemporary design studio, architectural training has been based on a social structure that is heavily dependent on the spatial relation of *being together* for long hours, allowing for group cohesion and identification.³

In these same studies that address architectural practice as a sociological or anthropological subject, the topic of how women and minorities have participated in the dynamics of collaboration has surfaced as a relevant issue in cultures of practice and production. Collaboration can effectively encourage a perception of horizontality in professional relationships, but at the same time it can contribute to the establishment of segregated structures in the trade, whose members have traditionally been white and male. In 1984, Judith Blau stated that comradeship in firms was 'built on bonds of trust and compatibility that stem from members' similarity' — or of a 'fraternity', in the opportune masculine word used by Mary N. Woods⁴ — but these same elements can also 'promote distrust of those who are in some way different'.⁵ In the context of the gradual incorporation of women in the workplace and persistent discrimination — even more notable in the 1980s than now — in terms of stereotypical 'feminised' roles in the office or with regards to salary, it is not surprising that women, four decades ago, could be considered 'in some way different'.⁶

Other studies have revealed how collectivity in architecture conflicts with a tendency to establish hierarchies of male domination in the workplace, showing an underlying patriarchal structure. As is common in many occupations, women are more susceptible to experiencing gender barriers, such as the so-called 'glass ceiling' and 'sticky floor', as well as a gender pay gap and overexertion with respect to men.⁷ But more specific to the architectural