

Can you give us an example from your research where you noticed a lack of references to women's work in architecture or urbanism archives? And how did this gap affect your research?

In my current research on Simone Guillissen-Hoa, one of the most important sources is the archival collection at the CIVA, the Center for Architectural Archives in Belgium. During a research residency there, I discovered that out of nearly 500 named collections, only five related to women. Two of these were architects, and only one was a Belgian architect.

The first observation is the sheer scale of the gap. It lies at the intersection of several issues: first, the question of preservation in architectural history, which has never been an obvious reflex; second, women's history, with the gender bias that shapes how – or whether – their memory is preserved; and finally, the Belgian historical context. When researching a Belgian architect, one confronts a narrowing identity that makes the research particularly difficult, and the archival collections are almost nonexistent. Simone Guillissen-Hoa's archival collection was recently deposited at the CEA: it consists of private archives now made available to the public.

When traditional archival sources are lacking, which alternative methods and sources do you find most effective for reconstructing women's professional contributions?

When studying the history of women architects, one is often confronted with gaps—or at least absences—in traditional archives. It is therefore useful to ask what constitutes a traditional archive.

In my research, feminist journals have proven to be particularly rich sources, not only for supporting interviews but also for reconstructing networks among women practitioners. They shed light on the economic and material conditions of work, whether productive or reproductive, and on the role of gender in society at a given moment—a moment that is then put into perspective with the architectural production under study.

They also provide abundant information on everyday life, which can support monographic approaches.

In Belgium, feminist journals are part of the Royal Library's collections, which attests to their recognition as archives. Yet in the field of architecture, this reflex hardly exists. If we were to evaluate a student tomorrow who cited feminist journals, we would tend to dismiss such sources. Some documents are thus perceived as more legitimate or acceptable than others.

Oral archives are also extremely valuable resources when studying women practitioners, and more specifically, their networks.

Gossip also enriches research in architectural history: it helps us understand friendships, power dynamics — whether of domination or not — and romantic relationships.

Whether they come from family members or former collaborators, oral archives bring a dimension rooted in feminist practices: the question of gossip – a tool that feminist and queer activists have long appropriated in their struggles. It is a way of organizing collectively. Gossip also enriches research in architectural history: it helps us understand friendships, power dynamics – whether of domination or not – and romantic relationships, particularly in the context of women practitioners. As we know, marital and domestic responsibilities can potentially affect their professional practice, since reproductive work still largely falls to women. This is therefore a relevant element to consider when analyzing their production.

Are there historical differences across periods regarding this lack of archives or these fragmentary archives?

Yes, there are clearly variations depending on the period. Archival treatment has not always been the same over the decades. I am thinking particularly of urban memory, the memory of the city: everything related to urban struggles, city-making, or architectural processes. These have only relatively recently become objects of research and archiving. Just a few decades ago, there were very few—if any—archives specifically dedicated to these themes

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Since then, archiving policies have emerged and gradually become institutionalized, sometimes even nationalized, gaining recognition. But paradoxically, even where architectural archives exist today, there is still no clear or explicit archiving policy that takes gender issues into account. In a way, there is an institutionalization of forgetting. In other words, whereas gender biases in archiving in the past existed without necessarily being identified as such, today they are recognized. Yet they persist, which turns them into conscious political choices – and therefore makes them all the more problematic.

When it comes to navigating between speculation and evidence, especially when there is a lack in the archives because they are incomplete or non-existent, how do you navigate between these two aspects?

To navigate between the complete and the incomplete, one must first recognize that we will always have to work with the hypothetical and acknowledge that the hypothetical is an integral part of historical research—whether for the history of women, minorities, or history in general. But beyond this first step, what seems particularly interesting today is the question of exhumation: how can we tell a history of women and minorities without simply talking about their invisibilization? How can we tell their absences – and, above all, what these absences reveal?

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I think this approach, which does not aim solely to fill gaps but to interrogate their significance, will become an essential methodological dimension of research in the coming years.

At that point, does this imply work that is more field-oriented rather than archive-focused? You mentioned oral history, but what other forms can this field investigation take?

This can include, for example, collecting oral sources: meeting and interviewing the family, descendants, but also the residents of the buildings designed or conceived by the architects under study. Very often, these residents are precisely the direct descendants, which makes the investigation even richer. There is a true genealogy to explore here. Among other sources to mobilize are colleagues, students, and a whole series of actors who are still today transmitters of memory. This is precious material, especially when studying women's history. In the case of Simone Guillissen-Hoa, her archives were managed after her death in 1996 by her only son. He carried out considerable work of transmission over nearly thirty years, combining archiving and advocacy to classify and have this memory recognized. This is a particularly interesting aspect to observe.

Another important detail, related to the memory of architects – not only women architects – is the existence of the ten-year warranty. It obliges architects to keep the archives of their projects for at least ten years. There is thus, in this profession, a form of archiving culture, a good practice already integrated, which is not necessarily the case in other disciplines.

It is also interesting to see how this relationship with archives manifests concretely. For example, in the workshop and apartment project designed by Simone Guillissen-Hoa, there was, both in the plans and in the execution, a

space entirely dedicated to archives. This reflects a very intimate, very direct relationship with memory—a memory that is maintained already during one's lifetime.

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Have your work and discoveries sometimes contradicted an already established historical narrative?

It should be noted that until about ten years ago, there was very little work on Simone Guillissen-Hoa. One could only find a few mentions in the daily press, where she was sometimes presented as the first Belgian woman architect. This is interesting, because in reality, very little research had been done on the first women architects in Belgium. From the very first fundamental inquiries, this status was taken away from her: she was not the first. Here again, we realize the absurdity of certain forms of classification. In fact, there is always a “first before the first,” because we are dealing with professional statuses that are fluid, sometimes implicit, not always recognized or formalized.

It is also interesting to question the labeling of “pioneer” or “first.” There is a tendency to always designate a form of primacy for the women practitioners studied. In reality, this is a form of aberration, both scientifically and historically. In my view, it holds no factual value. And this, of course, creates a tension between, on the one hand, the stakes of the architectural history canon, and on the other hand, those of contemporary feminist methodologies.

How can one reconcile the dual challenge of making women's work visible while avoiding the trap of measuring their contributions solely against frameworks and norms dominated by men?

Regarding methodologies in architectural history, and more broadly at the

intersection with women's history, I think there are two major challenges.

The first is this tension between “grand history” and a separate category. Should we create a specific, somewhat isolated chapter that deals with women practitioners? Or should we adopt what I would call a gender mainstreaming approach, meaning the integration of gendered knowledge into the overall narrative, into what we call grand history?

Then there is a second tension: do we talk about the history of women and practitioners using the historical milestones and canonical criteria that structure architectural history today? Or do we try to work from the margins, using other forms of narratives and other frameworks?

One must both produce separate categories and integrate these narratives into grand history. One must both work through the canon and seek out the margins.

In my view, these two tensions overlap. Today, my position – because I also see these as political choices – is not to choose one over the other. For me, it's not either/or; it's really both. One must both produce separate categories and integrate these narratives into grand history. One must both work through the canon and seek out the margins. This is what can be complex and creates paradoxes in the way we write or practice architectural history. But I truly believe this “both/and” approach is necessary, because it allows us to reach different audiences, respond to different historical challenges, and also adopt varied critical positions.

But at that point, are the methods different for writing “great History” compared to women's history? Do we use the same methods, or do the methods change?

I'll answer with an example. Methodologically, if we want to integrate women practitioners into grand history, or even write a form of alternative history, I think the methodologies can sometimes overlap, be identical at certain stages of research, but they can also differ.

I think of a concrete example: the new feminist canon, that of the "pioneer." Today, in exhibition titles, book titles, and in the way these works are presented to the general public or institutions, the emphasis on the pioneer—being the first, the greatest, the exceptional—"sells." There are capitalist logics behind it—it attracts attention, it works, it's glitz and glamour. For me, this strategy of glitz and glamour is valid.

But at the same time, the critical question in architectural history arises: the status of "pioneer" exists ex nihilo. It doesn't really make sense if you look at the archives, at the genealogy of women practitioners, which extends well before the 20th century. So, deconstructing the figure of the pioneer, reconstructing networks, telling stories of solidarities—that's a strategy that challenges this figure and allows one to write an alternative history. But both approaches can perfectly coexist: you can title a book *The Pioneer* while also telling these stories of networks, solidarities, and the multiplication of supports that have always existed.

That said, this idea of "de-pioneering" is not without controversy.

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It's also paradoxical because this concept of the pioneer precisely questions a recent canon, built by my predecessors—historians of architecture—who spent decades establishing this legitimacy and these designations, which

allowed female figures to be reintegrated and exhumed into grand history. The idea is therefore not to throw all these methodologies away or claim that there is a wrong way to do history. I simply think that when certain methodologies become reflexive, they need to be interrogated and questioned.

Does the fact that women often operate through networks prevent them from being pioneers?

Semantically, the notion of a pioneer really refers to being the first. Being the first invisibilizes everything that came before, all the avant-garde that existed prior and despite everything. For me, there's a double dimension—one I haven't yet fully explored but that seems important to critique: the figure of the pioneer also evokes a colonial past. It's a word that deserves to be interrogated—both in terms of the "first" aspect and in terms of the definition of pioneer, someone who clears a wild, unoccupied terrain. Yet in colonial history, the so-called pioneers weren't really the first either. It's a historical bias that repeats itself.

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Often, the notion of the pioneer is also accompanied by a semantic field linked to revolutionary women. And again, this reinforces the idea of exceptionality, a kind of narrative or myth. Feminist engagement, for example, is often highlighted and presented in different forms, but in the process, it invisibilizes the everyday practitioners—the ones who are not necessarily politically active. So it only brings to light a certain type of profile. That's what I find concerning. This is also why I say it's both-and. Today, I think we can't afford to ignore either side. In the long term, I think the figure of the pioneer may do more harm than good.

Even when we talk about pioneers in reference to their networks, in the end, we often remember just one name. The idea of heroism, of genius, also

evokes a very solitary imagination. At the same time, we need that. There's an identification power in it. In feminist, political, and activist movements, I believe the collective holds a certain strength. But precisely because of that, the inability to identify or humanize a struggle with a name can sometimes weaken it. Conversely, when a person truly becomes the emblem of a struggle, it can also generate forms of dehumanization, even violence. So again, it's both-and.

For me, it's different, because some of the women I have studied are women of power, not always women who worked collectively or engaged in collective action. These are women who sometimes worked alone, frequently with significant wealth, a lot of power, and sometimes who were even more "masculine" than men. In fact, among some practitioners, even today, there remains this drive toward masculinization, internalized sexism, sometimes even exacerbated.

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So yes, the question of power is fundamental. Who gains posterity? Who enters history? These aren't only questions of talent — They involve real issues of economic, social and cultural capital. And these questions are still sorely missing from analytical frameworks in history, in architecture, not only regarding women's history. If we interrogated power more systematically, we would likely tell these stories differently.

From your experience, what institutional changes—whether in archives, university programs, or professional organizations—are most important to prevent the work of future generations of women from disappearing into the same blind spots of history?

To truly counteract this institutionalized forgetting of women and minorities in the history of architecture, I see

at least two, perhaps three, essential levers. First of all, there is fundamental research: it must continue to be funded, supported, and, above all, its results transmitted—through exhibitions, publications, and so on. But beyond that, there are two other important tools.

The first of these is archival policy: institutions need to implement ambitious archival strategies in terms of gender and minority representation. Often, good practices developed for gender can also apply to other marginalized groups — we think in particular of LGBTQIA+ communities or racially minoritized creators. Institutions could really benefit from taking inspiration from specialized archival centers that already work with these publics.

The second lever is pedagogy: for me, this is the ultimate lever to change how we practice and think about architecture, as well as how we remember it. Making courses on gender in architecture mandatory—addressing both historical and contemporary issues—is an absolute necessity to transform both architectural practice and the memory we preserve of it. Even today, it is possible to graduate in architecture — whether in France, Belgium, or elsewhere — without ever having been exposed to a critical gender analysis framework. This is a real blind spot.

One must remain vigilant in the face of the rise of masculinist discourses, or even the resurgence of reactionary theories. These currents represent a real danger, not only for research but also for teaching.

And when I speak of the gender lens, I am actually referring to a broader set of feminist and intersectional critical tools, which also intersect with decolonial approaches and class studies — in short, all questions of power in

architecture. What is also interesting, from my experience, is that students are often more aware of these gender issues than their teachers. A real gap therefore emerges. Without succumbing to the myth that younger generations are automatically the solution, one must remain vigilant in the face of the rise of masculinist discourses, or even the resurgence of reactionary theories. These currents represent a real danger, not only for research but also for teaching, and more broadly for struggles and achievements that seemed consolidated... but are not.

My recent research has allowed me to understand two things regarding archives.

The private domain is often excluded, sometimes left to the families, or even destroyed. And yet, as feminists have repeatedly emphasized, the personal is political.

The first concerns the history of architecture: I realized that it is not self-evident to study practitioners' careers while considering a continuum between private and public spheres. Even today, many institutions apply archival policies that preserve only architectural production—plans, sections, elevations, models — while everything belonging to the private domain is often excluded, sometimes left to the families, or even destroyed. And yet, as feminists have repeatedly emphasized, the personal is political. This is an aspect I had not fully grasped, and in my view, it calls for real advocacy work—not only with memory and archival professionals but also with architects themselves. Creating archives should not be limited to production documents: reproductive work also sheds light on productive work. For example, consider Simone Guillissen-Hoa, who in the 1950s raised a child on her own—a single-parent family model in which a mother manages both her business and her household. This element illuminates both her professional organization and her choices of collaboration, and even some design decisions: when she conceives her studio-apartment, the articulation between workspace and living space raises questions very different

from those of a heterosexual couple. These are precisely the dimensions that our archives and methodologies must integrate.

The second point, complementing this private-public continuum, concerns another tension: that between urgency and the long term. My interviews with archivists made me realize how much the deposit of archives often takes place over time—a process that can take many years. Yet in the field, one often faces architects in the later stages of life, whose memory is fragile, and where transmission—particularly of oral sources—can literally disappear overnight. To this fragility is added a very concrete urgency: it sometimes happens that architects have already passed away, and their descendants, or the people in charge of clearing their homes, are unaware of the value of the documents... and discard them. This is a situation that archivists unfortunately encounter all too often. But there is also the other side: the long time needed to build trust and connection. Depositing part of one's private life into an archival collection requires the assurance that this intimate dimension will be protected—not by keeping it from the public, since the goal is indeed to open up the archives—but by safeguarding it from voyeurism or distortions of reality, risks that are real and manifold.

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Addressing, for instance, family conflicts or interpersonal relationships, whether romantic or not, touches on extremely sensitive areas that demand constant ethical vigilance. Archives are often imagined as lifeless documents, sleeping in drawers. In reality, they are deeply charged with affect: the emotions of those who pass them on, of those who handle them, and also of ourselves when we witness the political debates around memory preservation. Heritage and matrimony are not exact sciences; they are human sciences, profoundly human, rooted in our relationships and perceptions, and as such both fragile and rich.

Which documentary sources have proven to be the most valuable in your research, and how could their nature help enrich our reflection on preserving the professional legacy of women in the future?

To preserve the professional legacy of women architects, one essential aspect—both for the practitioners already studied and for those to come—is the question of women’s, and sometimes feminist, networks—even when they do not always explicitly identify as such. Archival collections linked to these networks or associations are sometimes deposited in institutions, but sometimes they are not, or not yet.

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Exploring this dimension allows not only a better understanding of dynamics of solidarity but also a different analysis of architectural practices, because the awareness—or not—of power relations directly influences the way architecture is practiced. In the case of Simone Guillissen-Hoa, for example, she explicitly addressed “the question of women.” This awareness shaped her ways of designing and practicing architecture. The solutions she developed may sometimes resemble those of male architects, but they highlight other concerns: domestic, urban, and collective issues. For instance, the design of shared spaces, considerations of parenthood, aging, or care for the elderly—responsibilities often assumed by women—can transform how one contributes to the making of the city.

In this sense, the study of feminist or women’s solidarity networks helps to reveal singular practices. This was also confirmed in my research on several 20th-century Belgian architects: almost all were connected through one or more structures and actively organized among themselves—a bit like what the concept of “matrimoine” brings to light.

In the case of Simone Guillissen-Hoa, I examined her collaborations with women’s magazines and the actions of the Union of Women Architects of Belgium, which had agreements with some of these publications. The goal was to reach a

broader audience at a time when illustrated women’s magazines were experiencing a real boom, between the 1960s and 1980s. These agreements also included professional photoshoots, which helped to circulate their image and work to a wider readership. The way Simone Guillissen-Hoa presented herself professionally is markedly different from that of her contemporaries. She is never seen with her children; when photographed at home, it is always in a work context, never lounging on a sofa. Her contemporaries, by contrast, are often shown knitting, taking care of children, or preparing food—images that convey a strategically essentialist discourse. Conversely, Simone Guillissen-Hoa adopts an almost masculinized stance, or at least a denial of her motherhood, even though in reality she was far more present with her children than the norms of her era might suggest.

I therefore try to explore methodologies that I juxtapose with the production specific to these architects. For example, regarding women’s magazines, I am also interested in reception, using feminist analytical tools in both specialized journals and the general press. I examine how the question of domesticity, when it comes to women practitioners, is simultaneously essentialized—assigned a traditional role—and valued as a specific expertise. This essentialization can sometimes become strategic.



Portrait of Simone Guillissen-Hoa at her desk, circa 1946.

Archives Through the Lens of Gender,
interview of Apolline Vranken (architect and
FNRS doctoral researcher at the Faculty of
Architecture La Cambre-Horta ULB, Belgium)
by Léa-Catherine Szacka and Solène Hoffmann,
Paris, France, 07.2025. On the occasion of the
exhibition *Crossed Histories, Gae Aulenti,*
Ada Louise Huxtable, Phyllis Lambert, on
Architecture and the City, Archizoom, EPFL,
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