

How has the lack of material on women's work in the archives affected your work?

I started to work at the archive in the autumn of 2021, and a week or two after I had started—and I had not even taken the directorship yet, I received an email from an assistant who knew me from previous work on parity talks. Her message was: *Can you please tell me the status of women in the GTA archives? How many women do you have?*

I went to the website and counted by hand. We had just over 300 individual archives of architects, and at that time, in October 2021, there were about ten archives of women, five of which were combined with the archives of their husbands. A shocking number. Since then, we have rewritten our collections policy to explicitly prioritize and pro-actively acquire women's archives. We are also aided by the fact that there are more women architects now, and they are increasingly willing to leave their archives to us.

Archival work is very much detective work. Often, you won't find materials that directly answer your questions.

I would take, for example, the case of Beate Schnitter. She gave her archive back to clients when she closed her office in the 1990s—she just drove with a niece and handed the projects to the clients she had worked for. So the archive that finally came to us last year is much diminished. This is an example of someone who was extremely active in Zurich, a wonderful architect, a feminist, an activist and at the same time she felt that her work would never be worthy of being in the archives. In a way, it illustrates a mentality that, hopefully, is now disappearing. Our numbers have already increased slightly, and we now have 15 archives of women, but it still represents a very small percentage.

In June 2022, we organized the first event entitled *Archiving Absence*, which addressed this question. The event itself consisted of a public tour organized around four themes. One theme was women in the archive. Another theme explored traces such as refugees, former students or individuals whose archives we held. Others focused on non-architect women, like furniture designers or photographers. These themes represent different approaches to understanding and addressing absence in the archives, though of course, one cannot change history. *Archiving Absence* is, in a way, an umbrella for a continuing series of events, and it also formed the basis for a publication.

What do you do when an archive is missing? How do you work with alternative sources?

Archival work is very much detective work. Often, you won't find materials that directly answer your questions. Then you have to enter a process of triangulation, using not only primary sources in the archive but also secondary sources, books, conversations with people, oral histories, or records of oral histories. These sources help generate a body of knowledge that would otherwise be missing from the archive.

An example of this is a research project undertaken by a group of women scholars under the direction of Eliana Perotti, of which I was part. We studied the teaching work of Flora Ruchat-Roncati. Professor Ruchat-Roncati, who started in 1985 and retired in 2002, didn't preserve her archive, she threw everything away. This was a source of personal grief for me, but it also reflects her personality: a very strong person who did not want to dwell on the past. To compensate, we relied on a variety of alternative sources to reconstruct her work.

First, through archival collaboration: we accessed materials from her architectural archive, which had been donated to the Archivio del Moderno in Mendrisio. This helped complement what we already knew. We also had access to her personal notebooks, kindly shared by her daughter. Additionally, we used all published material from her teaching that was accessible through the

library – her courses, her publications and publications from the school and her chair. Most crucially, we organized an oral history project, interviewing her assistants and many of her students. While the interviews sometimes highlighted different aspects or didn't always align, it was our task as researchers to triangulate these sources to create a narrative that corresponded to most of the evidence.

Writing history always involves incomplete evidence — it is by definition fragmentary. We are situated in a different historical time than the subjects we study, so some speculation and storytelling are unavoidable.

I think it's important to recognize that writing history always involves incomplete evidence – it is by definition fragmentary. We are situated in a different historical time than the subjects we study, so some speculation and storytelling are unavoidable. No historian can aim to produce a single "truth". I was told by Alan Colquhoun many years ago that there's no such thing as "the" truth; facts appear differently to different people in different circumstances. The historian herself is shaped by her own historical context and values.

I'm currently working on an exhibition that marks a very important event from 50 years ago, titled *Tendenzen, Neuere Architektur im Tessin*. It was organized by the GTA Exhibitions program and curated by Martin Steinmann and Thomas Boga. The exhibition was significant because it introduced northern Swiss, German-speaking audiences to work that had been quietly produced locally in the 1960s and early 1970s by a young generation and a younger generation of Ticino architects, including Flora Ruchat-Roncati. Out of the 21 or 22 architects featured, she was the only woman. What stands out to me is how she presents herself in the appendix, where all other architects listed their biographies and works in a standard, bullet-point style. Instead, she writes a beautiful, personal text. She notes

This is precisely why I enjoy writing women's histories. They often surprise you with unexpected twists, and it's possible to reinterpret these stories as subversions of established narratives.

that she was the first baby girl born in the newly refurbished maternity hospital and that her photograph hung there for many years. From the very beginning, she was accustomed to being "the first" and she conveys this with curiosity and humor. Rather than providing a dry chronology, she shares an intimate anecdote, offering far more insight than a typical CV. This highlights the reality of subjective history: it's not just women who produce such texts, but her choice to include personal biography among career facts underscores how history can be told through individual perspectives. This is precisely why I enjoy writing women's histories. They often surprise you with unexpected twists, and it's possible to reinterpret these stories as subversions of established narratives.

Currently, we are working on the exhibition by revisiting the older show and examining the impact it had. I applied for funding from a research program that was explicitly designed to prioritize diversity and inclusivity in project selection. Unfortunately, my proposal was rejected. The decision, communicated in writing, pointed out that the history I was covering consisted of a ratio of 20 men to one woman. Even my attempts to address this imbalance, such as organizing a panel discussion with women architects of Ticino, were interpreted as token gestures. Structurally, there was no way to resolve this imbalance within the topic I was presenting. For me, obtaining funding for this exhibition under these criteria would mean changing the focus entirely, to cover a subject with "enough" women in it. That's the story.



Poster *Archiving Absence*, gta Archives, 2022.

Archives Through the Lens of Gender, interview of Irina Davidovici (architect, director of gta Archives, Zurich) by Cyril Veillon and Dimitri Kasparian, Zurich, 07.2025. On the occasion of the exhibition *Crossed Histories*, Gae Aulenti, Ada Louise Huxtable, Phyllis Lambert on Architecture and the City, Archizoom, EPFL, 24.09-28.11.2025.

