

Why are archival materials such a crucial issue when working on the history of women in architecture?

Accessing archival materials—or even identifying them in the first place—is one of the crucial challenges when doing architectural history that centers on women, or on other marginalized subjects.

In my own work, when I started in that field, I faced exactly this problem. I knew I wanted to do something on women in architectural history because I had encountered that lacuna, especially in teaching. I realized that the general overviews of architectural history that exist are actually lacking, completely devoid of women. So what to do about it?

When I started my research practice, I searched and searched, and I couldn't find anything. Eventually, by total accident, I came across a blog post from the Secret State Archives in Berlin, where two archivists had written about their recent findings: a new archival deposit of Marianne of Orange-Nassau, who was part of the Prussian royal family. That collection included drawings, paintings, floor plans—all kinds of material that could be used for architectural history.

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So I went there, and it's really thanks to these archivists and their work that I was able to reclaim that material for architectural history. And I think there is great potential in looking for traces of architectural histories in archives that are not necessarily labeled as "architectural archives."

For me, this also relates to broader methodological questions: which archival materials do we use, question,

and analyze in order to draw out these histories? Especially when working on women in architectural history, one has to be quite creative. And I think that's also a positive challenge—a fruitful and exciting one. It means thinking outside the box: can we use postage stamps, postcards, friendship albums? These kinds of things often give us insight, on a very personal level, into how women engaged with designing, reflecting on, and producing the built environment.

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In architectural history, the figure of the hero or the male genius has often been central. How do you approach this idea methodologically, especially in your work on women architects from the 18th and 19th centuries?

The figure of the genius, the male creator, the heroic architect within architectural history is very challenging. It has a long history of being gendered. The idea of genius itself is a tradition that has always been associated with a male figure. This goes back as far as the Renaissance, with the emergence of the "artist-architect" as an exceptional individual. Later, in Romanticism, this notion became even stronger. And although it is, in many ways, an outdated model, it has nevertheless persisted and remains deeply pervasive. It is still very present in the way architectural history is written today.

We can see this clearly in more recent examples. For instance, Hilde Heynen's research has shown how Zaha Hadid, when she received the Pritzker Prize, was described with terms associated with masculine genius in the laudatio. She was celebrated as extraordinary, as exceptional, precisely because she could be inscribed in that heroic mold, as though she embodied the qualities of "the male genius".

This, paradoxically, was part of what made her the first woman to be recognized with the Pritzker Prize.

For me, this shows the limitations of that framework. If we want to move away from it, one strategy is to rethink what we mean by architecture. Instead of considering architecture as an object, we can look at it as a process. The moment we shift the focus in this way, it becomes clear that no single individual can ever be solely responsible for a building or a project. Architecture, if we take it seriously, is a long-term process. It involves the acquisition of funds, the development of ideas, the design process, the construction, the occupation and use of the building, its later modifications, its reuse, and sometimes even its destruction. Once you take all these stages into account, you inevitably realize that architecture is always the result of many people's involvement. It cannot be reduced to one person alone.

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So, redefining architecture as process rather than object is one strategy that allows us to move away from the focus on the individual genius, the towering figure of the hero, and to open the field to collective narratives.

If architectural history has long been structured around the notion of individual authorship, how can we make visible the work of people—very often women—who were involved in projects but who did not hold the official title of “architect”? What methodology can we use to bring their contributions into view?

This is indeed one of the key methodological challenges. If we look, for example, at the history of women in architecture in Switzerland before the 1920s, it is very difficult to find women working under the professional tit-

le of “architect.” The immediate reaction might be to conclude that there were no women in architectural history before that date. Period. Full stop.

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But I don't think that is true. And I think it is too easy, too simplistic a conclusion. So the question becomes what do we do instead? One possibility is to redefine the profession of the architect more broadly. Rather than limiting it to those who held the professional title, we can consider a wider field—professional as well as non-professional—through which women engaged with architecture. That means not only the design and the production of buildings, but also the reflection on architecture, the reception of built spaces, and the multiple roles through which architecture is shaped.

Once we open up the category in this way, suddenly many women appear. They may have been the ones financing a project, bringing in ideas, building the networks around it. They may have been the users of the buildings, or the critics of built space. They contributed in multiple ways that were crucial, but that have not been recognized within the traditional framework of “the architect.” By enlarging the set of actors we consider relevant to architectural history, we realize that women were in fact very present. And this also gives us a way to move beyond the simplified notion of the genius or the hero.

When an archive of a woman that has not been studied before comes to light, how can her contribution be integrated into architectural history? How do you approach this challenge in your own research?

That is always a very delicate question. How do we place a newly discovered archive, belonging to a woman, into the existing narratives of architectu-

ral history? Do we compare her directly to already recognized figures? Do we measure her contribution against that of architects whose names are established? Or do we try to write history differently?

In my own research, I have tried to experiment with this question. For example, I studied a building project connected to Karl Friedrich Schinkel, the Prussian court architect. The project was financed and overseen by Marianne of Orange-Nassau. She was the one who owned the project, who provided the financial means, and who commissioned Schinkel.

If we look closely at the details of the design process, what we see immediately is that decisions were not made by one person alone. There was a constant negotiation, an ongoing exchange, a back-and-forth of ideas and critiques. More than one actor was always involved.

The real issue is how these projects embody negotiation and collaboration, and how, once we acknowledge this, we can begin to reframe the way we write architectural history.

Through extensive archival work in Berlin, I was able to trace Marianne of Orange-Nassau's involvement over a very long period of time. In fact, her commitment to the project extended far beyond Schinkel's lifetime, since he died relatively early. She was the one who kept the project alive, who claimed it on many different levels. She even wrote an architectural description of it and commissioned photographs.

Once you go into that level of detail—which requires patient, painstaking archival research, consulting different collections—you realize that architectural projects are not simply the product of one individual genius. What emerges is the quality of the project as a collaborative process. The question is not whether one project was “better” than another, or whether one commissioner was more important than another. The real issue is how these

projects embody negotiation and collaboration, and how, once we acknowledge this, we can begin to reframe the way we write architectural history: it's rather about the quality of the project as a collaborative process and not so much, about the role of one individual exclusively.



Karl Wilhelm Wach, *Portrait of Princess Marianne of Orange-Nassau (1810-1883), with a landscape park and architectural components in the background*. Oil on canvas, 1832. Amsterdam Museum, K SA 1773, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Archives Through the Lens of Gender, interview of Laura Hindelang (Assistant Professor, Institute of Art History, University of Bern) by Cyril Veillon, Bern, 08.2025. 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

