

Could you give an example from your research where you noticed an absence or near-absence of references to women's work in architecture or urban planning archives? And if so, how did these gaps affect your work?

I am a researcher in architecture, but I do not specifically work on monographs or life stories of women. My approach focuses more on the value of the project and the history surrounding it. Nevertheless, I often consult archives and try to identify documents that can tell the story of these projects, particularly when they involve female contributions.

That said, I do not consider the archive as an absolute truth or a neutral source. My work therefore does not rely exclusively on archives, and I do not see them as the only way to conduct research or to find material for writing history. Archives are part of a larger set of sources to which I have access, but they are not necessarily central to my approach.

When traditional archival sources are incomplete, particularly regarding women, which methods or alternative sources are most effective for reconstructing their professional contributions to architectural projects?

A few years ago, the two researchers Lori A. Brown and Karen Burns contacted me to take charge of the section on France in an encyclopedia that was just released in July 2025, about women architects in the 20th century worldwide. It is truly a transnational project. For this assignment, they had sent me a list of French women architects for whom we were to write entries. With my fellow historians, we had two options: either take these names and write the entries based on existing research – research that had already helped make some women more visible – or undertake new research. However, we had neither the time nor the resources for the latter option.

In this context, what became central was not solely archival work, but rather the following question: how do we account for the scarcity of sources about these women? We therefore asked

the editors of the volume to allow us to write texts that, beyond the entries, highlight the lack of archives and the low visibility of women.

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These texts also made it possible to broaden the perspective on women architects' work, including women landscapers, urban planners, or those working at other levels of what is today called the architectural professions. For women who had not occupied the roles they should have in project management, it allowed us to show their need to find alternative spaces for intervention and to overcome these gaps in order to still document their contribution and their impact on the writing of architectural history.

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

Because of the lack of archives, there are moments when I wonder whether we shouldn't write a kind of "historiography of silence." By silence, I mean invisibility, erasure. We know that one of the most effective weapons – perhaps the most patriarchal – is simply not to create these archives, not to give them space to exist, and not to allow them to exist.

In the long term, it would be interesting to ask this question and imagine other forms of histories that account for this silence, that reveal the mechanisms of exclusion of women in this field. And let us remember, this field is based on the figure of the model, of

the reference. Whether in architecture schools or in journals, it is always certain architects who serve as references, whom students must follow or challenge.

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If I return to the question more literally, I would say that nothing prevents us from using the archive as a fiction. Perhaps I should clarify what I mean by this: as I said earlier, for me, the archive is not a document of truth. It is constructed. In other words, in archival collections, some documents are preserved, others are discarded. Choices are made, and these choices have a political significance that is never neutral. Sometimes they simply reflect the perception of what was important at a given time, but over time, that meaning can evolve, be lost, or, on the contrary, transform.

Turning the archive into a fictional narrative, combined with other sources – such as oral sources, fieldwork, etc. – can be an effective way to reconstruct stories. I think in particular of Adèle Yon's book, *Mon vrai nom est Elizabeth*, published this year. It received very positive reviews and demonstrates how archives can be used creatively. The book tells a heavy story – that of psychiatry – mixing life narratives with archival documents. Here, the archive is not used to construct neutral historical knowledge or "History with a capital H," but to nourish a well-informed and documented narrative. Adèle Yon explains very clearly that she did not find archives directly relating to her grandmother's story. She used other documents – perhaps closer to diaries or correspondence – to imagine and reconstruct this story, while

clarifying her assumptions. It is an example of how the archive can become material for fiction, while remaining rigorous.

There is also Michelle Perrot, a historian, who says something I really like: "Women are imagined." By this, she means that, at various points in history, we don't really know who these women were who accomplished certain work. We don't have descriptions or documents that reflect their reality. We only have partial traces, and in the absence of these, we imagine them – often projecting onto them all the stereotypes associated with their gender.

Do you notice historical differences depending on the era? For example, is there a difference today compared to 100 years ago?

Yes, I would say there are two types of historical moments, if we can categorize them that way, which can show differences.

First, the feminization of certain professions. In France, after May 1968, many more women enrolled in architecture schools and gained access to professional practice. This means that, gradually, we can expect there to be more archives documenting their work.

Second, there are the feminist waves. During these periods – first, second, third wave, etc. – women speak out publicly, produce work, and make their activities visible. These traces can take various forms: journals, fanzines, radio or TV programs, public interventions, collectives... Most of these productions exist somewhere, even if they are not always deposited in public archival collections. It is up to us to go and find them. And these traces help enrich the writing of history, making visible what would otherwise have remained silent.

How do you navigate between speculation and evidence when archival documents are incomplete or nonexistent?

First, it is important to clearly state which sources have been used and to show how these sources allowed the research to be constructed. Next, one must remember that certain types of documents have historically been considered "feminine": diaries, correspondence, and anything relating to intimacy. For a long time, these were often the only accessible spaces for women's expression. Even today, when such sources are found, they are often in private or family collections. Finally, there is oral transmission. One can rely on the creation of oral

archives or on interviews conducted in the manner of ethnologists or sociologists. This allows the reconstruction of life stories, the collection of testimonies, and the filling of gaps left by written archives.

What is your approach to fieldwork or oral history?

For my part, I work a lot at the intersection of history and, more broadly, the human and social sciences. I focus primarily on the second half of the 20th century, which often means that some of the people studied are still alive. I work very little on deceased individuals. This has a twofold effect.

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On one hand, it allows me to meet these people again and question them directly. On the other hand, it makes me question the value of the archive: archives tell one story, but living memory can tell another. We cannot necessarily privilege one over the other. Both are biased, and both convey a form of truth: the truth of the person recounting their experience, even if it is not an objective truth, and the truth of someone recounting another person. This is where cross-referencing becomes essential: confronting these different narratives allows for a deeper understanding, nuance, and a richer reconstruction of history.

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We are also in a period where history is no longer written linearly. We realize that these back-and-forths and

interrogations are an integral part of historical writing. History is no longer an immutable block produced by a certain authority; it becomes more of a discussion, something that is built and written progressively.

Regarding methodological biases, how do you reconcile the dual challenge of making women's work visible while avoiding the trap of measuring their contributions only according to frameworks dominated by men?

For a very long time, women were absent from the historical narrative, simply because history was written according to other logics. The history we learned in school was often centered on wars, for example. Of course, women were not on the "main stage" of these conflicts, even if they played powerful roles behind the scenes. As a result, they often appear as secondary or subordinate figures in these narratives, and the archives reflect this hierarchy: men are much more present than women. Sometimes, traces of women's history are found, but not where one would want them. For example, in the archives of medical or psychiatric centers, women appear as the insane, the alienated, the hysterical... But that is not where we aim to situate them today.

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In architecture, what is interesting is that women themselves question the very frameworks. Not finding their place in the formal practice of architecture, they were able to create their own niches and develop original knowledge. They were often pioneers, and that is where their contribution lies, beyond male-dominated norms.

If we look at the role of the discipline, we realize that women, very early on, were interested in issues that are very trendy today: ecology, the rehabilitation of "making with" the extension of the home, housing, lifestyles, the everyday... In short, everything related to daily life.

In 2025, it feels as if we are discovering these themes, whereas these issues actually arose at different times, at the end of the 1890s, then again in the 1950s and 1960s. Women architects of that period were pioneers, approaching architecture from the perspective of the ordinary and the intimate, posing questions that still resonate today.

Can you give an example from your work where the discoveries you made sometimes contradicted an already established historical narrative?

At the moment, there are four researchers, including myself, working on a project of a book on the contribution of women in architectural practice in France. From our perspective, we argue that the traditional framework of architectural practice is a masculine norm: the design and execution of architectural projects. We believe it is necessary to broaden this framework to include other forms of engagement in architecture.

Between the institutional mandate and our critical reading, there is therefore a genuine gap in understanding. It's not that there are no women architects in practice; if we had the time and resources, we would discover even more. Many have not been studied, either because of a lack of archives or simply a lack of interest—which is only now beginning to emerge. Today, our goal is to rewrite the historical narrative, opening it not only to architecture understood as formal practice, but also to all other forms of contributions and practices that reveal the multiplicity of women's engagement.

From your experience, which institutional changes – archives, university programs, professional organizations – are most important to prevent the work of future generations of women from falling into the same zone of historical oblivion?

We know how crucial archives are for writing history. I am convinced that collecting archives—whether public or private, material or oral—is more important today than ever. Yet, in Europe, institutions have fewer and fewer resources for this work, whether it's prospecting, archiving, or storage. Added to this are all the issues related to digital documents: how to preserve digital materials produced by architects, make them durable, and ensure they remain accessible?

In my view, a first step would be to encourage women to donate their archives. Today, it is mostly men who,

later in life or at the time of their death, leave their archives. Women do so much less often, sometimes hardly at all. It would therefore be important to incentivize them to deposit these collections or at least consider leaving them. Beyond this, a transnational effort would be valuable. At the European level, for instance, several researchers could collaborate to create archives—first digitally, and, as far as possible, physically—to ensure their preservation and accessibility for future generations.

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How has your work changed your understanding of what constitutes an archive?

In my work, reading plays a central role. One book by Benedict Anderson particularly shaped my thinking. It was there that I realized how intimately linked history and archives are: the construction of archives constructs history itself. And, as we can see, the history written today remains largely the history of the dominant.

We also see that, during wars or conflicts, one of the most effective weapons is to erase archives and knowledge. For me, an archive is, by nature, a biased document. Of course, it conveys fragments of truth, facts, but always in a partial and oriented way.

Using fiction, not to create imaginary stories, but to re-examine history itself.

This brings me back to the idea of inventing and using fiction, not to create imaginary stories, but to re-examine history itself. To me, the making of history and archives must be constantly paired with critical reflection. Otherwise, we end up constructing narratives solely from archives, without questioning their complexity. History is not linear, nor is it a mere juxtaposition of documents: it contains small stories, gaps, details that can radically change the way we tell and understand it.

I can give you a concrete example from one of the courses I taught at the School of Architecture of Paris Malaquais, which I led for two or three years. I would give the students two texts: one from the early 20th century, the other from the late 20th century. These texts were often written by a man and a woman, or by an architect and a non-architect thinker. I asked the students, in pairs, to perform these texts. In other words, they had to transform them into a dialogue, a discussion, a correspondence—bringing together two characters who originally had nothing to do with each other. These encounters could be completely anachronistic: a WhatsApp message, a meeting in a café, or on a plane.

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Of course, everyone knew it was a deliberate fiction: ironic, cynical, but intentionally conscious of its absurdity. The objective was twofold: on the one hand, to reclaim the text and question it by placing it in a different context; on the other hand, to become aware of the distortion a text undergoes as it passes through time, and the filters we, as readers or interpreters, impose on it.

For me, this is what an archive is: it's not only the writing of past stories, but the ongoing questioning of the institution, the document, and the history in which it was produced. It's about interrogating what it can tell us, but also what it cannot, and how it transforms when we read it today.

Archives Through the Lens of Gender, interview of Stéphanie Dadour (PhD and architectural historian, Paris-Malaquais) 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, 24.09-28.11.2025.