

1x1 in Real Time

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The experimental session, *1x1 in Real Time*, brought to life the interactive learning experience of collecting and working in an architectural archive. More specifically, the session created an experiential expansion and discussion of the growing International Archive of Women in Architecture (IAWA).¹

THE ARCHIVE

The IAWA was founded in 1985 by Bulgarian/American architect and scholar, Dr. Milka T. Bliznakov, as a joint commitment between the College of Architecture and Urban Studies and the University Libraries at Virginia Tech, only a few years after Bliznakov joined the college's faculty in the late 1970's. The founding mission grew from Bliznakov's quest to locate, collect and preserve the works of women in architecture so that history would not be deprived of the evidence needed to construct more complete stories of architecture. As a result, after 34 years, the archive, held in Special Collections in Newman Library, has acquired more than 450 collections of the work of pioneering women and women's organizations. Through various ongoing initiatives, the IAWA is expanding and fostering the writing of new histories.² By making visible and crediting the contributions women have made to the built environment, the archive aids in filling significant gaps in the history of the disciplines that add dimension to the historical narrative, and diversify perspectives on possible roles and practices.

1X1: THE PREMISE

While written history is the basis of traditional ways of learning, we propose that there are additional forms of learning possible from the subtle layers of information latent in the original works, which are not easily transferable via conventional historical means. We therefore dedicated our session to present and experiment with an education method resulting from the direct encounter with original work. Within the conference's frame of *Less Talk, More Action*, we put forward an *Action* consisting of an exhibition, set up for the entirety of the conference, where elements of the IAWA's **1x1** initiative would be collected and displayed on-site, paired with a session devoted to discussing the collection and emerging experiences.

Launched in 2018, the ongoing initiative, **1x1**, seeks to collect one important piece of work from every single woman in architecture and design around the world, with an initial goal of collecting 2,020 artifacts by the end of the year 2020.

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To capture the experience of building an archive in real time, women architects and designers - practitioners and/or educators - attending the ACSA Fall Conference 2019, were invited ahead-of-time to contribute one *original* flat work, accompanied by a CV and a handwritten paragraph noting the work's significance, describing how this piece sparked a breakthrough in their education or practice. All conference participants were also invited to contribute an original work by other women. Flatwork could include sketches, drawings, diagrams, collages, prints, screen prints, photographs, outlines or synopses of written work, among other artifacts of revelatory moments.



Figure 1: Schematic design for a cabin by Joanna Schmikel, AIA, in ink and color pencil on trace paper

Donating work to a collection, as women have donated to the IAWA over the last three decades, in addition to contributing now to this initiative, is a vulnerable act. It requires enough detachment to give away work that in some cases has resulted from a life-long practice, and it necessitates the courage to offer that work for research and scrutiny. Selecting the work to donate is an exercise of dispelling or quieting self-judgment,

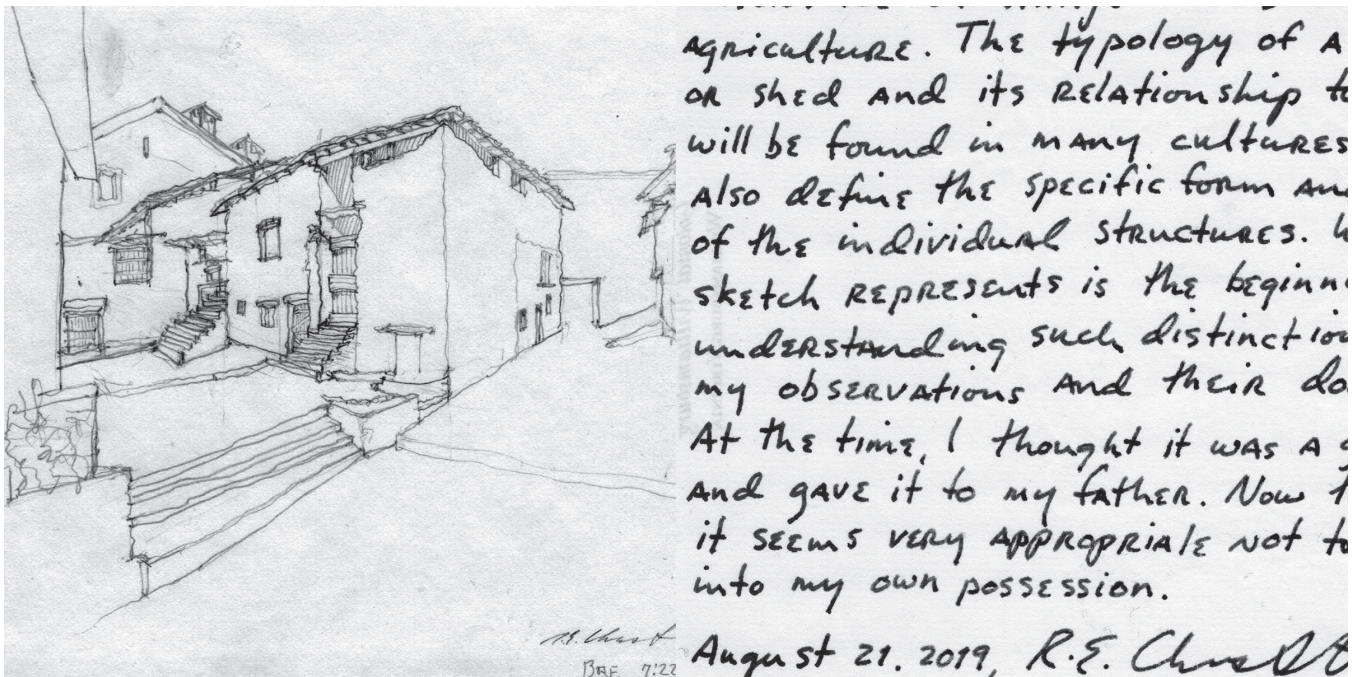


Figure 2. Graphite travel sketch and fragment of accompanying text by Rebecca Chestnutt, German architect and professor

as well as disregarding doubts and fears about how the work will be received and evaluated by others for and beyond its appearance. The requested accompanying text is therefore critical in this regard because it becomes a gateway into the work, making every piece relevant and beautiful as a result of a deeper understanding of the effort, the energy, and the passion that went into the thinking process during the creation and development of the piece.

THE FORMAT

The call attracted a diverse set of artifacts authored by an international group of 23 women in architecture and design fields which included: Alice Finnerup Møller, Aki Ishida, Donna Dunay, Elham Morshedzadeh, Elizabeth Grant, Helene Renard, Joanna Schmickel, Junko Matsukawa, Kathryn Albright, Kristine Fallon, Linda Searle, Marietta Monaghan, Marlena Shade, Michelle Pannone, Mo Zell, Paola Zellner, Rebecca Chestnutt, Sameena Sitabkhan, Seana Reilly, Sharón Tomer, Stephanie Pilat, Susannah Drake, and Tanja Poppelreuter.

For the exhibit at the ACSA meeting, the collected artifacts authored by the group listed above were displayed flat on long tables, recreating the condition in the archive, together with the handwritten personal text and the author's CVs. Casually overlapping, the pieces of text asked to be picked up and read more closely. Magnifying domed lenses were deliberately placed over the works, framing and highlighting nuanced instances, inviting the audience to observe the work more deeply and travel with the lens to different areas of the work to follow their curiosity, as subtle qualities emerged, or information not noticeable with the naked eye became apparent.

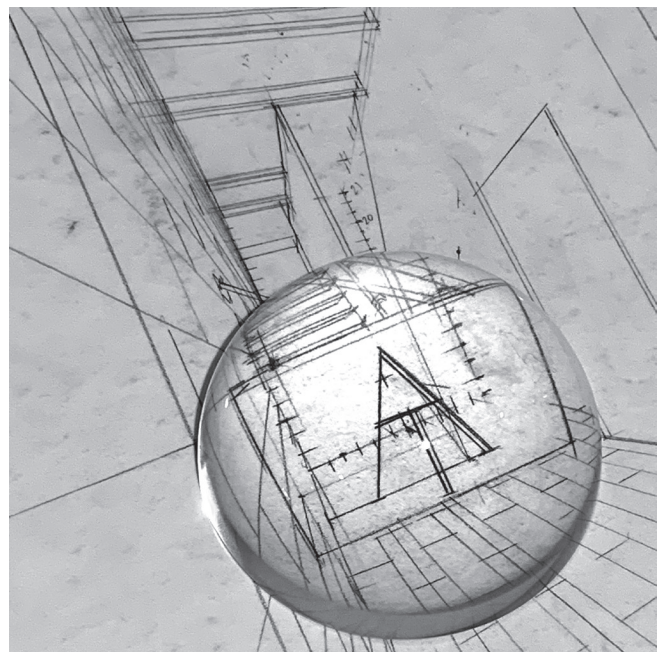


Figure 3: Magnifying lens inviting deeper study of graphite on vellum perspectival drawing by Mo Zell, American architect and professor

This structure of engagement was truly dependent on the direct experience with original pieces.

Paired with the exhibition, the session offered a brief introduction to the IAWA, its origins, its mission and goals, and presented the 1x1 initiative. Subsequently, the attendees were asked to select and bring into the session one artifact



Figure 4: Participants during the conference session, *1x1 in Real Time*, studying and discussing impressions they had of the selected works

each from the work displayed in the 1x1 exhibit and share their personal experiences with the work and their reasoning for selecting it. A rich discussion ensued about the artifacts themselves that acknowledged the different roles women have played and continue to play in the fields, as well as the relevance of the archive in preserving original works of architecture and design.

The session shared the multilayered opportunities students and researchers are usually afforded in engaging with original artifacts in the archive, learning simultaneously about the particularities of the work and the diversity of forms of practice. Offering an alternative to discussing published work, the session brought to life the intimate engagement that can occur with artifacts, with original works that can foster curiosity in all its arising unanswered questions prior to their history being interpreted, processed, and written. In such an experience, the importance of the female role model is expanded; in direct contact with an original artifact, students, researchers and professionals may easily project themselves into these women's practices and processes, sharing questions, recognizing doubts, ideas, impulses, interests, within a history not yet written, thus propelling knowledge of under-represented groups and frequently hidden methods in architecture. While knowledge gained from direct experience with original artifacts does not replace written history, the impact of these experiences can be consequential and transformative.

IMPRESSIONS

The session illustrated, for example, how proximity to the original artifact offers the opportunity for insights and discoveries

that would not likely occur when encountering secondary source material. One participant, whom we'll call JM, selected two stacked sheets of waxed trace with graphite and color pencil drawings and sketches, stating:

"I really enjoyed this piece. The magnifying glass brings you in, almost pulls you to engage with this layered drawing. It makes you curious about what is happening underneath. It makes you wonder: do these drawings line up? What was the story, what was the narrative of this rectangular frame? A structured grid with elements piercing through and out of it?"

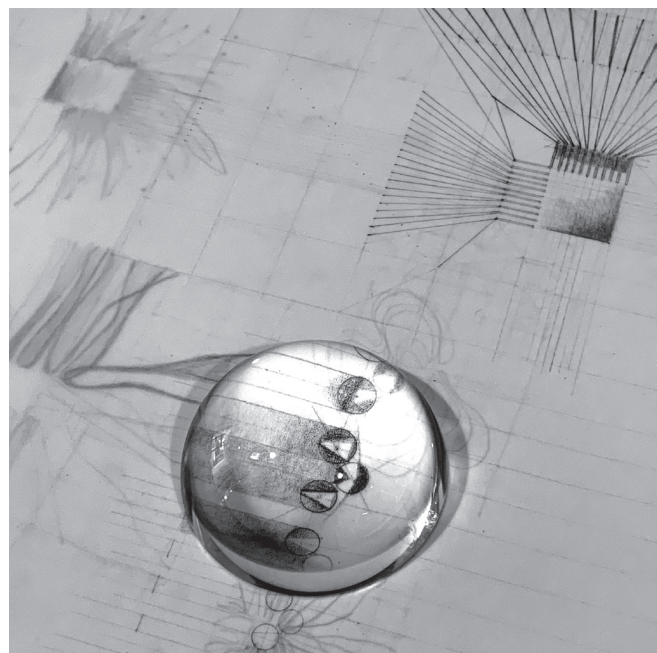


Figure 5: Schematic design in graphite and color pencil on waxed trace paper by American architect and professor Donna Dunay, responding to the competition call for the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Another participant, NB, chose three collages on graph paper, which were accompanied by a text that read:

"These are remnants (wall paper, xeroxes, thread) found in the back room of a remodel project. This room was being demolished. I guess they document the memory and history of that room, and hint at some of the stories that played out (or were imagined) there. I started to make collages after I found these materials, as a way to think about space outside of architecture. They are messy, exploratory and free of the rules + prescriptive nature of architecture."³

In both examples, the session participants noted the insight they gained from the explanatory narratives that accompanied the artifacts. JM, in referencing the above sheets of waxed trace, stated that:

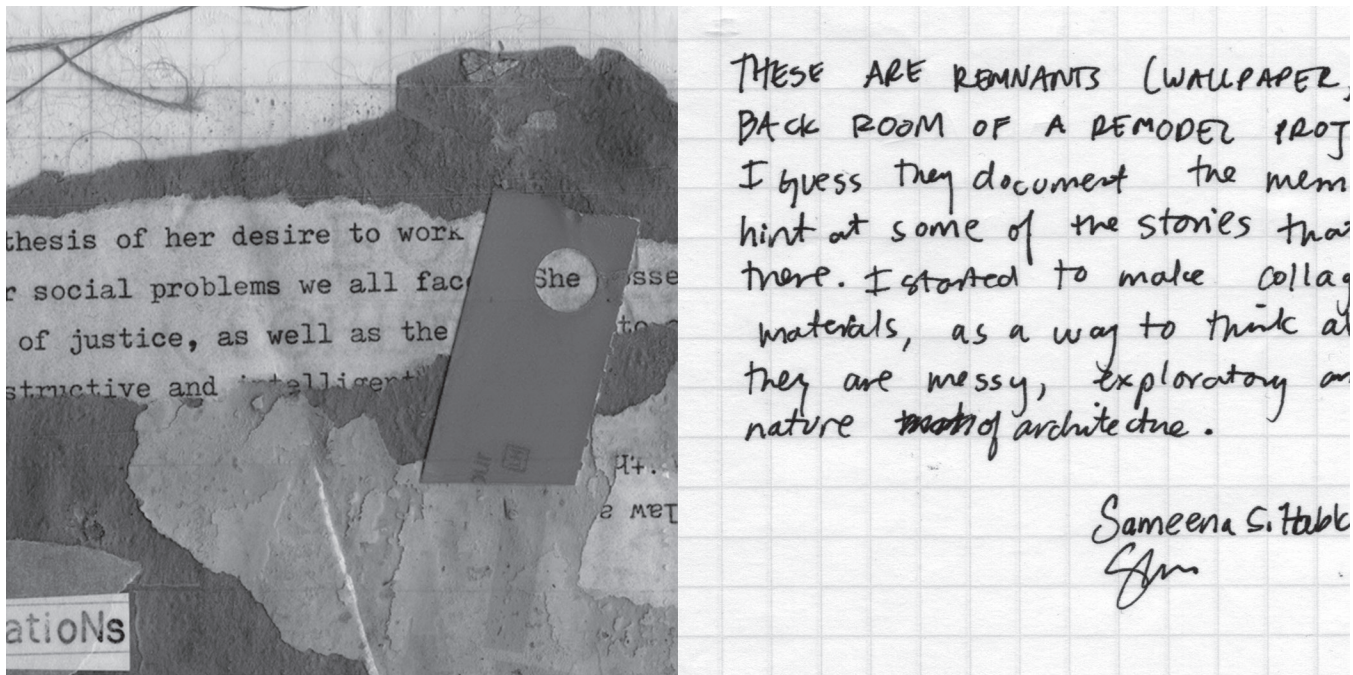


Figure 6: Fragment of collage in multiple media with accompanying text by architect and professor Sameena Sitabkhan

“The narrative related to it talks about memory, about some sort of space that signifies something that has happened in the past that is traumatic. And you need to come closer to the work to investigate: what could that have been? I was drawn to that, trying to understand that narrative, what is this space, where is it, what does it memorialize, what sorts of narratives are embedded in the drawings from it. That is why I chose this drawing. I hadn’t read the note. I just looked at the piece and read the narrative afterwards.”

The narrative that JM is discussing is this, written by the author of the artifact:

“The means to represent and honor all who served, those who died, and those missing in action was a clear directive for the National Vietnam Memorial competition for the Mall in Washington, D.C.

Several drawings navigated the search. Iterations found a stance that held - a cloud of elements floating above a field, defining a clearing. Group, element, organization came into play.

A personal moment of realization came from this project where number had become such a significant aspect. This hastened me to find out how one and many could become whole and not lose the one.

The small drawing of vertical circles, a plan, revealed how space, light, and element would as a matrix bind the memorial. For me, this illuminated how architecture could speak - it

was at this point I realized the significance of the matrix, the relationship.”⁴

Engagement with the ‘archived’ artifact, and its accompanying explanatory narrative, provides access to the architect’s thoughts and work, in ways which are immediate and revelatory.

For NB, the encounter with the artifact took place in multiple stages. The immediate encounter, with the collage, was directed by NB’s attraction to the artifact’s medium: “I chose this work by Sameena because, on first impression, anything on graph paper is attractive.” Then, drawn into the work, NB discussed discovering that images that initially may have been attractive but undecipherable, actually illuminated the relationship between architecture and humanity:

“This work brought home humanity and art. I, myself, have gone into old buildings and when tearing down a wall in a school I have found a newspaper article from the early 1900s just there.

I find this work really beautiful because architecture is about the expression of many things, and “messiness,” as she describes in her text, is one of the key components. I love how she wove the remnants together and made them architectural. Others probably would not have noticed them as architecture.”

For both JM and NB, the narratives, personally written by the authors of the artifacts, deepened and shifted their encounter

with the artifact. The mediating space of the archive enables the production of knowledge distinct from that of the traditional architectural history text.

The woman-centric focus of the IAWA also enables encounter with pioneering women who very broadly identify with the fields of the built environment. Another session participant was drawn to the artifact produced by Elham Morshedzadeh:

“Elham, I want to read Elham. She is from Iran and has ten years of professional experience in Iran. She studied Japanese society and elements of design that came from outside of Iran. Elham was able to become the only woman participating on the industrial design of a smart-card reader for fuel pumps.”

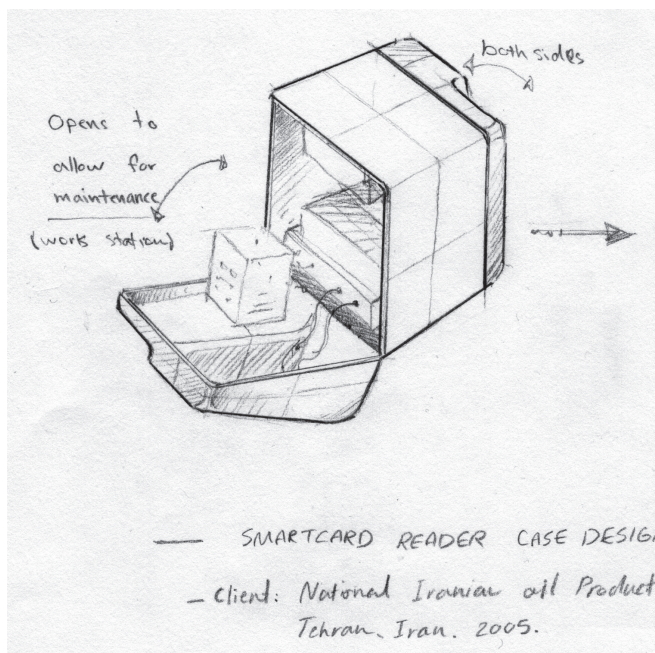


Figure 7: Fragment of schematic design of a smart card reader for fuel pumps by Iranian/American industrial designer and professor, Elham Morshedzadeh

The same participant, JA, also chose to discuss the artifact by Kathryn Albright, which was a study of building perimeters and public space thresholds in Savannah, Georgia. The author wrote, about her artifact:

“Several decades ago, I became intrigued about how the perimeter of some buildings sponsor activities and relationships beyond their designated functions and surroundings. And, how some public places adjacent to buildings appear to remain vital amidst societal changes better than others do. I began to consider the idea that the first ten feet of a building, in its height and depth, has an obligation to contribute to the vitality of the public realm. The dimension of ten feet

was intuitive at the time because it is a familiar and knowable dimension as a whole, as well as in varying increments.

Assessment of the visual facts served as a tool to gain an understanding of where the building form as a boundary limits interaction and intersection of the public and private spheres of daily life. In this circumstance, essential components have at least a two-fold consequence – delineation of a spatial domain and inference of activity.

Through study of Savannah’s original town squares, I examined the physical facts that serve both as a catalyst and as a vehicle in the social construction of place. I registered the vertical and horizontal measure of elements, and how things add up with one another. I looked at the kind and number of things that occur within a dimension of ten feet initially, later increasing my investigation to twenty feet.”⁵

JA stated, in reflection of these artifacts:

“On a previous session I was asked to draw a diagram of my home based on narrative and self, and I drew a sectional diagram. Immediately my eyes went to Kathryn’s work because there was a resonance to what I have just sketched.”

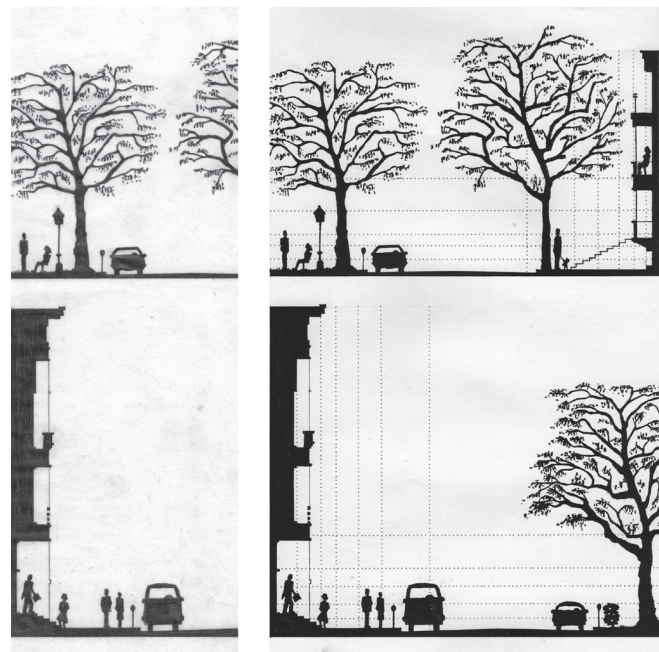


Figure 8: Fragment of graphite on vellum section drawing of building perimeters and public space in Savannah, Georgia, and study of public space thresholds conducted on a copy of the original drawing, by American architect and professor Kathryn Albright

In the session, JA went on to point out that both artifacts illustrated an expanded understanding of what constitutes ‘architecture’:

“This work is about public life and public space in Savannah, and this other work [Elham’s] is about the access to fuel in Tehran; both of them being completely outside of what we think of as traditional building design, and I don’t mean traditional architecture, but traditional building design.”

JA also pointed to another important type of work that a focused archive such as the IAWA performs, namely the recovery of women’s voices within disciplines related to architecture:

“[Elham’s] project, I feel focuses on the idea of access, access to design, access to fuel, access to the economy. To have the woman’s voice or not have the woman’s voice in these incredibly everyday issues matters, this is absolute access.

The two of them, Elham and Kathryn, resonated, even as I wandered through the exhibit thinking that all the exhibited work was so beautiful. The imagery that we are all so enamored by is the aesthetic beauty, yet these two projects are highly analytical, that side of the brain is not always acknowledged in women, so it was the “other” that I realized that I was searching for, and in finding these, recognized that there was a relationship between the two.”

DISCOVERIES

As each of the participants expressed their individual experiences with their chosen pieces and delved into the group discussion a new understanding about the relevance of the original handmade artifact was gradually constructed:

1: The unmediated, virtual presence of each designer could be witnessed in the mark drawn, in the trace revealing the pressure exerted with the drafting tool on a piece of paper, in the worn or torn edge of a drawing, and in the circled design option that affirmed a decision made between three variations studied on the margin of the vellum - to list a few, and provided a more vivid, nuanced and complex understanding of the work and its author.

2: The impression made by the precious nature of the irreplaceable original artifact, together with the tactility that reveals and takes delight in the authenticity and singularity of the piece, intensified the cognitive and sensorial engagement with the piece.

3: The chosen medium and the craft exercised in that medium were recognized as essential layers of information offered by the artifacts. While discussing the collages by Sameena, the focused observation of the work raised curiosity and revealed pockets of information existing, for example, in the selection of the source material, in the choices made during the process to include or exclude certain pieces, in the provocative open-endedness of the medium, in the material surface qualities and textures of the included pieces, and in the texture resulting from the layering of pieces. That these forms of information

were recognized as difficult to perceive from a scanned image of the original work pointed at the valuable information held within the act of crafting an artifact. This led to the affirmation that the medium is not only a means but an integral part of the message, of its content, and as such that information can only be accessed through the direct engagement with the original piece.

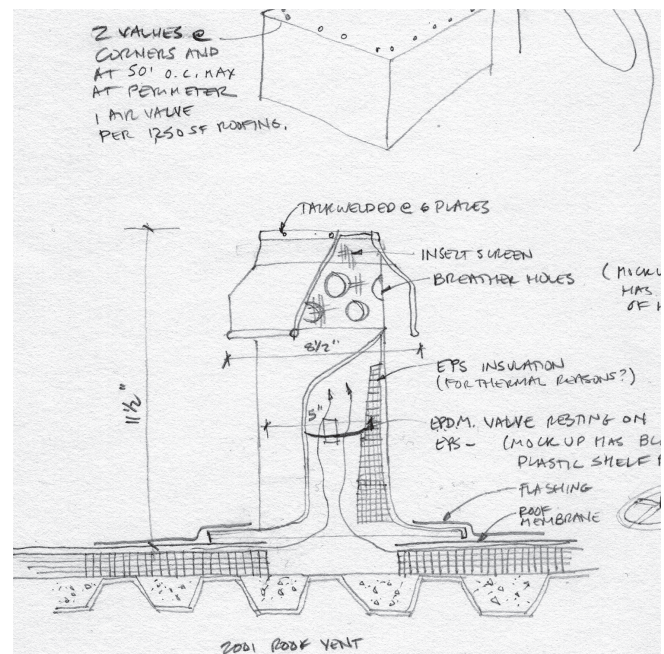


Figure 9: Fragment of a study of a pressure-equalizing roof vent for a low-slope roof by American architect and professor, Elizabeth Grant.

Additionally, all participants - male and female - were prompted to inquire and make realizations at multiple scales. At a larger scale, the exhibit and the collection, composed of exclusively women’s work, revealed the possibility of constructing knowledge not only from the individual artifacts but also from a collective that allows for comparison and contrast. Suggestions and questions arose during the session whether study of a collection such as the IAWA’s would allow for the emergence, if they exist, of patterns or aspects that are typical across women’s practices. Alternatively and more importantly, study of such a collection could debunk myths that have constrained women’s contributions into gendered stereotypes, such as interiors or homes. This is attested by the earlier discussion of Elham’s and Kathryn’s work; or by the artifact donated by Elizabeth Grant that captures the study of a “pressure-equalizing roof vent for a low-slope roof” that “led [her] to two joint patents for an omni-directional negative pressure vent, currently in the market;” or the artifacts by Junko Matsukawa speculating on how and with whom we live when we age. As a result of the debunking process, myths across other categorical boundaries will become obsolete as well, freeing the disciplines from unnecessary limitations.



Figure 10: Ballpoint pen sketch, publication of symposium, and entry panels submitted to a symposium and exhibit entitled, "A Final House - How and with Whom We Live when We Age," by Japanese architect Junko Matsukawa

At a more personal level, all participants found aspects that resonated with their own thoughts about architecture and their creative processes in the work they selected and the emerging discussion. They therefore recognized not only the value in the experiences afforded by the session, but also became aware of the importance of the archive, the necessity to grow the collection and preservation efforts, and the relevance of initiatives such as *1x1 in the quest to enrich and balance architectural history*. The session underscored the fact

that the IAWA, rather than addressing a gender issue, is seeking to address architecture within a holistic perspective.

CALL TO ACTION

With this mission, our imaginations are challenged to grow larger and while *1x1* seems an audacious proposition, the broader mission of the archive becomes essential to the disciplines of architecture and design. The *1x1* initiative is ongoing and will require a sustained effort over several years to achieve

a presence that may start illuminating the expansiveness of a network that has existed for centuries. With an initial goal of collecting 2,020 artifacts by the end of the year 2020, the IAWA, energized by the response received at this conference, invites and charges all to collaborate in this effort, by prompting women to donate an important original piece of work and, with it, contribute to the expansion of history.

ENDNOTES

1. For information about the IAWA and its collections visit : <https://spec.lib.vt.edu/iawa/>
2. Initiatives include, among others: The yearly Milka Bliznakov Research Prize offered globally, in April, for research conducted with material held in the archive; the yearly IAWA Symposium hosted in March inviting international submissions around topics that expand the ways archived material is researched and studied; the Instagram thread at IAWA_VT showcasing weekly a woman of the archive and samples of her work; the Fire in the Library conversations with visiting researchers, faculty and students about paths that lead to the archive and initial findings in conducted research projects; expanding the awarded, immersive, digital exhibit 30x30; the ongoing collection, 1x1.
3. Sameena Sitabkhan, architect.
4. Donna Dunay, FAIA
5. Kathryn Albright, AIA