

A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY: CHANGES IN SOCIETY'S PERCEPTION OF FEMALE ARCHITECTS IN PUERTO RICO

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This paper deals with the changes in society's perception of female architects in Puerto Rico. From a Cultural History standpoint, it makes a critical analysis of the newspaper articles that featured female architects published in this Caribbean island between 1945 and 2011, as it relates to the way the press presented them as well as the way these architects presented themselves through the press. It intends to shed light on how female architects participated in the making of their identity as professional women, the challenges they faced, and the way the shifting beliefs about tradition and feminism influenced their opinions and those of society.

HISTORIC CONTEXT

The establishment of the University of Puerto Rico at the beginning of the twentieth century helped expand the presence of women in traditionally female occupations like teachers, librarians, nurses and social workers, while the increase of their participation in non-traditional occupations such as architecture, engineering, law and medicine, considered as more prestigious fields and with better remuneration, was limited.¹ One reason for this being that the involvement of women in non-traditional careers challenged preconceived ideas about segregation of labor by sex, which were present and quite deeply rooted in Puerto Rican patriarchal society. Besides, in the case of architecture, there was no professional school in the Island, which added the disadvantage of limiting the profession to people of economic means who were able to afford studies abroad. But this did not deter women from joining the profession.

FIRST FEMALE ARCHITECT

In 1945, Gertie Yolanda Besosa, the first female architect in Puerto Rico, graduated from Cornell University (fig. 1). *El Mundo*, the leading newspaper in the Island, published a story exalting the success of the young architect, like the fact that Besosa had received the Best Thesis award from Cornell University where she had been the only Latina at the school of architecture, and that she had obtained the highest score in the professional licensing exam, where she had been the only woman.² Furthermore, it mentioned that she had done volunteer work for the US Department of Engineers during World War II, and had received, as soon as two days after her return, three significant Government job offers including a position as architect in the *Autoridad Insular de Hogares*. It was a beautiful and

informative piece that showcased the 'New Woman following the calls of Female Independence'.



Figure 1. Gertie Yolanda Besosa, la primera portorriqueña graduada de arquitecta.' *El Mundo*, July 8, 1945.

Looking closely at each photo in the article we realize how emphatically they reflect society's attitudes at the time. The first picture shows Besosa as a daring individual, asserting her position as a licensed architect, in a pose more commonly found in men. The second image depicts Besosa casually holding a cigarette.

Her relaxed stance and relatively short dress convey the mythical sensual appeal of the Liberated Woman with notions of free love, often confused with the availability for free sex. But the third image is the one that returns her to her fate as woman by displaying the fulfillment of the reproductive role: Besosa in front of the stove.

In one article and three photographs, the press was making a spectacle of the first female architect in Puerto Rico by framing her into three prevalent women archetypes. She was portrayed as Eve, the first created woman [architect], responsible for the Fall. She was also presented as the Whore, the New Woman with a different belief of what marriage and family should be. And lastly, placed in moral juxtaposition was the Mother, Mary the Saint, tending to the needs of her family. Eve, Whore and Saint, all in one day.

Furthermore, the subtitle of the article paraphrases a statement by Besosa stating that when she gets married, her husband and her home will have priority over her career and the demands of a professional practice. Placing her statement in context, it is necessary to note that during the 1940's there was a backlash in the Western world designed to coerce women back to the domestic realm and away from the paying jobs they held during the war.³ Several anti feminist books published at the time depicted feminism as an illness, and tried to link women who ventured into masculine fields as abnormal, uninterested in bearing children, masculine, and therefore, lesbians.⁴

According to the article, Besosa's ambition was to be accepted by society, especially by her colleagues, 'despite being the first woman architect' in the Island. She was aware that her participation in the architectural profession was a transgressive act. The act of posing for the camera, her beautiful dress, pretending to cook, all reveal her conformity with society's standards. It was a normalizing act requiring her to be attractive, heterosexual and behave 'like a lady' and homemaker. The value given by society to women's domesticity and men's work privileges, persuaded this architect to understand the importance of eventually denying the right to practice the profession she studied, affirming, with quotes and photos, that 'she is a woman with female interests and goals.'

FIRST FEMALE STUDENTS OF ARCHITECTURE

The School of Architecture at the University of Puerto Rico was founded in 1966 with a class composed of 56 students, 14 of who were female. To commemorate the opening of the School, an article was published showcasing these determined women who were forging a new identity for themselves and for others to come.⁵ But the article ignores their attempts and returns them to their domestic fate by stating that 'the architecture of interiors would surely be something fit for a woman architect.' The women condition is stressed even further when it concludes with the question: 'who better than a woman to deeply know the needs of comfort and aesthetics in the home?'

At the same time, the female students interviewed by the press understood that being a women in the field was advantageous since 'we are more practical...more sensible, and would focus more on providing better spaces for the housewife in the homes we design... they would have that special touch.' In an attempt to justify their incursion into the profession, the first female students of architecture in the Island demanded their feminine expertise be recognized as valid.⁶ The problem was that by exalting their female 'ways of knowing', they risked segregating themselves into a small branch of the profession, giving away the more important architecture to their male peers. By compartmentalizing tasks according to gender, these architects were not aware that they were extending their subordination out of the domestic sphere.⁷

REPRESENTING FEMINISM

The image shows a newspaper clipping from 'THE SAN JUAN STAR—Sunday, August 3, 1975'. The main article is titled 'Architecture: A Marriage Of Art And Science' and is a multi-column text piece. To the right of the article is a large advertisement for 'LANCASTER' bras, featuring a photograph of a woman and the slogan 'Lets you feel proud of your body.' Below the article and advertisement is a circular notice for 'ALLIANCE FRANCAISE DE PUERTO RICO ANNEXE RIO PIEDRAS' with details about starting dates and contact information.

Figure 2. 'Architecture: A Marriage of Art and Science', *The San Juan Star*, August 3, 1975.

In 1975, prompted by the International Year of the Woman, ten of the fifteen female architects practicing in Puerto Rico joined efforts to organize the first exhibition of their work, thus undertaking the

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task of increasing their symbolic capital while seeking to establish a stronger position within the power field of construction.

The *San Juan Star* newspaper published an extensive four-page article in their Sunday Style section and interviewed the architects that participated in the exhibition.⁸ But instead of talking about the challenges of being a woman in a man's field, these architects used the exposure granted to address the concerns and challenges of the profession. For these women, gender discrimination was not as important as the material needs of the collective.⁹

The *San Juan Star* chose to place the story amid a selection of advertisements aimed at females. The main ad featured the image of an almost bare-chested woman and next to it a smaller ad for Massengil presented an explicit drawing of a disposable douche (fig. 2). The feminist agenda carried out by these architects appeared to be but banal thoughts floating around visual notions of female vanity and hygiene, in what seemed to be a meeting of both their intellectual and corporal needs. The press acknowledged the exhibition as being a female event, by women, for women, in a way that kept their contributions at the margins of the profession.

AT THE CONSTRUCTION SITE

Early in her career Architect Istra Hernández, a graduate of UPR's new School of Architecture, had the opportunity to design the main building of the Inter American University in Cupey, PR. During its groundbreaking ceremony in April 1979, a pregnant Hernández, along with the University's president, bankers and contractors, participated in the commemorative photo.¹⁰ The architect was the only woman that posed for the news, but when the photo was published in the Construction section of *El Mundo*, she was cropped out. All that remained as evidence of her presence was the blade of the shovel she used and part of the hardhat she wore. *El Nuevo Día* newspaper published the news the same day but cropped the photo even further, leaving only the faces of the men who, along with Hernández, had posed for the camera.¹¹ The fact that two major newspapers in the Island excluded the architect from the story, invalidating her contribution, implies that the press did not allow the image of a woman obtrude on the Construction section of the newspaper. Construction was part of man's world.

Three years later, Jaime Cobas, a design critic for the *San Juan Star*, wrote about Hernández's design for the Inter American University.¹² In 'Architecture or Real Estate?' the critic stated his disregard for the project and referred to the tropical-modernist-style courtyard-building as '*a loser amid a sea of polemics... a structure with an irregular hole in its center*', and questions whether it deserves to be called Architecture. Among the faults he lists are: inadequate parking facilities, different use of structural systems, lack of screens at bathrooms entrances, and the fact that the building, with its central area occupied by the students at all times of the day, '*is noisy*.' In rational deliberation style, Cobas recognizes some of its attributes such as the implementation of a barrier-free design,

classrooms that are '*pleasantly naturally ventilated*' and says that when he visited the facilities, the '*well lit and quiet library*' was filled to capacity. He describes the 800-seat theater as the only star "*in this undistinguished constellation of mistakes*" and credits the successful design to an acoustic consultants' firm from Texas.

Architect Istra Hernández answered back with a lengthy letter published in the newspaper addressing each of Cobas' claims besides adding other aspects of the project left out by the critic like its successful relationship to the site, and the low operating costs as a result of its sustainable design.¹³ Cobas publicly answers her back, this time stating that he found '*the design elitist for it did not provide for those without private transportation*' even though one of the reasons he previously called the design a failure was its lack parking. At the end concludes that '*The building is adequate, but it is not an example of the best of our contemporary architecture.*' This article is evidence to the fact that the work of female architects was criticized like that of any other practitioner.

There is no way to prove that the design conceived by Hernández was harshly reviewed as a consequence of her gender, but there are several aspects of this engagement in criticism that are worth noting. One of these is the fact that the building was significant enough to deserve a review in an important newspaper: a high visibility project in a high visibility media. Even with its negative undertones, the article was extensive, displayed two photographs of the building, and ensued a published dialog with the architect. Still, it was good publicity for the profession and for Hernández who was barely over thirty years old at the time. Both the building and the article gave her a place in the debate on what was considered Architecture; a dialog architects controlled where experience, seniority and gender sanctioned who could participate.

ARCHITECT AND ARCHITECT'S WIFE

Besides the review of Hernández work, the only other article related to a female architect published by the press in the eighties appeared in *El Nuevo Día* and it was about a husband and wife team of Fernando Abruña, and Peggy Musgrave (fig. 3).¹⁴

Even though the article presented a photograph of both, the text only speaks about Abruña, including a detailed account of the universities he graduated from, his design ideas, and recently completed projects. It does not make any mention of Musgrave except for the caption of the photograph where it states '*Peggy directs her work towards interior design, complementing this way her husband's work.*'

The article proves Scott-Brown's thesis that the Star System in architecture is doubly hard on women and that '*the female architect who works with her husband will be submerged in his reputation.*'¹⁵ It went even further to imply that Peggy was a good wife, as she did not intervene in her husband's work but instead accommodated herself to a discipline of less prestige traditionally associated with women.

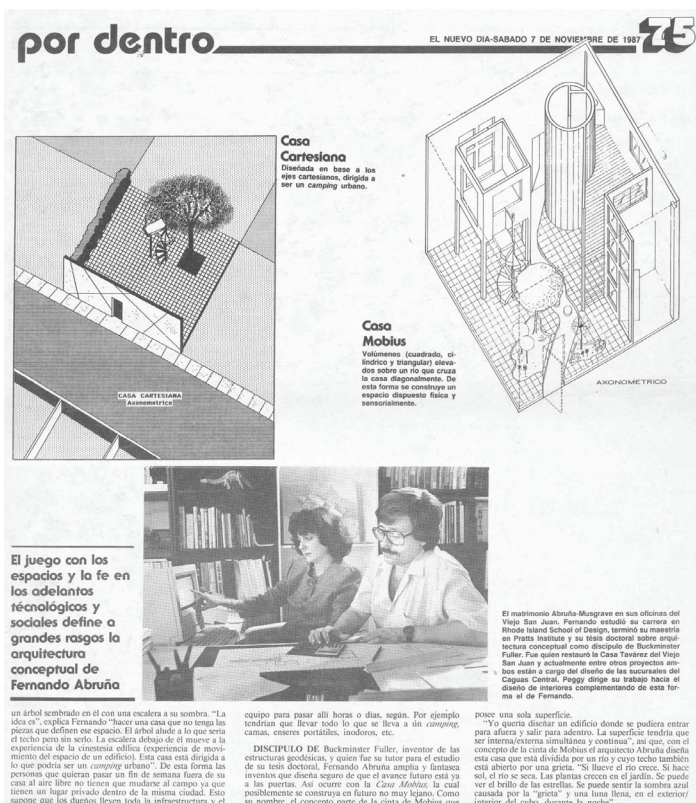


Figure 3. "Casa Cartesiana", *El Nuevo Día*, November 7, 1987.

In 1990 there was another article published about the Abruña-Musgrave firm.¹⁶ This time it presented a book they had written together and the caption under the photograph introduces Abruña as the architect and Musgrave as his wife without mentioning her title. Both articles make valid unequal power relations through the display and acceptance of cultural beliefs about work and gender. The articles give prominence to the male architect as an affirmation of his rights to the practice, and keeps society from perceiving the potential of female architects out of traditionally feminine fields.

AS COMPETENT PROFESSIONALS

During the decades of the nineties there were four articles published on the subject of female architects. Two of these appeared in *On the Job* section of *The San Juan Star* as part of a series educating society on different trades and vocations.¹⁷ The other two articles were about architect Arleen Pabón, PhD. One of these was about the rehabilitation of the University of Puerto Rico's 1938 theater and her role as administrator of the project.¹⁸ The article spoke about her qualifications, her expertise on historic preservation and also mentioned the firm of architects selected for the design. The other article is about Pabón's high profile resignation from the *Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña* where she held the position of director of the board.¹⁹ It is with these four articles that female architects are beginning to be showcased as independent and competent professionals.



Figure 4. "Maestra del diseño arquitectónico", *El Nuevo Día*, January 14, 2001.

The first decade of the new millennium was significant in terms of articles published in the press about or by female architects. The profession of architecture itself was showcased by Astrid Díaz, a graduate from the School of Architecture in Río Piedras, who developed a series of short TV documentaries about the value of the built environment.²⁰ She also published numerous articles in *El Nuevo Día* about all subjects pertaining to architecture: from history, preservation and sustainability to home inspection, furniture and color selection (fig. 4). Pretty, young and educated, Astrid became the face of the profession as she helped the public become aware of the importance of architecture.

Besides Astrid, other female architects appeared in the press as educators, builders, furniture designers, developers, preservationists and sustainable architects. Of particular interest is an article about Beatriz del Cueto, PhD, FAIA, university professor and recipient in 2011 of the Rome Prize for her work on historic preservation.²¹ *El Nuevo Día* published the article in 2006 and the title serves as its summary: "Centered in History; with perseverance and dedication, Beatriz Del Cueto enjoys her roles as mother, architect and wife." In what seems to be a visit back in time, it addressed the same issues presented more than six decades before in the article about Besosa: the efforts of the female architect in balancing family and work.

Comparing the two articles we can see that where as Besosa was professional, young and single, Del Cueto was older, experienced and married. While the sexuality of the first one was questioned, that of the second had been established. Besosa represented the unknown, the beginning of a movement of women leaving the domestic sphere and joining man's world. Del Cueto represented the known: women could have both, a successful career and a successful family life. Del Cueto, like Besosa, stated that her family came first: she married and had a child after establishing her career, and her office was set up at home so that she could tend to the needs of her family.

an interview with three outstanding female architects: Beatriz Del Cueto, Astrid Díaz and Sonia Miranda.²³ The article, prompted by the upcoming International Women's Day and published in the construction section of the newspaper, summarizes personal views on the practice of each professional. They all concurred that architecture is still a male dominated field, that the construction site is particularly problematic, that women do not get credit when working in a firm, and that they feel that they had to work twice as much in order to appear competent. At the same time they acknowledge that nowadays there are more women owners of firms, more women winning architectural prizes, and more women participating as jurors in competitions.

Por Yaitza E. Rodríguez
REVISTA HABITAT

De los seis premios otorgados en la XI Bienal de Arquitectura reconocieron el trabajo de rescate del patrimonio cultural. Ambos proyectos, uno construido y otro todavía en bocetos, aluden al mismo tema de la conservación de estructuras históricas en el pueblo de Aibonito.

Los arquitectos Norma Iba Fúster y Guillermo Acevedo muestran su preocupación ante los visitantes como resultado de un esfuerzo colectivo. "Si no llega a ser por el Gobierno, que tomó en sus manos estos edificios, ninguno de los dos proyectos hubieran sido posibles", afirma la arquitecta Fúster en referencia a la antigua tabacalera de Aibonito, hoy convertida en un pintoresco Mercado de Frutas y Flores y la PR-14, donde se asoman ahora emblemáticos edificios decimonónicos.

El interior de la tabacalera sí sufre cambios dramáticos. "El interior es distinto. La estructura original tenía un semicírculo empalmado en un desnivel. Se apropió ese hueco y se creó un espacio más alto, con escalinatas hechas en ladrillo, emulando una gran plaza", explica la Arq. Fúster.

El interior de la tabacalera cuenta con unas dimensiones de 50x10. La altura sobrepasa los 50 pies. Se añadió un tragaluz en el techo con el propósito de que puedan sembrarse plantas y palmeras de gran altura. Los contados del edificio se ampliaron, permitiendo el flujo de fresco natural proveniente de las montañas.

El Mercado de Frutas y Flores también habrá de cumplir con otros propósitos. "En algunos de sus áreas para venta de alimentos, y se contempló un área para grupos musicales", dice la arquitecta, quien espera todo comience a funcionar para verano de este año.

Ambos arquitectos afirman haber experimentado el riesgo que el pueblo siente hacia esta estructura. "Las personas se sienten tan orgullosas de tenerlo, al punto que la identificación de los empleados cuenta con una foto de la tabacalera. Era distinto cuando el edificio era de uso privado. Ahora el edificio les pertenece", sentenció el arquitecto Guillermo Acevedo.

La calle San José, también conocida como la PR-14, fue la primera carretera que unió a San Juan con Ponce. Por ser la vía principal que conecta el norte y el sur, la avenida sirvió importantes edificios construidos a finales del siglo diecinueve y principios del veinte.

Cuando se construyó el expresado, esta ruta quedó rezagada. Por consiguiente, la actividad económica de la zona decayó enormemente, y así edificios que albergaban dichos comercios. En palabras textuales de la arquitecta Norma Iba Fúster, "la arquitectura sólo podía verse detrás de los letreros".

Ambos proyectos, uno construido y otro todavía en bocetos, aluden a la conservación de estructuras históricas en el pueblo de Aibonito.

"El proyecto comenzó como un ejercicio gráfico, usando fotos de todos los edificios. Así fue como pudimos ver el proyecto en su totalidad", explica el arquitecto Acevedo.

Largo fue el camino de la intervención en cada una de las estructuras existentes. Visto el devenir de las puertas y las ventanas, limpiamos, y sobre todo quitar los letreros. "Otros edificios fueron tan maltratados que quisieron construir la 'reconstrucción', comenta Acevedo.

Para sorprender a ambos arquitectos, la rehabilitación de las fachadas en la calle San José repercutió enormemente en la memoria colectiva del pueblo. "Surgió algo muy bonito. Se creó un comité de ciudadanos para el rescate de Aibonito. Hicimos un fichero con todos los estilos de las casas, para evaluar el valor de la arquitectura", cuenta la Arq. Fúster.

La calle combina edificaciones modernas y antiguas. Con los modernos, la intervención de los arquitectos consistió en cambiarle el color de la pintura y trabajar la iluminación. Se realizó también un trabajo de fachadas nuevas para darle ritmo a la calle. Los edificios antiguos simplemente fueron sanados, explica.

"Conseguimos la mezcla de la arquitectura vieja y la contemporánea, ambas armonizan y hacen muy bonita. Es igual a los lugares que reúnen una gran cantidad de personas diferentes. Eso, así es la vida", concluyó la arquitecta Fúster.

Fúster - Acevedo

entre la conservación y el rescate histórico



La antigua tabacalera estuvo en manos de capital privado hasta que fue adquirido por el Gobierno Central. Luego pasó a manos del Municipio de Aibonito, bajo el programa de Rehabilitación de los Cascos Urbanos establecido por la ex gobernadora, Silda Calderón.

En la entrada de la calle San José (PR-14) ubica la tabacalera, explica la arquitecta. El proyecto, aunque dividido en dos, fue conceptualizado bajo un mismo principio de diseño. "El edificio no tenía esta forma. Era importante mantener las paredes porque emocionalmente el pueblo veía que se trataba una pared que le representaba la pérdida de su pasado", afirma la arquitecta Fúster.

"Por tal razón", agrega el arquitecto Guillermo, "la estructura moderna que se construyó conservó las cuatro paredes, salvo la norte". La pared que mira hacia el este también recibió un tratamiento especial, según detallaron los arquitectos.

Transformaron la imagen sombría y venata de una tabacalera en un centro de reunión que estimula el diálogo y las horas de convivencia conllevó un cambio en la presentación de fachada y la actividad en la selección de color.

"El ritmo de ventanas era este. Los huecos estaban, así como se apropiaron de la gran abertura", afirma el arq. Acevedo. Sobre la selección de color, el arquitecto explicó que el objetivo era crear un logotipo de una gran casa, atibar al imaginario de una inmensa y acogedora casa. "Así, en el pueblo, todo el mundo pintaba de gris y rosa. Quitámoslo no ocultar la estructura, sino devolverla a la memoria colectiva. Darle vida al pueblo a través de la casa", arguyó.

Mercado de Frutas y Flores de Aibonito. Premio de Honor.

Figure 5. "Fúster-Acevedo: entre la conservación y el rescate histórico." *El Vocero*, February 22, 2008.

In 2008 *El Vocero* published an article about the historic preservation work of Fúster-Acevedo, a husband and wife team of architects (fig. 5).²² Contrary to the article in the 1980s about the Abruña-Musgrave firm, the text gives voice to each one of the designers and lets them explain the history of the place, the design process, and the challenges faced. The pictures of the architects are substituted for pictures of the project for what turned out to be, like the project itself, a balanced piece of work.

The last article analyzed for this paper was published in March 7, 2009 in the construction section of *El Nuevo Día* and presented

CONCLUSION

It could be inferred that the increase in the exposure of female architects by the press during the first decade of the 21st Century was in view of the fact that they had finally achieved equality within the profession. But a closer look might reveal a more practical reason. All the articles published between 1945 and 1990 were written by male journalists and from a masculine perspective, whereas those published after the mid-nineties and the beginning of the 21st century were put together by female journalists with the corresponding viewpoint. The proliferation of professional women in all working spheres was finally showing its results. Like it happened in architecture, female journalists were assigned to women's topics²⁴ and, among others subjects, they chose to follow the careers of fellow professional women, including those in architecture. We can say that in Puerto Rico, news about the work of female architects is still a female subject, by women, for women, but this time it takes their contributions from the margins to the center of the profession and presents them as any other competent practitioner.

ENDNOTES

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- 21 "Centrada en la Historia" *El Nuevo Día* (December 12, 2006), 23.
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- 24 Wolf, *Fire with Fire*, 86.