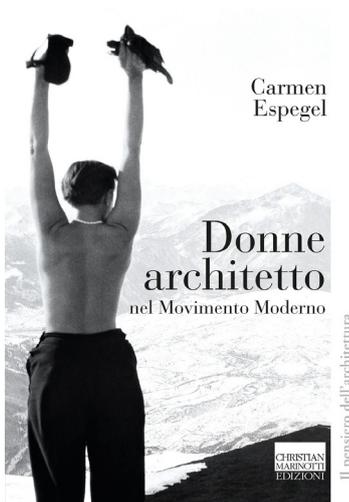


Andrea Valvason
The other half of the sky: female architecture

Author: *Carmen Espegel*
 Translated by: *Bruno Melotto*
 Title: *Donne architetto nel Movimento Moderno*
 Language: *Italian*
 Publisher: *Christian Marinotti*
 Serie: *Il pensiero dell'architettura (edit by Orsina Simona Pierini)*
 Characteristics: *15x21 cm, 224 pages, paperback, black and white*
 ISBN: *978-88-8273-183-0*
 Year: *2021*



Carmen Espegel's book *Donne architetto nel Movimento Moderno* immediately makes it clear, starting from the cover image, what the bursting character of this work is, in which the author tackles a topic of great complexity – until now perhaps insufficiently investigated – as that of the role of women architects in modern architecture, which finds its roots in the period of the «crazy 1920s», as the author defines them. The title in the original language *Heroínas del espacio* clarifies, without the need for further addition, the meaning of this first statement.

The goal of this research, «partly archaeological», is clarified from the outset: to investigate the existing contradiction between the idea of «diaphanous, transparent, dynamic and modern architecture» and «the human being's need for habitability, intimacy and spirituality», which emerges as a substantial issue within the theoretical research and design verifications of the Modern Movement, which women architects of the 1920s and 1930s mainly questioned.

The work is presented as a theoretical and critical research, as well as a monographic exploration of the various leading figures of this historical period, fitting rightfully within the series *Il pensiero dell'architettura*, edited by Christian Marinotti and curated by Orsina Simona Pierini, which has published important writings by Italian and international architects over the years.

The book is structured according to two macro sections, which are in turn divided into gradually more specific chapters and subchapters: a first part *Donna e società* dedicated to a critical investigation on the evolution of the figure of women from a sociological point of view and their role within architectural and urban development; a second part *Quattro cronistorie* dedicated to an in-depth study of four «exceptional pioneers» selected «on the basis of personal criteria due to certain affinities and attunements», as the author states.

The first part, which serves as the basis of study to answer the question of the search for habitability in modern architecture that women architects carried out in the early 20th century, develops from the investigation of the «primordial idea of home, the woman-builder, the human habitat, inherited archetypes, and everyday life in the private sphere». Carmen Espegel immediately identifies the theme around which architectural research focused

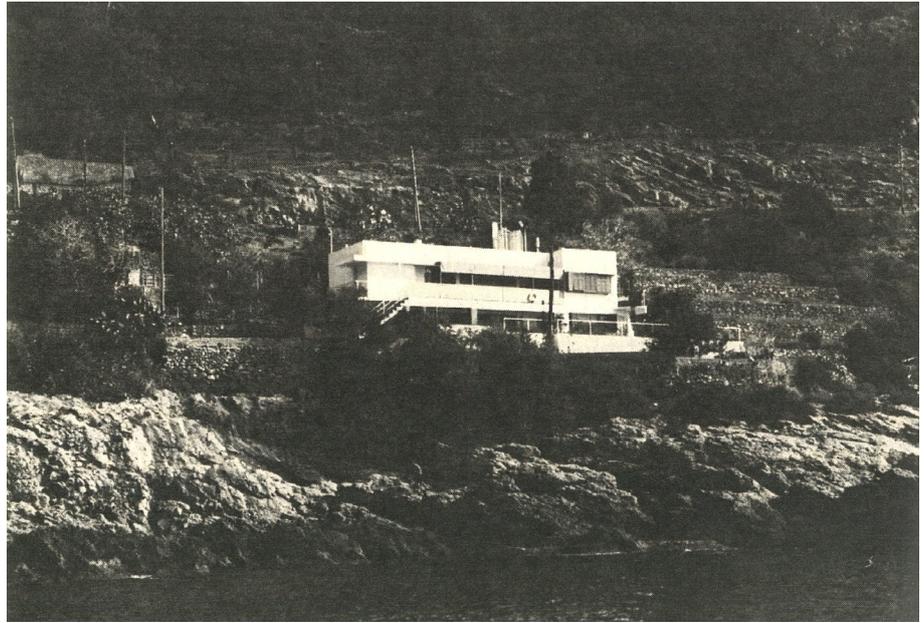


Fig. 1
Eileen Gray with Jean Badovici,
E. 1027, view from the sea, 1929.
National Museum of Ireland.

during the 1920s and 1930s, the theme of *living*, a subject that the author masters excellently as can be seen by scrolling through her numerous publications, of which it is certainly useful to mention the most recent *Textos críticos* and *Amaneceres domésticos*, where one can find extensive treatment of these themes.

This first section turns out to be very important to understand the scope of this work and provides a broader approach than just the architectural sphere to frame the topic more comprehensively. In fact, the author adopts a syncretic method of inquiry, moving through different disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy and art, without renouncing a political look at the different issues.

The reflections originate from a view of the *home*, which is attributed a «uterine character» from a formal-spatial point of view, as archetypal architecture of women, defining a general analysis of the human habitat from an anthropological perspective.

There is no shortage of experiments done with a group of students from the School of Architecture in Madrid, in which typological analyses of ancient settlement patterns are carried out to arrive at the conclusion that there is a correspondence between matrilineal dwelling patterns and modern dwelling patterns. These are followed by further typological studies that demonstrate the centrality of women to the spatial evolution of domestic environments throughout history, from prehistoric times to the early decades of the Twentieth Century.

With the advent of the new century, the *home* thus represents the primary place for the development of modern man's life, a place that, especially following the tragic events of World War I, requires its redefinition within a broader reorganisation of the social and moral value system of the post-war period. The house thus constitutes the ideological reflection of the individual who inhabits it, whose spatial organisation and signification represents the mirror-image of his own intellectual commitment.

By examining the second section of the book, one can understand what substantial contribution the women architects of the Modern Movement brought to the redefinition of living space, both on the theoretical and operational levels.

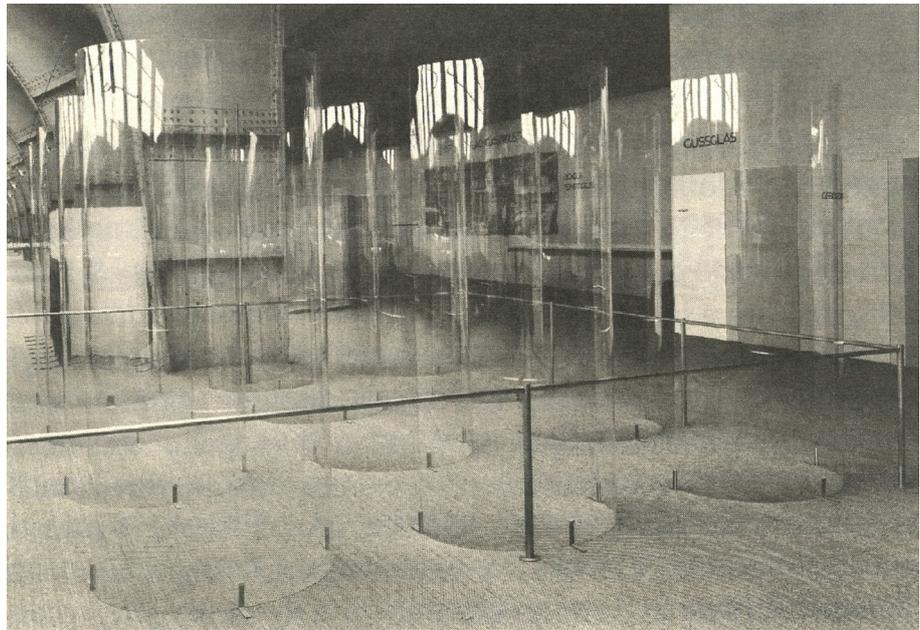


Fig. 2

Lilly Reich with Mies van der Rohe, "German People-German Labor" exhibition, 1934. MoMA Archives.

Four figures are analysed: Eileen Gray, Lilly Reich, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, and Charlotte Perriand; figures who, while having personal histories with different facets, show several common aspects.

These pioneering women, along with other female colleagues who are simply mentioned here, tiptoed into the artistic and architectural scene of the 1920s maintaining very close relationships with various masters of the Modern Movement and, through an understandably cautious initial approach, managed to courageously express their work, always through choices guided by strong ethical principles, redeeming the figure of women from a social, intellectual and professional point of view.

Eileen Gray, a woman of Irish descent with a strongly independent character, was an artist and architect closely associated with the Parisian environment and especially with the figures of Jean Badovici, architect and architecture critic, founder of the magazine *L'Architecture Vivante*, and Le Corbusier. About his work, it is important to recall villas *E. 1027* and *Tempe à Pailla*, in which the innovative character of his work emerges, always supported by a strong ideological construct whereby Gray considers the "hard laws of modern mechanicism" as a necessary transition, even if excessively theoretical, intellectualist and cold. She advocates a return to emotion, *pathos*, feelings and emotionality in architecture, but purified through knowledge; she declares herself opposed to simplicity and crude simplification; she suggests adding to the rationalist formulas of the Modern Movement, in order to enrich them, *life*, that which is vital (spirit and heart), "by making the real penetrate abstraction", rejecting the rigid dogmatism of the main current of the Modern Movement».

Berlin-born Lilly Reich devoted her career mainly to interior design and especially to exhibition architecture, a field in which her contribution was also very important for future developments. Her active participation in the *Werkbund* and collaboration with the *Bauhaus* are well known. Her figure has always been linked to that of Mies van der Rohe, a master of great importance for her professional and intellectual education from whom Lilly Reich would nevertheless always try to maintain her own independent dimension. Among her major works, particularly the exhibitions, it is useful to recall *Dalla Fibra al Tessuto*, *Sala del Vetro*, *Caffè di seta e veluto*, and *Popolo tedesco, lavoro tedesco*, achievements in which it can be seen that



Fig. 3
Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky,
Frankfurter Küche, 1926. Foto di
Hermann Collischonn. Collec-
tion and Archive, University of
Applied Arts Vienna.

«Lilly Reich elevated exhibition design to an art form and transformed the discipline by dramatically showcasing the essential elements of an exhibition, making materials and content the main theme of the exhibition project in itself».

Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, a woman architect originally from Vienna, had a career marked primarily by a deep social and political commitment that she placed at the basis of her work. Formed under the guidance of Tessenow and Hoffmann, she collaborated in the early 1920s with Adolf Loos, but very important was her collaboration with Ernst May on the design of the *Neue Frankfurt*, as a member of the *Hochbauamt* (Department of Construction), within which she designed the famous *Frankfurter Küche*, a revolution in the kitchen concept, seen as the core and generating pole of domestic space: «Her work was closely related to the idea of Modernity, to the great social reforms and the aspiration for a new socio-economic order. She devoted his professional practice and theoretical investigation to the design of houses for the less fortunate social classes».

Charlotte Perriand, a Parisian, her name is closely linked to that of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, with whom she collaborated for many years, during which she always defended her professional autonomy and had the opportunity to measure herself against architectural design at different scales, from that of furnishings to that of the city. She became recognised for a pronounced design talent, especially for furnishings, and an unconditional faith in the emerging mechanistic society that she rejected everything of a traditional nature, including materials. These positions would be revised in his more mature years, beginning in the late 1930s but especially in the post-World War II years, a period when, partly through the consolidation of his collaboration with Jean Prouvé, all previous investigations into architecture, prefabrication, standardization, industrialisation and materials converged in his work. About his works, the *Bar sous le toit*, the interiors of the *Pavillon Suisse*, the prototype kitchen for the *Unité d'Habitation*, and the *Les Arcs* mountain complex, as well as numerous furnishings are of great importance: «Perriand believed that we had been overtaken by the evolution of the machine and that architectural questions were often posed “in terms of form and not in terms of necessity”. Her interiors reflect, using the words with which Hegel describes Dutch painting, the “Sunday of life”. His works reveal to us “the spectacle of all that exists in man, in the human spirit and character”. Through them we can learn to know the moral nature of man».

Carmen Espejel's book, far from any kind of rhetoric easily spent today, takes the form of an important research work with a high scholarly contribution in the field of architecture: «today, we insist, turning our gaze towards the achievements of certain women of the past is not a past-tense nostalgia, nor a form of radical claimant feminism, but a real historical necessity to search for other models that serve to give more dignity to the entire human race».