



MARY PEPCHINSKI
AND MARIANN SIMON (EDS.)

**Ideological Equals: Women Architects in
Socialist Europe 1945-1989**

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The book *Ideological Equals*, published in 2017, engages questions of gender in the socialist architectural environment of Soviet-aligned Eastern Europe. The book's topic and contents were initiated at the 2014 conference European Architectural History Network during a session hosted by the editors, both architects and scholars. Mary Pepchinski (University of Dresden) and Mariann Simon (Budapest University of Technology and Economics) highlight that their approach to the theme turns towards an equality perspective than the more common difference framework. In their Introduction, they suggest that in European Soviet countries women were equal to the men in terms of professional freedom back in the 1950's. As the publication shows, "despite declarations of equality, the opportunities that were available to women architects varied greatly from one context to another".¹ The authors aim to answer several questions: "To what extent did gender ideology truly transform professional conditions? Did equality wipe away all traces of the past and create a balanced playing field for women architects? Was the notion of difference too deeply ingrained in Central and Eastern European mentality for any contrasting ideology to take hold? Or, do the answers occupy a more ambiguous terrain? In

response, we offer readers this collection, and hope it inspires a reflection, criticism, and certainly more research on the period of 20th-century architectural history".²

The book is structured in three parts with twelve scholarly essays. These essays carry the thematic ideas without having an emphasis on the historical figures, either female or male, but through discussions with a more historical background and context. The writers seek the ideal socialist woman as a worker and a contributor to the society in the states' policies and societies' ideological understandings. In order to do so, they prioritize to show through which motivations, and under which circumstances equal work and education conditions between women and men were secured. First part is the largest in size and introduces seven chapters, which focus on the different situations of women architects in the targeted countries in relation to the professional and educational legislations and regulations. The twelve chapters "look at nations in Eastern Europe under Socialism where, between 1945 and 1989, a contrasting vision of gender relations was propagated in response to the need for engineers and architects".³

In Part I: "Case Studies", the essays examine the issue on a bureaucratic and an institutional level. It provides an insight into the architecture and engineering schools, professional organizations, private companies and design offices. First chapter discusses the German Democratic Republic's gender related professional policies after the Second World War in terms of socialist propaganda. Second chapter is a review of the women architecture students' motivations to study with Jože Plečnik, who is known to not to follow modernist path in Slovenia. The next two chapters allow a perspective considering the women professionals' self-organizations respectively in Hungary and Slovakia. The conception of successful women as anti-careerists and anti-leaders is criticized through the idea of 'glass ceiling' in the fourth chapter. The fifth chapter focuses on a still ongoing issue of spousal professional collaborations following the Polish architects like Maria Pietchotka, Hanna Adamczewka-Wejchert, Malgorzata Handzelewicz-Waclawek. The next chapter opens a discussion with analysing the female contribution to the Romanian *Architectura* magazine. And final chapter of the first part discusses four women architects' built work in rural Estonia in the period of 1960-80. This part allows a wider perspective to understand the post war conditions and necessities in the practices of architecture and construction therefore suggests a fairer knowledge on the topic. The chapters don't study women in general under communism neither their architectural design work, instead they bring a more professional and regulative focus, in order "to assess the situation of women architects as an illustration of the situation of all women architects during that period, and to shed new light on the alleged equality that they enjoyed, thus unveiling the behind-the-

scenes realities that local professional life engendered".⁴

The three chapters forming Part 2: "Individuals in Context", the scholars each examine one female architect as authors in their own cultural and political context. This part is the one also where private and family life dynamics and choices of the women architects are detailedly examined. Chapters respectively examines these cases of Karola Bloch, who is married to well-known philosopher Ernst Bloch, of Mimoza Nesterova-Tomic whose solo travels fed her architectural practices and of Anna Petrescu who mainly design and supervised the building process of the People's House in Bucharest. Part 3: "Exchange and Publicity" offers the last two chapters, which are mainly about the internationality and translations in media. As mentioned in the book's introduction the problematic of internationality about the Soviet women architecture is related both the "Iron Curtain" and "Glass Ceiling" affects.

The volume offers a broad historical view through different-scale institutions, collectives, unions and companies in the subject, which allow the reader to gain an insight to the local issues in the socialist countries. Specific and localized knowledge, which is brought together in the book, creates the base, developing a non-biased evaluation and eliminating the generalizations owing to the Iron Curtain. Adopting the equality perspective, the editors suggest that the lack of representation of women lays more in ideologies is allowing creativity in research, yet the chapters don't categorically include the Soviet policies which were applied to women representing different minorities of the society. It is difficult to say that the book takes a distinct position considering the economic and social privileges.

To conclude, *Ideological Equals* stands as an important source in two ways. Firstly, the volume proposes a fresh perspective on the study of gendered architectural practices. And secondly, it brings together important historical studies about the local situations in socialist Europe. Therefore, the study facilitates non-biased opinions and fairer approaches in both areas.

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1. Mary Pepchinski and Mariann Simon, eds. *Ideological Equals: Women Architects in Socialist Europe 1945-1989*. Routledge (Abingdon and New York, 2017), 2.
2. Pepchinski and Simon, *Ideological Equals*, 3.
3. Pepchinski and Simon, *Ideological Equals*, iii.
4. Pepchinski and Simon, *Ideological Equals*, 78.