

Book Review: *Review of Women Architects in Australia, 1900 to 1950*

Reviewed by S A Reeves

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It was over a decade ago that this reviewer first encountered the existence of Melbourne's early women architects, when casual perusal of some early issues of *Cazaly's Contract Reporter* revealed tender notices for buildings designed by mysterious people called Muriel Stott and Eileen Good. Were there really women architects practising in Melbourne in the 1910s? This reviewer, then merely an impressionable young architecture student, had neither heard, read, nor been taught of such things. A well-meant, if naïve, attempt to undertake further research on these women proved fruitless, and this reviewer retreated in defeat, concluding that this decidedly obscure topic was surely fodder for a post-graduate thesis. It was only a few years thence that this reviewer became gleefully aware of the research of Julie Willis, then undertaking a doctoral thesis at the University of Melbourne on the very topic of Victoria's pioneer women architects. This proved to be a remarkable and breathtakingly researched tour de force, in which the careers of the elusive Misses Stott, Good and countless others were finally and painstakingly documented. The logical progression, of course, was for this groundbreaking and crucial research to be made more widely available in some published form. Now, with the backing of the RAlA Sisalation scholarship, Dr Willis has published *Women Architects in Australia, 1900 to 1950*. The book, which simultaneously represents an abridgement and an expansion of her doctorate research, was prepared in conjunction with her northern counterpart, Dr Bronwyn Hanna, who undertook similar post-graduate research on women architects in New South Wales. The story of early women architects throughout Australia is necessarily complex, encapsulating the diverse and sometimes unrelated experiences of those women who

actually worked as architects (variously in large firms, smaller partnerships and in sole practice), those who trained as architects but worked in other fields, and those who enrolled in but never actually completed their architectural studies. The influence of different educational and employment opportunities in various states, to say nothing of the broader effects of war, marriage and social mores, adds even more layers of complexity. The challenge for Drs Willis and Hanna was to find the most appropriate means of drawing together these convoluted threads that form the tattered historiography of Australia's early women architects. The book has a broad chronological framework into which a series of brief thematic vignettes and stand-alone biographical entries have been

loosely inserted, resulting in a textual collage that is fragmented, but not displeasingly so. Indeed, this approach represents a particularly fine solution, acknowledging, as it does, the intrinsic complexity of the topic and the fact that more information on early women architects will inevitably come to light. The numerous biographical entries on individual women are minor masterpieces of empirical research. As with many publications of this type, to read the footnotes alone is a delight, revealing a breathtaking array of raw material from which the final text was lovingly hewn. A slight and unfortunate distraction, however, was the vague citation of dates of birth and death for the women, with the authors making frequent use of question marks and the term 'circa'.

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This tends to exacerbate the 'invisibility' of these women architects; the book would have benefited greatly from some rudimentary genealogical research to establish years of birth and death, or even approximate dates floruit, to provide an appropriate sense of closure on the careers of these architects.

The casual reader will be astounded, perhaps, by the sheer volume of work that early women architects have been responsible for in Australia. The text is lavishly illustrated with contemporary and recent photographs of the buildings, as well as original perspective and working drawings by the architects themselves, culled from a range of public and private collections. But it must also be said that any admiration for the extent of the work of these women architects is tempered somewhat by the slight frustration that few exact addresses are cited. For all their rhetoric of re-dressing the 'invisibility' of women architects over the past century, the authors of this book have been surprisingly shy in revealing the exact location of the buildings themselves.

This may well have been a deliberate attempt to preserve the privacy of the current owners and occupants of the buildings, but, at the same time, it renders these important buildings inaccessible to all but the dedicated researcher. A number of these buildings would be worthy of statutory protection under local planning schemes or state heritage registers, but the paucity of precise addresses makes this difficult. Dr Willis alludes, for example, to a house in Croydon, designed by Ruth Alsop, which is of enormous significance as the only known work of Victoria's first qualified woman architect. No address, however, is given, and it falls to the dedicated researcher to establish that the building was, and is, located at 161 Dorset Road. Likewise, the early houses of Florence Taylor, Muriel Stott and other pioneers remain similarly ill-identified. An appendix, featuring a list of the exact addresses of the most important surviving work of Australia's early woman architects, would have been a most appropriate and useful addition to the volume.

Of course, it is an intrinsic difficulty in preparing an empirical study such as this that no matter how intense the research is, there will always be new facts to emerge in the future. To their overwhelming credit, the authors of this book do not purport to have produced the definitive and exhaustive study of all early women architects in Australia. Its intention, as Dr Willis herself states, was merely to 'establish the scope and potential importance of women architects in twentieth century Australian architectural history.'

There are certainly factual omissions in this study, some minor and some less so, but to draw specific attention to them is to miss the entire point of the study. We should be eternally grateful to Drs Willis and Hanna for providing what is, and will remain as, an outstanding introductory study to this significant topic, and a tantalising invitation to other scholars to fill the gaps.

Cost: \$49.50

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