



INTERNATIONAL ARCHIVE OF WOMEN IN ARCHITECTURE

IAWA Center News

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PROFESSOR MILKA TCHERNEVA BLIZNAKOV

By Tony Wrenn, Hon. AIA, Fredericksburg, Virginia
AIA Archivist Retired, Member Emeritus, IAWA Board of Advisors

Though The American Institute of Architects elected its first female member in 1888, Louise Blanchard Bethune of Buffalo, NY, and women were accepted as members after that date, the male pronoun is still the most used pronoun in architectural writing and thought.

In the early 1980's I began, as AIA Archivist, documenting Bethune's membership. Simultaneously Matilda McQuaid, an AIA Archives intern and architecture student at the University of Virginia, undertook research to document Bethune's membership and to identify all women in the AIA prior to 1988.

It was said that as Bethune's membership was being discussed in 1888 - her application was considered only after male applicants had been selected, since membership requirements referred only to males - one member commented, "We should not be discussing whether the architect is a woman, but whether the woman is an architect." That should have focused the matter - - architecture is gender neutral. Still, in the 1980's, the public, and most architects still thought of architects as men.

As news of what we were doing spread I received a telephone call from an architect who identified herself as Milka Bliznakov of Blacksburg, VA. Before the call was ended it was clear that I was talking to someone deeply interested in research and recognition of women architects.

We both knew that there were and had long been women architects. At the AIA we were focusing on women who practiced in the US, but Dr. Bliznakov's -- or Milka, as she quickly became to us -- interest was broader. She had begun practicing architecture in Bulgaria, had come to the US where she practiced and received her doctorate from Columbia, before teaching in Texas, then moving to Virginia Tech. She believed there was no absence of women practicing architecture, only a lack of knowledge of who they were, where they practiced, and what they had accomplished.

Between the 1880s and 1980s the profession had kept pace with changes in training, materials, practice and style, but architecture seems to have remained a male profession. The AIA intended to celebrate the Centennial of Bethune's membership with an exhibition, but Milka had a more important dream. She would build, at Virginia Tech, an International Archive of Women in Architecture,



something that existed at no other place, and something whose value to Tech and to the profession of architecture, would increase year by year as the archive and those who used it grew.

At the AIA we needed to verify that Bethune was indeed the first woman AIA member, and identify other women who became members during the century -- 1888-1988 -- not an easy task, though the AIA Archives included both original and printed materials that made the search possible. That search, accomplished mainly by McQuaid, provided a working list of women architects in the US which served as the basis for future research as the AIA developed an Archive of Women in Architecture.

Our conversation with Milka continued for some 20 years, by telephone, letter, e-mail and personal meetings, never dull, and always deepening our interest in the subject. Milka breathed architecture, walked architecture, talked architecture, and loved architecture with a passion that constantly renewed and sharpened our own involvement and interest.

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She introduced us to architects, teachers, artists and other supporters of her dream, as she made us into not just believers in, but crusaders for that dream.

Sharing information was natural, and I was invited to join a Board of Advisors that met regularly to discuss the methods and activities of the IAWA. Milka used her office, her home and her travels to advance the cause, which went beyond architecture. She was a scholar who had persevered, risen to a position from which she could both study and involve others in studying the history, and future, of women in architecture, and in other arts. She pursued her cause in the classroom, on the lecture circuit, and in conversations wherever she went. Milka cared with a passion about the arts, especially architecture, and worked constantly to attract new believers to her cause. To learn about women in architecture, she argued, was the only way to make architecture gender neutral.

To be a part of her circle of friends and believers became important to the rest of us. Milka never monopolized our conversation or time, but did channel both. Only in her passing have I fully realized how much she influenced my thought, and my life, and what a rarity she was. Those who leave legacies of worldwide importance, such as the IAWA, are the most important of human rarities. Their work and their beliefs survive their passing, ever enriching our life, our work, and, in Milka's case, our architecture.

The AIA exhibit celebrating the Centennial of Bethune's AIA membership opened in 1988 at the AIA Convention in New York. After its opening it traveled to multiple venues, its last being the IAWA in Blacksburg, where notes from the research which had gone into producing it joined the exhibition panels and reference materials. The exhibition showcased work produced by women, often against professional ennui and actual discouragement, taking its title from remarks made by an internationally respected architect, who did not welcome women into the profession and suggested that only an extraordinary or exceptionally talented woman - "that exceptional one" - should be given the chance to become an architect. Those three words became the title of the AIA exhibit.

In my long life I have met no other individual so totally involved with a cause, and so willing to devote her life to fostering it. Because of her contribution, the IAWA, the first architectural collection of its scope, will be one of the world's great archival collections. Thank you Milka for letting us be a small part of your dream.

GROWING UP WITH MILKA

By her brother, Dimiter Tchernev (edited by John Tchernev)

Milka Tcherneva Bliznakov ("Mimi", as I called her) was my only sibling. She was three years older than me. We grew up in the city of Varna, Bulgaria. When Mimi first started going to school, she would come home and teach me everything she had learned that day. She enjoyed playing teacher, and enjoyed giving me all of the knowledge that she had learned in school. Because of that, she gave me a leg up in my own schooling. When I went to kindergarten, I already knew how to read quite well, thanks to her.

Years later, in high school, she decided that she wasn't challenged enough by her courses. She decided to skip a grade by taking the final exams early instead of going to classes and "wasting time", as she called it. So she took the exams and passed them all, and skipped a year in school, which was quite an undertaking.



She became a Senior instead of a Junior. Her GPA didn't go down, even after skipping a grade. Despite her academic success, she somewhat regretted that all of her close friends, whom she had

known for years were left behind when she skipped, and she finished high school with an entirely different group of people. When she saw her old friends, it was as a visitor from outside the class, rather than as a member of the group.

She was admitted to college right away. But soon after she started college, the Communists took over the government in Bulgaria. Our father was a high-ranking member of one of the political parties in Bulgaria – a member of parliament. In 1948 the Communists surrounded the Parliament and arrested all of the politicians who were not members of the Communist Party, and sent them all to work camps, including our father.

Mimi was expelled from college because her father was an "enemy of the people". My sister collided with the Communist system over her expulsion from the university, and, being stubborn and smart, decided to appeal their decision. She went to great lengths explaining that our parents divorced when she was 10 years old, and since then she had lived with our mother while our father remarried and was involved in politics. So even if my father was an enemy of the people, he had



very little influence over her upbringing and personal values. Our mother, on the other hand, had lived for a time as a student in Germany in the 1920s, and had gone to meetings of the Communist Party at that time. My sister managed to convince the Communists that while my father was an enemy of the people, she herself was not. And she got re-admitted to the university. She ended up missing a year of school due to the whole debacle. Serendipitously, the year she missed made up for the year she had skipped in high school, so she wound up back in college among many of her childhood friends, and graduated alongside them.

In 1956, I became a member of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. This gave me the chance to visit the German Democratic Republic (Communist East Germany). And I did not return to Bulgaria after that trip. I stayed in West Germany and then came to the United States. At the time that I escaped from Bulgaria, Mimi was married to Dr. Emil Bliznakov (a medical doctor & microbiologist). She decided that she wanted to escape and join me. One of her friends from college, named Stubel, had a friend who worked for the Bulgarian secret service. That friend had told Stubel that for \$10,000 cash, he would help Mimi to escape from Bulgaria. Everyone told Mimi that she would be crazy to try it, because the contact at the secret service could just take the money and then not help her, or even take the money and then arrest her for trying to bribe a government official! The deck was stacked against her. Her husband was also not thrilled about the opportunity. But being Mimi, she went ahead with it anyway.

Her escape from Bulgaria was very daring. I had already escaped, so the government was opening every letter my family received. I sent some letters through my aunt Maria. But many years later, we learned that the government had known the letters were from me, and had translated them. They also wanted to see if Mimi was in contact with our father. So our whole family was under heavy observation.

Mimi met with the agent in a darkened room so that she couldn't see his face, and gave him \$10,000 in U.S. cash. He told her that she and her husband should sign up under different names for a cruise of the Mediterranean Sea that was organized for high government officials. Mimi and Emil took the cruise and tried to keep a low profile.

There was gambling on the cruise, and Emil made some money on roulette. A Communist official asked to borrow money from Emil, and promised to re-pay him when they got back to Bulgaria. Since Mimi and Emil were not planning on going back, they became worried as the official repeatedly took money from them. Mimi finally staged an argument with Emil, putting up a big fuss in front of the official. This gave her husband an excuse to say "no" to the official: Emil had to stop giving him money or else his wife would kill him.

When the cruise reached Marseilles, France, they had an excursion to the city. On the way back, Mimi and Emil hid among the crates and packages in the harbor. The ship waited for them, and they were called on the public address system repeatedly. Finally, the ship could not wait anymore, and left after 2 or 3 hours.

Mimi had a cousin in France who helped them get to Paris. It took a couple of years for Mimi and Emil to get the necessary bureaucratic approval to immigrate to the United States, so in the meantime, Mimi took a job at an architecture firm in Paris. Her employers noticed her talent, and by the time she and her husband arrived in the States, she had already started to become a successful architect!



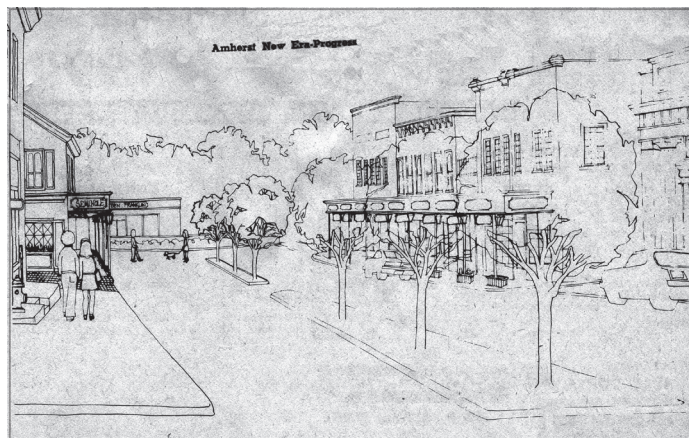
THE MILKA BLIZNAKOV PRIZE: 2009 - 2010

By Donna Dunay, FAIA, Chair, Milka Bliznakov Prize Committee
Marilyn Casto, Ph.D., IAWA Center, Honorary Advisor

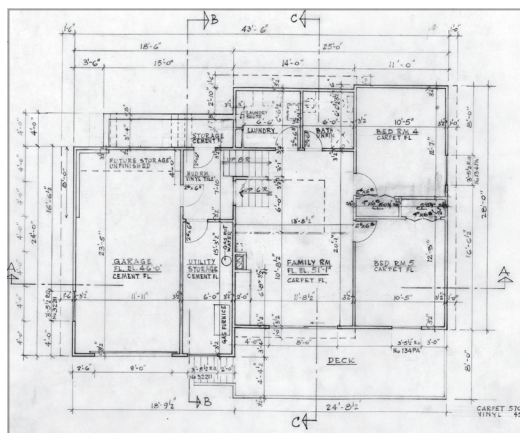
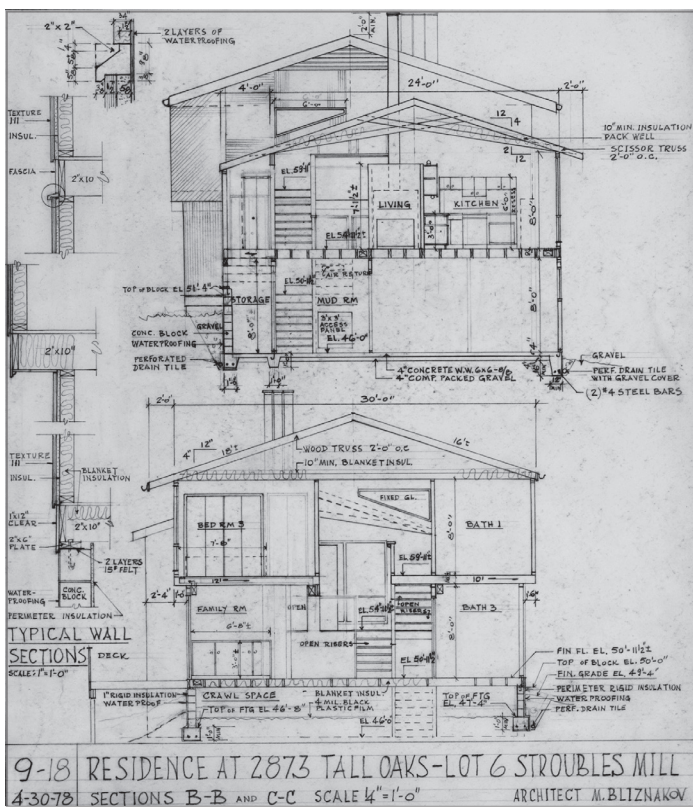
The Jury for the 2009 Milka Bliznakov Prize of the IAWA is pleased to announce the first place award of \$1000 for the Milka Bliznakov Prize for "Sarah Hunter Kelly: Designing the House of Good Taste," a study by Patrick Lee Lucas. Patrick Lee Lucas's "Sarah Hunter Kelly: Designing the House of Good Taste" is a valuable addition to the growing body of literature on the history of the interior design profession. Documentary sources, including original plans, and oral history interviews are among the sources from which this study weaves the story of Kelly's career. Lucas effectively situates Kelly in the context of her era and in relation to interior design as a field of practice, other interior designers, and related design professions. The study is particularly strong in regard to Kelly's work on a series of North Carolina Modernist houses by Edward Loewenstein, for which she met a dearth of suitable furnishings by designing them herself.



From 1972 - 1998, Milka practiced while holding Professorship positions, held at the University of Texas at Austin, and then at Virginia Polytechnic Institute in Blacksburg, VA , where she founded the International Archive for Women in Architecture in 1985.



(Above) Students gathered about Milka. (Above Right) Scheme from the "AMHERST ALIVE" revitalization project, Amherst, VA, 1974-75. The theme was chosen by Virginia Tech Urban Design graduate students, led by Professor Bliznakov. Proposed here is a median of trees and unified Main Street store fronts between Court Street and the Amherst Shopping Center.



Tall Oaks Residence, Blacksburg, VA. 1978
Sections (L) Ground Floor Plan (R. Bottom) & Photograph from Street



Her use of furnishing designs based on historical French forms points to the fact that Modernist interiors did not necessarily contain wholly Modernist furniture. Among her more significant jobs was a collaboration with architect Edward Durrell Stone on the “House of Good Taste” for the 1964 New York World’s Fair. Lucas has examined both the space and Kelly’s words to explicate her interpretation of “good taste,” a concept that, while not unique to the 20th century did absorb many designers of her era. As in the case of well-known interior designers such as Elsie de Wolfe, Kelly worked her social contacts and skills to obtain commissions, a networking method that succeeded for a number of women long before the word “networking” entered the vocabulary. Lucas examines Kelly’s work as it influenced and was influenced by the architects, lighting designer (her husband, Thomas Kelly), builders, and other professionals with which she created interior designs. He also highlights the importance of client relationships in discussing how Kelly integrated the wishes of both wives and husbands into the spaces. Lucas’s study of Sarah Hunter Kelly makes a strong contribution to awareness of the degree to which women interior designers impacted Modernist spaces and their vital roles as part of design teams.

The first place award for the 2010 Milka Bliznakov Prize was awarded for the book, **Early Women Architects of the San Francisco Bay Area: The Lives and Works of Fifty Professionals**, 1890-1951 by Inge Schaefer Horton. The work presents an impressive and detailed history of 50 remarkable women from the San Francisco Bay area who, through their life’s works, made a significant place for the practice of women in architecture. The book’s detailed research reveals that many women were active in this time period. Some, like Julia Morgan (licensed in 1904 and one of the first women to have her own architectural practice) were prominent then, and are very well known now; others were perhaps obscure then and are almost completely unknown now, such as Florence Thurston Hincks Sanford. Although she opened her own office in San Francisco in the 1910’s, there is almost nothing really known of her work after the First World War. Even though these architects found places in the professional world, in some cases this obscurity was made even more manifest by the context of the day, as in the case of Julian Mesick, a woman in architectural practice who likely received the request from her boss to change her name from Charlotte to Julian on her work because he did not have women’s names on his drawings. As Horton states in the opening lines of the introduction, “The twentieth century was an exciting era for women. Many doors opened, not magically, but with admirable efforts by women, and new opportunities appeared on the horizon and came within reach.” Through exhaustive research, Horton shows fully how each pioneer found a place in architecture

along with the support system that helped them achieve this rare distinction – the contributions of family, friends, mentors, and fortunate circumstances, all helped to bring their architectural work to light. The three sections of the book - *A Collective Portrait*, *The Design Legacy of Pioneer Women Architects*, and *Individual Portraits* - give the reader a clear vantage point from which to query this special time in architectural history. The richly detailed narrative is accompanied by photographs of buildings and portraits, important in giving the reader the sense of the person at hand and the stature of her contributions. A precise source list in each case lays the groundwork for future researchers. This work deserves to be seen as a model for uncovering the hidden contributions of women to the built environment. Overall, the book offers a welcome, continuing challenge to today by illuminating the manner in which women of a previous era located a creative approach to the profession.



MILKA IN THE TOKYO EXHIBITION

By Kay Edge

On June 6 through June 17, 2011 the Japanese section of the International Union of Women Architects (UIFA) held their annual meeting. The theme was *For the Future: The Pioneering Women in Architecture from Japan and Beyond*.

The accompanying exhibit with the same name, mounted at the Architectural Institute of Japan, featured Japanese women as well as others from around the world who started their careers in architecture in the early 20th century. One corner of the gallery was dedicated to honoring the memory of Milka Bliznakov. In starting the IAWA, Milka was instrumental in making these pioneers and their work known. The comments from her many friends and colleagues around the world let us know what an impact Milka and the Archive have had on women in the profession:

The organization, and Milka through her founding of it and by her example, showed that we are connected not only through our professional work, but also by friendship, our hopes for women’s rightful recognition, the celebration of our contributions to the Archive, and our applause for each other’s successes. May we be continued to be inspired by her.

Martha Thorne



Milka was and is a great inspiration for all of us! With her talent, enthusiasm, dedication, and first and foremost her open mind and enlightened spirit, she supported so many of us in our plans and projects....Milka not only was the face of the IAWA for many international colleagues, she was the soul of sisterhood and international support....We all will miss her...

-Anna Sokolina

She was an educator who opened vistas for her students, as she has opened a view into the work and contributions of women in architecture for the international design community. She was personally excited to encounter new knowledge and new experiences and she communicated that inexhaustible intellectual zest to all. She was an informed, thoughtful and honest contributor to discourse on many subjects. We should strive to honor and emulate that legacy.

-Kristine Fallon

She was a bigger than life, wonderful, and generous woman. The IAWA came about because of that generosity of spirit, ready to acknowledge the achievements of other colleagues, and to honor those whose achievements had been forgotten....Continuing her work will be the best, and most fitting form of remembrance.

-Susana Torre

She was a powerhouse and we all owe her a great debt for her efforts to preserve the work of women architects. She leaves a tremendous legacy.

-Despina Stratigakos

LINDSAY NENCHECK VISITS IAWA CENTER AS WINNER OF THE ANNUAL MILKA BLIZNAKOV RESEARCH PRIZE

As the 2011 Milka Bliznakov Research Prize recipient, scholar Lindsay Nenchek spent three days on campus researching in the Archive's collections. Her winning proposal entitled, "Organizing Voices: Examining the 1974 Women in Architecture Symposium at Washington University in St. Louis," reported on her investigations into the previously largely undocumented symposium and her ongoing efforts to learn more about this important event. Her research at Virginia Tech included review of the materials in five different collections. A draft of her paper and audio recordings of interviews with the original symposium participants were among the materials that Nenchek donated to the Archive. She also shared her research with students on campus through a lecture and conversation. With this first prize, the jury hopes to generate interest in and awareness of the resource that the Archive represents.

NOTE FROM THE CHAIR

Donna Dunay, FAIA

Colleagues and friends,

We are pleased to draw together aspects of Milka Bliznakov's life to create this special issue of the IAWA Center News as a tribute. As many of you know, Milka Bliznakov was a remarkable woman in architecture, and throughout her life. We realize how especially thankful we are that she so tirelessly devoted her time to establish this ever enlarging record of women's achievements to create a better environment - a precious resource. Just this year, *Early Women Architects of the San Francisco Bay Area* by Inge Horton, the 2010 Milka Bliznakov Prize Award, notably drew upon this material. The creation of the IAWA began over twenty-five years ago, growing from letters written by Milka Bliznakov in 1985 to architects around the world asking them to donate their archives to provide the means to access a lost history.

To celebrate 25 years of the IAWA, the IAWA Center joined with the Japan International Union of Women in Architecture (UIFA Japon) to create and mount the exhibition - *For the Future: Pioneering Women from Japan and Beyond*. Pivotal points in the title give pause for the "Future" - "Pioneering Women, and Beyond." With this installation we are brought to a very clear moment to gain a broader understanding of the role that architecture must play, appreciative that documents from the lives and works of these women are available.

We especially wish to thank our colleagues and friends in Japan who worked through a very difficult time in their country to make this occasion possible. The exhibition was first shown at the Architectural Institute of Japan (AIJ) in June with a warm reception and was then, mounted for the 24th International Congress of World Architecture (UIA) at the Tokyo Forum this fall with a further show at the Gender Equity Center in Chuo-ku, Tokyo. Talks given by myself and IAWA Board Advisors, Junko Matsukawa, Kay Edge, and Helene Renard, situated the exhibition as an ever-enlarging window into a new history in architecture - one that speaks of pioneers adding to a more comprehensive understanding of architecture. Now we look forward to "For the Future" traveling further to gather other pioneers.

This year we welcome Alice Finnerup Møller from Denmark who is joining the IAWA Board and wish to thank Nichole Shiaris who is leaving the IAWA Center Board of Advisors along with friends who continue to make the IAWA Center known to others. In addition, we thank those who so generously contributed to future the IAWA Center and honor Milka's legacy: Inge Horton, Lucy Ferrari, Susan Anderson, Coreen Mett, Patricia Ballard, Leonard Singer, Robert Heller, Lyn Manson, Doris Goyette, Alicia Bulwik, Marlene Shade, Eva Huebscher, Kristine Fallon, and UIFA Japon. This support is an important acknowledgement of the gift of the IAWA Center efforts for the future.

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School of Architecture + Design/Special Collections Department, University Libraries
Virginia Tech (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University)
P.O. Box 90001 Blacksburg, Virginia 24062-9001 USA
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Editor:
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Graphic Design Assistant:
Jessica Lentner
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