



International Archive of Women in Architecture

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
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No. 8

A Life Dedicated to the Spiritual in Architecture: Helene Koller-Buchwieser

"An architect is the person who employs her/his knowledge, sensibility and talents to create shelters for the needs of others. Her/his work must be beautiful, serene and harmonious." In an interview on Vienna's radio, Helene Koller-Buchwieser summed up her lifelong goal to find a creative solution to contemporary needs and her commitment to infuse a spiritual dimension into architecture. The occasion of the broadcast was the celebration of Helene's 83rd birthday and her decision to withdraw from active architectural practice and to donate her work to the International Archive of Women in Architecture. "In the U.S.A., Virginia Tech is the only place where the papers and drawings of women architects are collected and preserved for posterity," she announced. In October, 1995, Helene Koller-Buchwieser traveled to Blacksburg to participate in the 10th anniversary celebration of the IAWA and to oversee the disposition of her work.

Helene Buchwieser was born in Vienna November 26, 1912. Helene's father, Bruno Buchwieser, was a contractor and architect. Since early childhood she visited his office and marveled over his drawings. The young girl began spending her summer vacations at the construction site. "By the age of sixteen, I was sure that I would love to become a mason or even a builder. My father agreed with me but made me promise that I would never wear trousers."

In 1932, Helene entered the Vienna Polytechnic (*Technischen Hochschule*) to study architecture under Professor Karl Holey



Helene designed this church which held both Protestant and Catholic services for a boys' youth center outside Vienna.

(1819-1955), a leading architect known for his preservation and restoration work of St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna. Helene graduated in 1937 and traveled for six months through England. She returned home on March 6, 1938 to join her father's firm, but with Hitler's annexation of Austria (March 13, 1938), construction of buildings for the Catholic church virtually stopped.

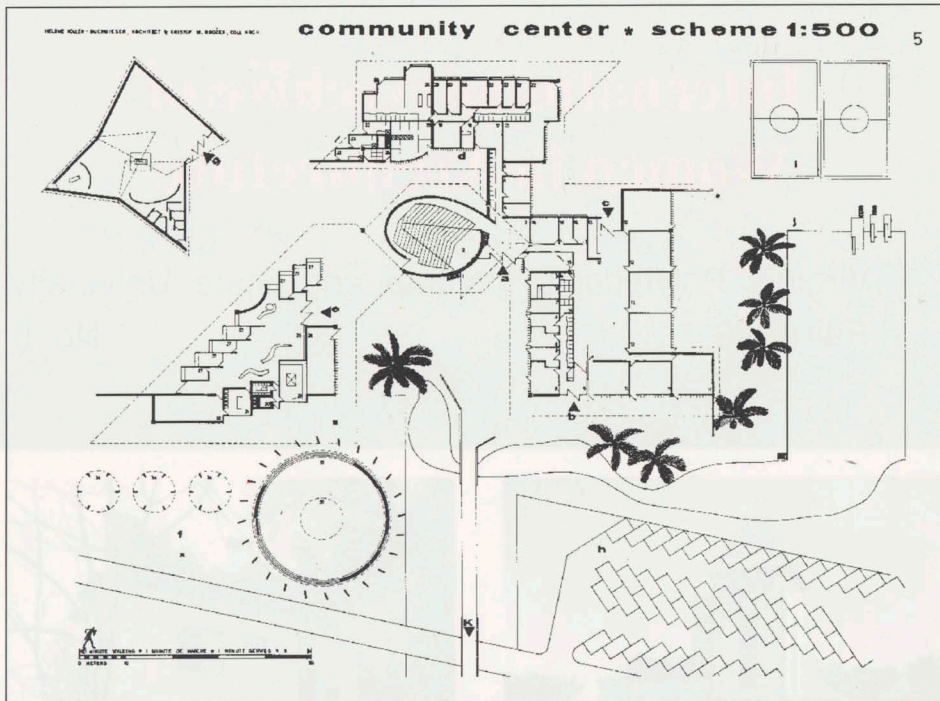
During her student years, Helene worked as a stone mason on the renovation of the Romanesque Church St. Michael in Pulkau. She was deeply committed to continue working on religious architecture. Yet, she had to accept a position at the Vienna Museum of Art History to assist Dr. Lothar Kutschelt with the reorganization of the sacred and secular treasures. "As it turned out, 1938-1939 were very happy years for me," recalled Helene. She fell in love and married Lothar Kutschelt (December 24, 1939). Two weeks thereafter, however, her husband was drafted and sent to the front. In 1944 he was killed. Meanwhile, Helene took her contractor-builder license (1940) and was compelled to join the war effort:



Row houses, Hinterbruehl, 1960s

building for the industry, restoration of the infrastructure and of bombed housing. "It was an urgent, but not necessarily artistic, work. The day the Russians came I was in my apartment at 10, Bellariastrasse [across from the Art Museum] watching the Museum's treasures being plundered. The next day, I was kicked out of the apartment. Many buildings around Vienna's center were emptied for Russian use."

Helene Buchwieser was also the first Austrian woman to take the examination (October 8, 1945) as a construction engineer for tall structures. After an educational trip to the U.S.A. in 1946 on a United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation fellowship, she opened her own architectural, engineering and construction practice. During the ensuing half century, her work included social housing and private houses, students' dormitories and housing for the elderly, orphanages, factories and fire stations, and above all, numerous churches and their auxiliary buildings, as well as, additions to monasteries. She was probably the first woman to design and build for the needs of



Helene Koller-Buchwieser's plan for a community center in Upper Volta, West Africa.

the Catholic church. Many of her commissions were won in competitions.

All her work is joyous and uplifting. She molded space through light to create a serene and congruous atmosphere. She projects an image of permanence and security by appropriate use of materials and construction methods. Most unusual is her work in Upper Volta, West Africa. In Quahigoya, she built two youth educational centers: one for girls and another for boys. For her ecclesiastic projects, Helene Koller-Buchwieser was recognized by Pope Paul VI with the "Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice" (1965). For her excellent work in Upper Volta she received the medal, "Ordre du Merite Voltaique" (1972). She was bestowed with the title "Professor" by the Austrian Ministry of Education and Art (1979) and in 1988, she was honored with the Gold Honorary medal of her hometown, Hinterbruehl.

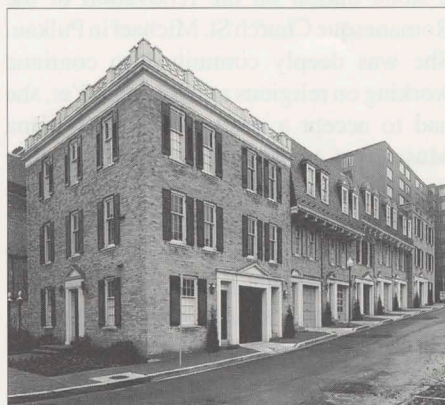
Helene Koller-Buchwieser has many ideas and plans for the future. "I am a happy and optimistic person. My inner disposition is to search for beauty and to create it. There is beauty and harmony in music, art, and literature. Every good architect must submerge in all these art forms. There is still so much to do," she assured me as she was leaving Blacksburg.

Milka Bliznakov
Founder IAWA

A Quest for the Spiritual Principles in Culture and in Architecture: Melita Rodeck

"Architecture needs a very strong design concept that will hold up under the impact of all types of life forces and will swing with them. The concept should be a single generating idea that is the logical answer to the problem." Thus, Melita Rodeck explains to the layman "What Is Good Design?" in an article in *Catholic Building and Maintenance* (May-June 1964).

Shortly after establishing her own private practice (1958) in Washington, D.C., Melita conceived an unusual idea: to establish a secular institute of the design professions to assist in setting standards for the quality



Queen Anne Apartments, row houses in Washington, D.C. designed by Rodeck.

of Sacred Art. Named Regina Institute of Sacred Art, this organization aided parishes in their design and decoration efforts and educated the parishioners about the psychological need and emotional impact of good design. "In the arts, one may find peace and contentment, for we may use our creative ability to transform our inner energy in a satisfying manner," she said.

Melita Rodeck integrated her artistic talent and professional abilities with her commitment to social justice, racial and religious harmony. During the 1940s she worked for four years in the Harlem Friendship House in New York City, searching for the socio-physical aspects of design. She took courses on aesthetics and moral philosophy at the New School for Social Research. In her little handbook, *People Space*, published by the American Association of University Women in 1969, she invites users to examine their town and neighborhood, to study the climate, topography, history, and social function, and to improvise options for a desirable future.

Melita Rodeck was born on April 12, 1914 in Milan, Italy where her father, an Austrian engineer, was working on special projects. After the outbreak of World War I, the family had to return to Vienna, Austria, where Melita was educated. In 1932, she enrolled at the Vienna Polytechnic to study architecture. She was a classmate and friend of Helene Buchwieser. In 1939, Melita's family left Austria after Hitler annexed the country. Her brother emigrated to Australia, while Melita decided to come to the United States. She landed in New York City and started immediately to work in order to support herself.

In 1950, Melita moved to Washington, D.C. for an employment opportunity with the federal government in the General Services Administration. After taking her architectural license examination (1952), Melita began working in association with private architectural-engineering firms until she opened her own office in 1958. She designed residences in Maryland and Virginia, restored many townhouses in Washington, D.C. and built new ones (on Eye Street and Queen Anne's Lane). But, "as a woman, it was hard to get contracts for big projects," Melita recalls, and in 1968, she had to take a position with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. At the same time, she

continued her education at Catholic University and received her master's in city and regional planning in 1973.

Then Melita Rodeck moved to HUD (Housing and Urban Development) as the program manager for policy and guidance. For the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), she wrote several handbooks, designed guidelines to help minimize or eliminate flood damage to both new and existing buildings. Melita retired from the federal government in 1985. Since then she has been involved in international development with the American Red Cross and other charitable activities. She recently donated her professional papers to the International Archive of Women in Architecture.

Milka Bliznakov
Founder IAWA



Melita's house in Foggy Bottom, an historic restoration among Washington D.C. institutions and modern buildings.

Clara Erskine Clement Waters Library Donated to IAWA Archives

A collection of books by Clara Erskine Clement Waters (1824-1916), art and architectural historian and world traveler, has been donated to the IAWA. Along with Louisa Tuthill (1799-1870) who wrote the first history of architecture published in the United States (1848), and Mariana Van Rensselaer (1851-1934) whose study of Henry Hobson Richardson's architecture, published in 1888 was long the standard work on Richardson, Waters was among the most important 19th-turn of the 20th century American writers on architecture. Of the three women, Waters is the least known however, though many of her works appeared in multiple editions.

Waters first book, published in 1869, followed a visit to Palestine. A series of books on symbolism and a number of guides to major European cities, providing data previously unavailable to women travelers, followed. Her *Painters, Sculptors, Architects, Engravers and Their Works* was published in 1874 and had gone through eleven editions by 1891. *An Outline History of Architecture for Beginners and Students...* was published in 1886, and in 1904, she produced *Women in the Fine Arts...*, not only the first biographical dictionary of women, but the first to include architecture among the fine arts and to recognize women architects.

The collection was donated on the 10th anniversary of the IAWA by Tony P. Wrenn, archivist in the American Institute of Architects Library and Archives and a founding member of the IAWA Board. In his remarks presenting the collection, Wrenn recounted the manner in which he had put it together. In the mid-1960s, he discovered thousands of books, arranged in no particular order, in a warehouse in Alexandria, Virginia. Within the first hour he said, "I spotted *An Outline History of Architecture...* which was signed by Ms. Waters and inscribed 'First copy received, Nov. 13, 1886.' In my hand I held a tangible tie, not only to Waters' ideas, but to her person as well. This was a volume she had not only written, but held in her hand, and later, as other inscriptions indicated, passed on to her family. Shortly thereafter I spotted *Angels in Art* with a magnificent decorated cloth binding signed with an 'A' superimposed over an 'S'. It too was by Ms. Waters, a first edition inscribed by her to her daughter Hope, whose bookplate is in the book."

At that point, Wrenn said the search was on, since it was clear that among the thousands of books in the warehouse were portions of Ms. Waters own library and the library of a member of her family. During the next several weekends, while the books remained in Alexandria, Wrenn pored through them, case by case and box by box, discovering in all, 13 Waters volumes.

In talking about Waters, Wrenn quoted from *Notable American Women* (Cambridge; Belknap Press, 1971). "To a native land more attuned to masculine vigor than to delicacy and sensitivity, she brought her politely feminist versions of the lives of women... To a mercantile world where art treasures had become tokens of conspicuous consumption, she brought a serious and appreciative interest in the aesthetic and moral elements of the art so freely bought and so handsomely displayed in American museums."

In making the gift, Wrenn noted that he hoped the presence of the Waters collection in Blacksburg would "influence someone to study Waters and write about her contributions to women in architecture, so that she can assume her rightful place with Tuthill, Van Rensselaer, and other yet to be discovered women in architecture who deserve to be recognized for the manner in which they have enriched our lives."

Let us know if you are interested in (please check)

- Learning more about the IAWA and its associated programs
 Donating to the IAWA
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The International Archive of Women in Architecture invites you to join the Friends of the IAWA. Contributions can be made in the following categories:

- \$25+ Friend (\$10 for students)
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Attn: Archivist, IAWA; P.O. Box 90001; Blacksburg, VA 24062-9001 U.S.A.

Welcome

We want to express a warm welcome to three new board members: Georgia Bizios, Joan Wood, and Evelyne Lang Jakob.

Georgia Bizios, AIA, is a professor of architecture at the School of Design, North Carolina State University since 1986. She holds a Bachelor of Arts from Colby College, Maine, a Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Minnesota, and Master of Science in Architecture from the University of Oregon. Professor Bizios has practiced architecture in the United States as well as in Greece.

Joan Wood, AIA, principal and chief project architect, founded Joan Wood Associates in 1962. Her professional responsibilities have included: full architectural services for a variety of projects ranging from custom houses and rehab to institutional, commercial and public projects. She holds a Bachelor of Architecture from M.I.T. and a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Chicago.

Most recently, **Evelyne Lang Jakob, EPF, SIA**, taught "Women in Architecture" at Free University in Berlin since 1993. In Switzerland, she was assistant for design and theory of architecture at the University of Geneva. Jakob served as an art and architecture critic for many newspapers and periodicals. She has written many technical publications on architecture and has lectured extensively. In 1993, she received a Ph.D. in science from the Federal Polytechnical School in Zurich, where she had earlier earned an architecture diploma.

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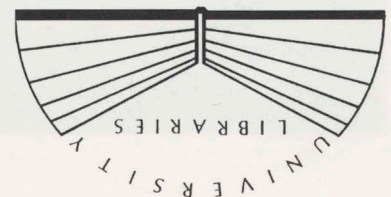
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