

Dorte Mandrup

A Danish architect and feminist



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17 april 2025

Abstract

In architectural history, the knowledge about women architects and their work contains a lot of gaps. Young women studying to be architects do not have role models to whom they can relate. The Danish architect Dorte Mandrup can be such a role model as she is a celebrated architect and speaks out on feminist topics. In this history thesis, the relation between Danish feminism and Dorte Mandrup as a woman in architecture will be examined by conducting a literature study. To provide a historical context, the feminist movement in Denmark will be discussed. The two main feminist waves of the 20th century created opportunities for women to study and practice architecture. Women could also open their own offices, although this happened rarely. Dorte Mandrup opened her own office after a bumpy road towards becoming an architect. Her experiences shaped her vision on good architecture, but also inspired her to speak out about gender issues in the male-dominated field of architecture.



Figure 1. Dorte Mandrup. From "Dorte Mandrup A/S," by V. Renner, n.d. (<https://dortemandrup.dk/profile>)

"I'm not a female
architect. I'm an
architect."

- Dorte Mandrup

(Mandrup, 2017)

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Introduction

Introduction

It is a common knowledge by now that architectural history fails to mention many important woman architects. Consequently, this results in the creation of a distorted image of the role women architects played in the past and still play in the field of architecture. This distorted image allows for gender inequality to continue and male architects to dominate in both the practice and the production of knowledge. Gender inequality is ingrained into the system. And as the system is designed for men, it will never fully accommodate women. Therefore, it is important to fill the gap in knowledge about women architects and their work. In this way young aspiring women architects have role models they can relate to and look up to. These young women can be just as successful in the field as men, so that they can no longer be ignored, and women can change the system from within.

Woman architects who are active now can also serve as role models. One such example in architecture is the internationally recognized Danish architect Dorte Mandrup. With her office Dorte Mandrup A/S, founded in 1999, Mandrup has realised numerous buildings across the globe in Denmark, Norway, Greenland and the United States (Dorte Mandrup A/S, 2025). The office focuses on the dialogue between architecture and the context. Not only is Dorte Mandrup a celebrated architect, but she also actively contributes to the discussion regarding gender issues in architecture. These issues still exist in Denmark even after the two main feminist waves from the 20th century and its successful efforts in gaining rights for women (Elkjær Sørensen, 2012; Elmegaard Bladt, 2017; Løgstrup & Elkjær Sørensen, 2012; Lous, 2011; Olesen, 2017). In Mandrup's publications and by participating in public debates about feminism and architecture, she is not shy to share her own experiences of working in the male-dominated field of architecture. Mandrup has an interesting relationship with feminism, because she is a feminist while also being against the need for feminism. This paradox about feminism in connection with her work has been my fascination and therefore the topic of this history thesis.

With this thesis, I want to take a deeper look into the relation between feminism and Dorte Mandrup. Current literature does cover the history of feminism in Denmark, as well as the career and life of Dorte Mandrup. But to my knowledge, there is no research on the relation between the two. Research on this relation will provide a deeper insight into the contribution of Dorte Mandrup to the field as a woman architect. *What is the role of feminism in Denmark in the career and life of Dorte Mandrup?* To answer this, a deeper understanding of the history of feminism in Denmark and Dorte Mandrup as a woman architect is needed. *What is the history of feminism in Denmark? What opportunities did Dorte Mandrup have as a woman in architecture? How does Dorte Mandrup profile herself as a woman architect?*

For this research I have conducted a literature study, which also included some archival studies. These archival sources are mainly images from the periods of the feminist waves from the archives of Det Kongelige Bibliotek (The Royal Library) and are primary sources. Other primary sources are the articles, documentaries, podcasts and lectures by Dorte Mandrup herself. Secondary sources, such as articles and books, fill in the gaps of the primary sources. Especially for studying feminism in Denmark, mostly secondary sources were used.

This thesis consists of three chapters. The first chapter contains an overview of Danish feminism to give context and a historical background to the career and life of Dorte Mandrup. This includes the feminist waves and the rights obtained by women during these waves. In the second chapter, the topic of the opportunities for a woman in architecture will be touched upon. With Dorte Mandrup as the case study, the research goes deeper into studying architecture, starting a firm and her awarded work. The third chapter is about how Dorte Mandrup sees herself as a woman architect. Lastly, the research question will be answered in the conclusion.

01

Danish feminism in society and architecture

In Denmark, like in other countries around the globe, the first feminist wave arrived around 1870. Disappointment in the new democracy, with only a select group of men having suffrage, leads to a movement that pushes for more rights for women. The second wave focused more on the social position of women in society. Researching the history of feminism in Denmark will mainly provide the historical context of the position of women in society and architecture. This chapter will therefore give a broader understanding of what the opinions were regarding gender equality during that time and how they have shaped the general opinion now.

1.1. First feminist wave

Before the arrival of the first feminist wave, women had very few rights. They could legally not be active in commerce and trade and did not inherit on an equal footing with men. As husbands controlled their wives' income and properties, men held power over women (Det Kongelige Bibliotek, n.d.a). When Denmark became a democracy with a constitution in 1849, activists for freedom and women's rights had hoped that the new democracy would mean that everybody, no matter their gender or social status, would be eligible to vote. In reality, it was a democracy for only a few. Men without a criminal record, independent with their own household and above 30 years old were eligible to vote and to be elected. Everybody else, including women, did not have a voice. Years later, women gained some rights but there was still a big discrepancy between men's and women's rights (Olesen, 2017).

The gender inequality of the new democracy caused some discussions about the position of women in society. Around 1870, women started to organise themselves in associations that fought for women's rights. One such example was the Dansk Kvindesamfund (Danish Women's Society) or DK in short, which was founded in 1871 by the couple Matilde and Fredrik Bajer (Dansk Kvindesamfund, n.d.; Lous, 2011). Matilde Bajer did not agree with the position women held in society and started the DK with her husband's support (Lous, 2011). Other early members of the DK were mainly middle-class women who had the time and energy to engage with the issues women faced. Subsequently, the DK was not a charity for women like many other groups, but an association led by activists that fought for changing the position of women in society by teaching them self-sufficiency (Dansk Kvindesamfund, n.d.). This self-sufficiency should start with women being able to work independently and dispose of the money they earn from those jobs. Wives should also be allowed to control their inheritance and properties that they brought into the marriage.

Another way towards independent women was education. Subsequently, the DK set up several schools for women (Lous, 2011). One such school the DK started was the Tegneskolen for Kvinder (Drawing School for Women) in 1876. Women could obtain knowledge and skills about drawing and other arts that could be beneficial to them if they were to find a job in the industry. The Drawing School for Women was needed because they were not allowed admission to the Royal Danish Academy for Fine Arts, which among painting and sculpture also taught architecture. In 1888 the Academy opened its doors for women for the first time with its own Kunstsolen for Kvinder (Art School for Women). Subsequently, the Drawing School changed its name to Tegne- og Kunstindustriskolen for Kvinder (Drawing- and Art Industry School for Women), clarifying the different task the Drawing School had from the Academy (Mygdahl, 1926).

It was this new Art School for Women that Agnete Frederikke Laub Hansen, who later became the first Danish woman architect, joined. Only when in 1908 the Women's Art School and the Academy merged, did men and women have equal access to the Academy (Det Kongelige Bibliotek, n.d.b; Riesto et al., 2020). Laub Hansen graduated in 1915 as the first woman from the Royal Academy of Architecture. One of her drawings can be seen in Figure 2, which is a design for a high school. Although she was essentially an architect, she never practiced architecture as a professional. After graduating, she married architect Henning Hansen and became a housewife (Det Kongelige Bibliotek, n.d.b). Most women architects, after Laub Hansen, would work for men and their studios. The women who wanted to start their own office did this with a male partner, as solely woman-led offices were frowned upon for a long time. Ragna Grubb was one of the first women that started an office entirely on her own in 1935. A year before, she had won a competition for a women-only building and this gave her confidence that she could be successful on her own as a woman. In 1937, Grubb won another competition together with Karen Hvistendahl and Ingeborg Schmidt. Together they are photographed in Figure 3, where they are discussing a plan for new types of houses for families with a low income (Lokvig, 2023).

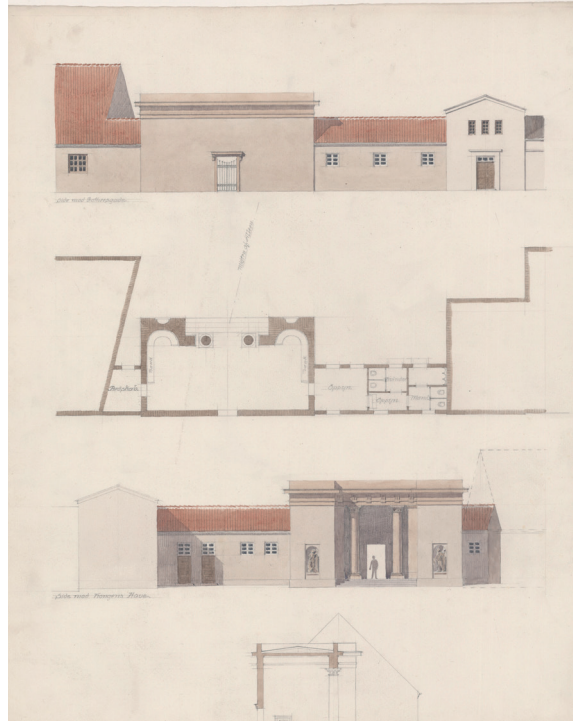


Figure 2. En højskole [A high school]. From “Det Kongelige Bibliotek billedsamling,” by A.F. Laub Hansen, n.d. (<http://www5.kb.dk/images/billed/2010/okt/billeder/object2108182/en?id=%2Fimages%2Fbilled%2F2010%2Fokt%2Fbilleder%2Fobject2108182>)

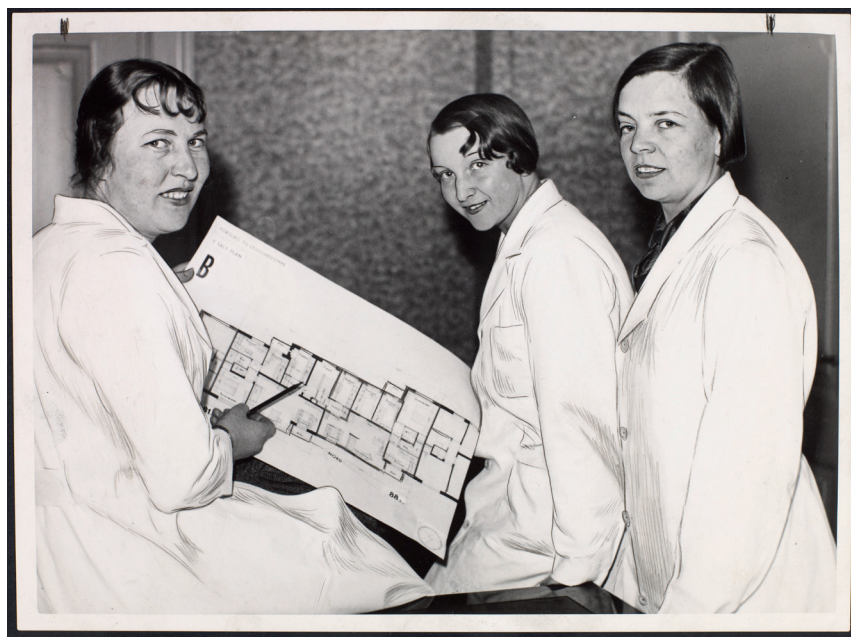


Figure 3. Ragna Grubb. From “Det Kongelige Bibliotek billedsamling,” by unknown, 1937 (<http://www5.kb.dk/images/billed/2010/okt/billeder/object526491/da/>).

Besides self-sufficiency and education, the DK also focused on women's suffrage as only men could vote. At first, a proposal to advocate for women's suffrage was rejected by the board of the DK as the association held a neutral political standpoint. The board members were afraid of the reactions of other members and believed they could not have too radical opinions to serve the needs of all Danish women. In reaction, several other associations were founded that dared to be more radical about the political objective of women's suffrage and other issues. Such organisations were the Kvindeligt Fremskridtsforening (Women's Progressive Association), Kvindevalgretsforeningen (Women's Suffrage Association), De Samlede Kvindeforeninger (The Combined Women's Associations), Danske Kvindeforeningers Valgretsudvalg (Danish Women's Associations Suffrage Committee) and Landsforbundet for Kvinders Valgret (National Federation for Women's Suffrage) (Elmegaard Bladt, 2017).

In 1886 it was Frederik Bajer, also a parliamentarian, who proposed women's municipal suffrage in parliament, but he was met with great opposition (Olesen, 2017). Only in 1906 did the DK adopt the once too political and radical standpoint of women's suffrage (Elmegaard Bladt, 2017). Two years later, in 1908, women obtained the right to vote in municipal elections, followed by the general women's suffrage in 1915 (Elmegaard Bladt, 2017; Lous, 2011; Olesen, 2017). In celebration, a group of 12.000 women from different women's organisations walked in a procession to the Amalienborg Palace square. The DK was also present and proudly paraded with their banner, as can be seen in Figures 4 and 5. At the square, they addressed the king and the government and expressed their appreciation without saying the words 'thank you' explicitly. Namely, women only got the right that they were always entitled to. By saying thank you, they would undermine this fundamental right (Elmegaard Bladt, 2017; Olesen, 2017).



Figure 4. Banner. From "Nationalmuseets Samlinger Online," by A. Mikkelsen, 1972 (<https://samlinger.natmus.dk/dnt/object/66079#DNT-539419>). Licensed under CC-BY-SA



Figure 5. Danske Kvinders Valgretstog d. 5. Juni 1915. Fanerne, klar til Indmarch paa Amalienborg Slotsplads [Danish Women's Suffrage March on June 5, 1915. The banners, ready to march onto Amalienborg Palace Square]. From "Det Kongelige Bibliotek billedsamling," by S. Obel, 1915 (<http://www5.kb.dk/images/billed/2010/okt/billeder/object143549/da/>)

1.2. Second feminist wave

After the first feminist wave, women had gained many significant rights, but there was still dissatisfaction about the position of women in society. More and more women in the 60s rebelled against the traditional ideal and role of women, which were still in place. From the moment women were allowed to enter the public labour market in 1921, they became more and more visible in the workforce. Still, women were paid less than men for the same jobs and they were expected to still do all the domestic tasks. As women gradually got better access to anticonception and the youth organised an uprising against the established authority, women dared to speak out more about social inequality. The conception that gender differences were not only on biological grounds but are also culturally and socially ingrained gained popularity. Demands such as equal pay were supported by the new association Rødstrømperne (Red Stockings) (Elkjær Sørensen, 2012). The Rødstrømperne were founded in 1970 by students who were already seasoned activists. They were more radical feminists than their predecessors from the DK, who were still active but were not as popular. Only women were able to join the association. While the DK was centrally governed, the Rødstrømperne focused on decentralized small groups throughout the country. There was no overarching board or statutes. Each group was democratic, had a bottom-up structure and was responsible for their own activities and actions. This structure was in line with their antiauthoritarian ideas (Leleur, 1974; Løgstrup & Elkjær Sørensen, 2012).

The main goals of the Rødstrømperne were to overthrow capitalism and the patriarchy, so that women would be equal to men in all facets of life. To achieve this, the association actively tried to bring the unequal position of women in society to attention both politically and privately. The Rødstrømperne succeeded in their push as women gained the right to abortion in 1973, as well as better maternity rights in 1980. Women's situation on the labour market also improved with the Equal Pay Act in 1976 and the Equal Treatment Act in 1978. These acts ensured that women received the same salary and working conditions as men (Det Kongelige Bibliotek, n.d.a; Elkjær Sørensen, 2012; Løgstrup & Elkjær Sørensen, 2012). Because of the Rødstrømperne an initiative started in Danish universities to study women, which brought the social difference of gender to different disciplines. Some institutions that still operate to this day came from the association. One such example is the KVINFO, which leads the research on women and gender. The Women's Museum in Aarhus (now KØN), several centres for abused women and the Womenhouse in Copenhagen were founded by the Rødstrømperne (Løgstrup & Elkjær Sørensen, 2012).

During the second feminist wave more and more women became architects, but this growth could not be seen in the number of women-led firms. Most women would still simply join an office owned by a man. One of the few women who started her own office in the 60s was Hanna Kjærholm. In 1989 she became the first female professor at the Royal Academy, where she had once been a student. In this new position, Kjærholm was committed to ensure an equal number of men of women were teaching young aspiring architects. She also pushed for more opportunities for women to work in the field of architecture (Bay, 2023). Despite the efforts of her and others, women in architecture were still subject to the power of men during the time of the second feminist wave.

1.3 Conclusion

Denmark has a rich history of feminism and women's rights. Over the course of the two main feminist waves women have gained a lot of rights. In the first wave, the focus was more on rights to vote, study and work just like men already could. Because of these efforts, women were admitted to the Royal Academy of Architecture in Copenhagen for the first time. The second wave mainly addressed the gender inequality in society and criticised the established gender roles. While women could technically start their own offices, it was socially not very accepted and therefore rare. Even though women's emancipation has developed enormously over the last decades, there is still gender inequality and therefore a need for more chapters in the history of feminism in Denmark.

02

Opportunities in architecture as a woman

The feminist movement in Denmark has given women opportunities to study and practice a profession. With Dorte Mandrup as a case study, the topic of the possibilities of becoming an architect as a woman will be explored in this chapter. Her study in architecture school, her vision for her own firm, her realised projects and the prizes these projects have won will inform what opportunities Dorte Mandrup had as a woman in architecture and what she has contributed to the field of architecture.

2.1. Formative years

Dorte Mandrup was born in 1961 in Aarhus, the second largest city in Denmark after Copenhagen. Even though her great-grandfather and grandfather were architects, Mandrup never considered being an architect when she was younger. As a child, Mandrup wanted to become a vet and later a journalist. After graduating from high school, she describes herself as a very confused young person. Mandrup could not choose as she found everything exciting. One thing that always excited her was the arts, so ultimately she decided to study sculpture and ceramics in the US for a year. After returning to Denmark, Mandrup talked a lot about her future with other people, including her father, who was an engineer. These conversations influenced her to start studying medicine and keep the arts as a hobby, since the latter did not pay much. Eventually, she dropped out of medical school because she was missing the creativity and discussions about societal issues and the arts with fellow students. Mandrup found the combination of art and natural sciences in architecture and applied for the architecture school in Aarhus (RIBA & Vitra Talk, 2020; Louisiana Channel, 2021; The Second Studio, 2022). In line with the anti-authoritarian views of the 60s, the Aarhus Arkitektskolen was founded as a breakaway school from the Royal Academy in Copenhagen. The architecture school did not employ any professors who would tell the students exactly what to do (The Second Studio, 2022). Because of this, students had to find their own way from the school's vision that developing their own interest as an architect sets them up for success. For Mandrup, this interest was in the mechanical aspect of architecture. She explored architecture with motion or a certain dynamic to fold and unfold for the users. Looking back at her time as a student, Mandrup expresses how vital studying and understanding the creations of other architects or artists can be for your development (Louisiana Channel, 2021). While every student was occupied with studying post-modernism, Mandrup felt like she could not relate to it on an emotional level. Consequently, in her search, she tried to find precedents by which she felt touched by. Architecture that was ethereal and very translucent did speak to her. This kind of architecture was mainly created by Japanese architects.

Mandrup admired the famous Toyo Ito (Top Artist Podcast, 2021; The Second Studio, 2022), but also architects who stayed out of the main discussion and had their own take on their role in architecture. They dared to walk out of line with everyone else (Louisiana Channel, 2021).

2.2. Working as an architect

After graduating in 1991, Mandrup finds herself in a time when not much was being built. Graduates had to exhibit their paper projects in a very academic way to find a job. Even when you had a job, you would have to exhibit. It was just not realistic to have a building done in your name (Louisiana Channel, 2021; The Second Studio, 2022). Eventually, Mandrup finds a position at the office of Henning Larsen, a famous Danish architect. She describes him as a person on his own search, which gave his employees the freedom to follow their own interests. Because she was given the opportunity to explore her interests and her role in architecture, she could develop herself as an architect while also gaining experience with working on projects (Louisiana Channel, 2021). This process of self-development and independence eventually led to co-founding the firm Fuglsang & Mandrup-Poulsen in 1996 together with Niels Fuglsang, who was her colleague at Henning Larsen. In the first year they won three competitions but only managed to build one. As Fuglsang was not able to make a living he wanted, he decided to quit. Mandrup, at the time, was also teaching so she was a bit more flexible and decided she wanted to continue (The Second Studio, 2022). When in 1999 the firm Fuglsang & Mandrup-Poulsen dissolved, Dorte Mandrup started her very own practice: Dorte Mandrup A/S (Det Centrale Virksomhedsregister, 2025a; Dorte Mandrup A/S, n.d.). Together with her only employee, Mandrup wins her first competition. After this initial success, the firm struggles to get into competitions. Luckily, the city architect of Copenhagen at that time wanted to help young architects and gave the smaller projects, such as kindergartens, to them. With this help Mandrup could work on two kindergartens and finally started to become a respected firm (The Second Studio, 2022).

2.3. Vision and design process

The whole process Mandrup has been through from her formative years to founding her own office has shaped her vision on architecture. This vision is very hands-on and informed by shape and form (Dorte Mandrup A/S, n.d.). In the design process this translates into using physical models that allow Dorte Mandrup to quickly respond to the context.

The models make it possible for the office to test ideas against context-specific parameters and explore all possible paths before deciding on one idea or concept. Subsequently, before coming to a final design there has been a whole circular process of trial and error. Models on the computer are used in later phases of the design process (Louisiana Channel, 2021). Context as an irreplaceable place is at the heart of the practice, along with pushing the boundaries of form and materiality. This creates modern architecture with a pragmatic sensibility for the context, form, materiality, human scale and history (Dorte Mandrup A/S, n.d.). According to Mandrup, good architects have a certain sensibility for how they shape the lives and experiences of the users of their buildings. It is a skill if you are able to use your sensory apparatus, as it gets silenced throughout your life. Through your senses you can understand the world as they are a form of communication that contains a greater understanding than words. Mandrup believes that trusting your senses and acknowledging them is one of the most important skills an architect can have (Louisiana Channel, 2021).

2.4. Work of Dorte Mandrup

Since its founding in 1999, the firm of Dorte Mandrup has designed a whole range of projects in Denmark and across the border. Dorte Mandrup herself is involved in each project in the office, while overseeing 77 employees as Creative Director and owner (Det Centrale Virksomhedsregister, 2025a; Dorte Mandrup A/S, n.d.). Each project deserves praise and acknowledgement for its own reasons, but I cannot go over all of them. Therefore, I will only address a selection of projects that have won one or multiple awards, as these projects are recognized contributions of Mandrup to architecture. Not all awards won are connected to a specific project, as some are granted as a celebration of Dorte Mandrup as an architect (firm). I will relate the projects to Mandrup's process of becoming an architect by making a timeline combining events in her life with the (project) awards. The timeline in Figure 6 shows the relation between events in Mandrup's life and her award projects. After the initial struggle to get into competitions, the firm starts to be successful in the years leading up to the economic crisis in 2008, but it gets quieter as Mandrup has to balance her work with her role as a single mother and almost goes bankrupt during the crisis itself. Half of the office was let go and the aftermath would last many years (The Second Studio, 2022). After getting the office back on track, the projects and awards became plenty. Some projects have been more crucial or relevant to the whole process of becoming a successful architect (firm). These projects I will highlight and dive deeper into.

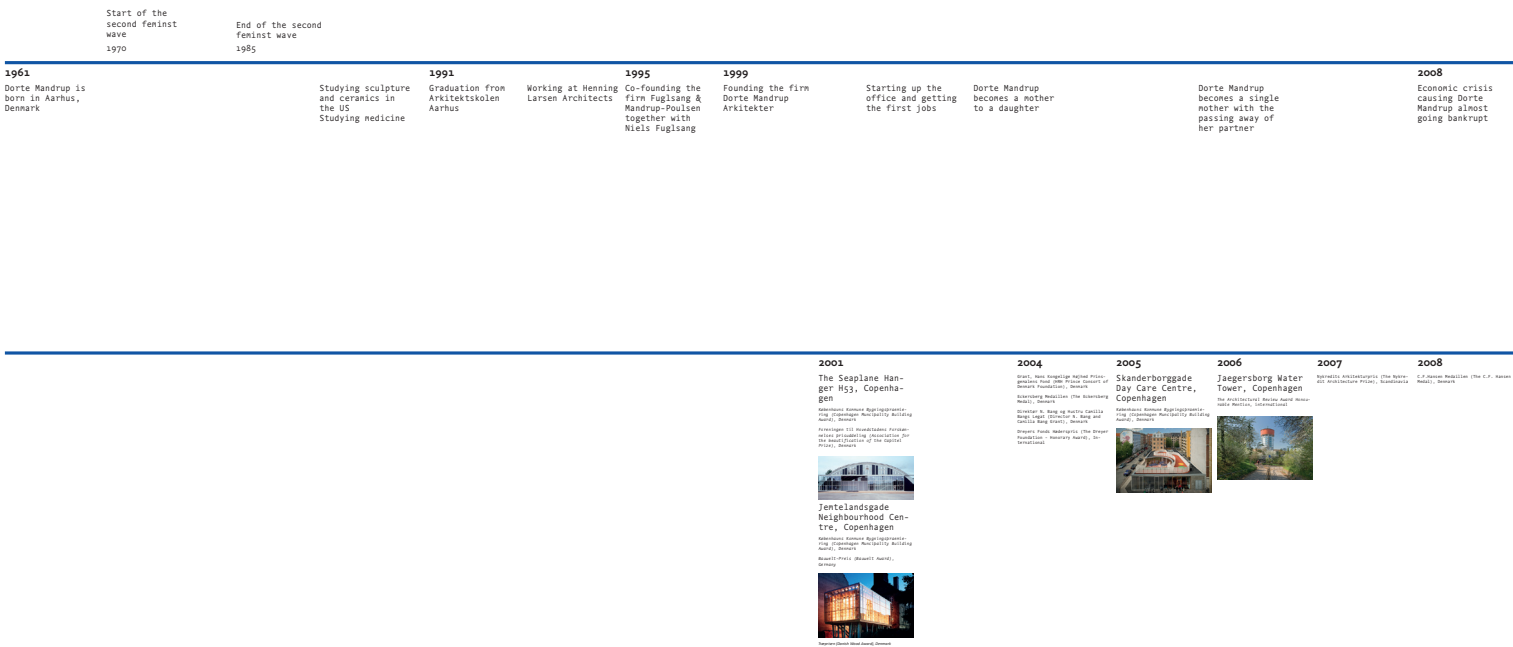












Figure 6. Timeline of the life and award-winning projects of Dorte Mandrup.

Slowly building
the office again

Hiring an CEO so
she can focus on
designing

2018
"CONDITIONS" an
exhibition at
the curated 16th
International
Architecture
Exhibition, La
Biennale di
Venezia, Italy

2019
Chairwoman of the
Jury, European
Union Prize for
Contemporary
Architecture
Mies van der Rohe
Award

<p>2009 Munksgaard School, Copenhagen</p>  <p>Bordings Independent School, Copenhagen</p> 	<p>2013 Anager Children's Culture House, Co- penhagen</p>  <p>Raa Preschool, Sweden</p> 	<p>2015 IKEA Hubhult, Swe- den</p>  <p>Salling Tower, Aarhus</p>  <p>Sundbyster Hall II, Copenhagen</p> 	<p>2016</p> <p>Holtenbjerg (Honorary Award), Den- mark (Honorary Award) International of Light (Honorary Award) Best Building Award, Denmark</p> <p>Oliver Latham, Sweden</p>	<p>2017</p> <p>The AEC Design and Architecture Award of the Year, AEC - Global Design Award (Honorary Award) Best Building Award, Denmark</p> <p>Green Head Design Award, The Chicago Architecture Center</p>	<p>2018</p> <p>Honorary Award, National Architecture Award of the Year, AEC - Global Design Award (Honorary Award) Best Building Award, Denmark</p> <p>Green Head Design Award, The Chicago Architecture Center</p>	<p>2019</p> <p>Honorary Award (Honorary Award) Best Building Award, Denmark</p> <p>Honorary Award (Honorary Award) Best Building Award, Denmark</p>	<p>2020</p> <p>International Leadership Award, AEC Award, Denmark</p>	<p>2021 Wadden Sea Centre, Denmark</p>  <p>Ilulissat Icefjord Centre, Greenland</p> 	<p>2022</p> <p>Global Award for Sustainable Archi- tecture</p> <p>Global Award for Sustainable Archi- tecture</p> <p>Global Award for Sustainable Archi- tecture</p>	<p>2023 The Whale, Norway</p>  <p>Global Award for Sustainable Archi- tecture</p> <p>Global Award for Sustainable Archi- tecture</p>
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When Dorte Mandrup founded the office she had to build it up from scratch. She had to formulate her vision, get in contact with potential clients, and enter competitions in order to secure projects. One of the first projects Mandrup did, was a neighbourhood centre in Jemtelandsgade, Copenhagen. By transforming an old industrial building from 1880 Mandrup has created a lively centre that accommodates theatre plays, debates and much more. The community has been given back a place to meet and engage in activities. As in line with her vision, the old industrial building is regarded as an irreplaceable place that informs the design but does not dictate the design interventions. Figures 7 and 8 show how Mandrup kept the original building but also made some changes and added new elements. In 2001 the firm won three prizes with this early project, including the prestigious Copenhagen Municipality's Building Award. They also won the Bauwelt-Preis, which is a prize for young architects and their first works. The project has put Mandrup on the map for community and culture centres and she has designed several similar projects in the years after (Dorte Mandrup A/S, 2025).

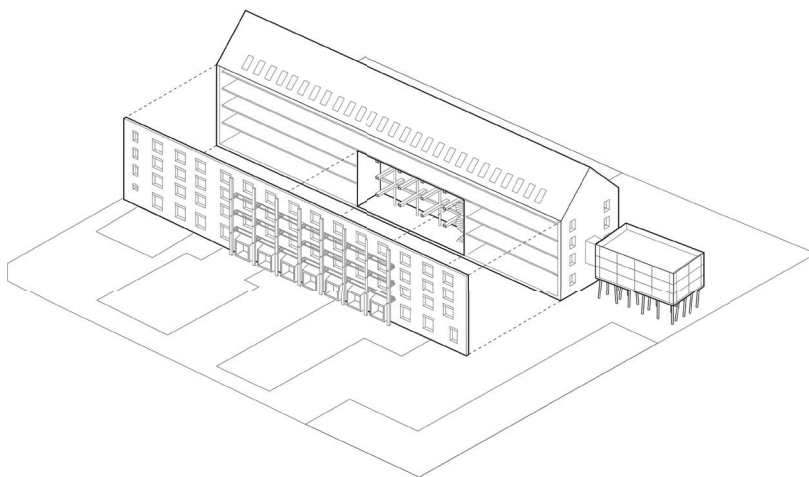


Figure 7. Axonometric drawing neighbourhood centre. From “Dorte Mandrup A/S,” by Dorte Mandrup A/S, 2001 (<https://dortemandrup.dk/work/neighbourhood-centre-jemtelandsgade>)

Figure 8. Interior neighbourhood centre. From “Dorte Mandrup A/S”, by Jens Markus Lindhe, 2001 (<https://dortemandrup.dk/work/neighbourhood-centre-jemtelandsgade>)

After getting more and more projects in the first few years, the firm develops itself as a recognized architecture firm. In 2007 Dorte Mandrup received a major award, the Nykredit Architecture Prize. It is the largest architecture award in Denmark for architects who have made a significant contribution to the built environment. The last project to win an award before the economic crisis in 2008 was the Jægersborg Water Tower. This project was a transformation as well, but now for student housing and it was completed in 2006. Mandrup wanted to create high-quality living conditions for students, who often lived in cramped and dark apartments. While adding protruding windows to create light and efficient use of space, see Figures 9 and 10, the tower maintained its image as a landmark for the area. This showcases Mandrup's sensibility for the context as well as her ability to use this context to push the boundaries of form. For all the efforts, the project received an Honourable Mention from The Architectural Review Award (Dorte Mandrup A/S, 2025).

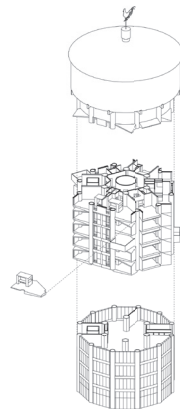


Figure 9. Exterior of the Jægersborg Water Tower. From “Dorte Mandrup A/S,” by Jens Markus Lindhe & Torben Eskerod, 2006 (<https://dortemandrup.dk/work/jaegersborg-water-tower-denmark>)

Figure 10. Exploded axonometric drawing of the Jægersborg Water Tower. From “Dorte Mandrup A/S,” by Dorte Mandrup A/S, 2006 (<https://dortemandrup.dk/work/jaegersborg-water-tower-denmark>)

The Råå Preschool is one of the projects to win an award after Mandrup manages to get the firm back on its feet after the crisis. This school is located in Sweden, which suggests the firm has expanded outside of Denmark. As Figure 11 shows, the roof is jagged and entirely made of timber in a way that it imitates the nearby dunes and the traditional fishermen's houses of Råå. Inside, the shape of the roof creates interesting spaces where children can play and learn, see Figure 12. Once again Mandrup is aware of the context and acts accordingly by letting the building become part of the landscape. This also enables the children in the school to connect with their surroundings. The success of the building speaks with the three awards it has won. According to the Skåne Architecture Prize, it is the Best Building of the Year in 2014. It also gets recognition from the German Design Council with the ICONIC Award for public buildings. Another award that has been given to the school is the Swedish Timber Award, which is only awarded once every four years (Dorte Mandrup A/S, 2025).



Figure 11. Roof of the Råå Preschool overlooking the sea. From “Dorte Mandrup A/S,” by Adam Mørk, 2013 (<https://dortemandrup.dk/work/raa-preschool-sweden>)



Figure 12. Interior of the Råå Preschool. From “Dorte Mandrup A/S,” by Adam Mørk, 2013 (<https://dortemandrup.dk/work/raa-preschool-sweden>)

In the following years, the firm expands even further and Mandrup hires a CEO who helps to professionalise the firm. It also allows her to focus more on the design part instead of also having to manage the administration (The Second Studio, 2022). The firm starts to enter and win competitions in countries outside of Scandinavia and becomes internationally recognized. One such international project is the recently built Ilulissat Icefjord Centre in Ilulissat, Greenland. Taking the UNESCO-protected ice glacier as the heart of human and nature's existence, Mandrup focuses on blending the building in with its surroundings and allowing visitors, residents and researchers to experience the story of life and ice. The building is discreet but also pushes boundaries with cantilevers and dealing with the harsh arctic climate. Especially because of all the snowfall, see Figure 13, Mandrup had to find a solution in the shape of the building that prevents build-up. Figure 14 shows this solution in the form of a boomerang shape. With exhibition space, mine science centre and café, the building caters to its users. In 2023 it got the AZ Award for Buildings over 1.000 sqm (Dorte Mandrup A/S, 2025).

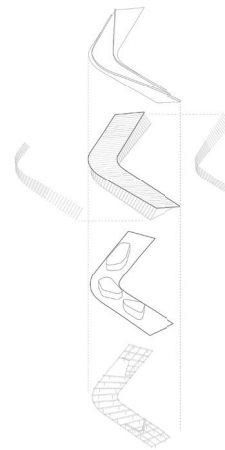


Figure 13. Exterior of the Ilulissat Icefjord Centre. From “Dorte Mandrup A/S,” by Adam Mørk, 2021 (<https://dortemandrup.dk/work/ilulissat-icefjord-centre-greenland>).

Figure 14. Exploded axonometric drawing of the Ilulissat Icefjord Centre. From “Dorte Mandrup A/S,” by Dorte Mandrup A/S, 2021 (<https://dortemandrup.dk/work/ilulissat-icefjord-centre-greenland>).

Another recent project and a favourite of mine is the Wadden Sea Centre in southern Jutland, Denmark. With its thatched roof and diagonal lines, the building harmonizes with its surroundings and history while also being a unique structure in those same surroundings, see Figure 15. The use of thatch can be seen as a homage to the local identity and craftsmanship. An exhibition informs visitors about the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Wadden Sea and its annual large ride of migrating birds. Figure 16 shows the interior of an exhibition space with the art representing the birds. The building also reacts to the previous centre by integrating the existing structure into the new building. This creates a courtyard as an oasis in the vast landscape. Awarded with five prizes, the Wadden Sea Centre is highly celebrated by architects and users. It has won the Esbjerg Kommunes Byfonds præmiering (Municipality of Esbjerg City-Fund Award), the Building of the Year from Magasinet Byggeri, the Danish Lighting Award, the Nordic Lighting Design Award and the Prize for Sustainability from the Meyvaert Museum (Dorte Mandrup A/S, 2025).



Figure 15. Exterior of the Wadden Sea Centre. From “Dorte Mandrup A/S,” by Adam Mørk, 2021 (<https://dortemandrup.dk/work/wadden-sea-centre-denmark>).



Figure 16. Interior of an exhibition space in the Wadden Sea Centre. From “Dorte Mandrup A/S,” by Adam Mørk, 2021 (<https://dortemandrup.dk/work/wadden-sea-centre-denmark>).

The firm expects to realise more projects in the coming years. Some are already under construction as we speak. Whether these projects will win any awards remains a question, but considering the repertoire of Dorte Mandrup this is very likely to happen.

2.4 Conclusion

Dorte Mandrup's road to becoming a celebrated architect was not very smooth, but it shaped her into the architect she is now. Mandrup had the opportunity to try several studies before committing to architecture. After graduating, she had the same struggles as her male counterparts with getting jobs. At the start of her own firm, it was difficult to get into competitions, but this had more to do with the crisis than with Mandrup being a woman. As Mandrup established herself and got numerous awards for projects, she got the opportunity to work on bigger projects.

03

Dorte Mandrup as a
woman architect

Dorte Mandrup not only made a name with her architecture but also with her participation in the discussion about gender inequality in the architecture profession. As there is still a lot to be done for women to have the same opportunities as men, there is a need for discussion and action. But what exactly has Mandrup experienced that she feels the need to speak up on this topic? And how does she see her role as a woman in architecture in the discussion? In this chapter these questions will be discussed.

3.1. Experience as a woman in architecture

About her time in architecture school, Dorte Mandrup remembers that students were taught that architecture is a men's profession. While famous male architects were mentioned time and time again, students were not taught about some of the most successful women architects. Therefore, students like Dorte Mandrup did not have any female role models to look up to. This maintained the idea of men being dominant in the architecture field. Students were not only prepared for the men's world that was architecture but also in all other aspects of the building environment, such as dealing with male clients and contractors (Edens, 2022). During her education and while working in the field of architecture, Mandrup has seen that women were looked upon as a rare species and not taken seriously in architectural discussions (Skyframe, 2024). She has walked into rooms full of men, wondering why she was the only woman in the room. As a woman, she felt like she had to play along and be one of the boys (Berlage Keynotes, 2023). Between men there is a certain understanding or friendship. Subsequently, women have to push harder to be seen and to establish themselves (RIBA & Vitra Talk, 2020; Top Artist Podcast, 2021). Architecture was a boyzone even long after the theoretical emancipation of women following the second feminist wave. Women are still not as successful as men, but the women believe that it must be their own fault. The consensus is that if men are more successful, then women just should not mind sexist remarks and if they do, they are regarded as too soft for the hard architecture world (Edens, 2022). In addition, after getting a child, Mandrup recalls critical remarks of her not being a good mom because she was also an architect. Paradoxically, she could also not be a good architect while being a mom at the same time. Having to raise her child on her own made things even more complicated. All the while, she felt that being a mother was a very powerful and empowering thing (Skyframe, 2024).

Mandrup states at a Berlage Keynotes lecture at TU Delft (2023) that she sees that, at least in Denmark, men are still in charge and hold the power in the world of construction. Most developers and clients are men.

These are the same people who are the most powerful and that architects depend on. The field of architecture in Denmark appears to be quite in balance when it comes to gender. The ratio of men and women working in the profession is almost one-to-one. Men are represented with 52% and women with 48% (Architects' Council of Europe, 2022). On the other hand, I did a small research, see appendix I, in the Danish Business Register (Det Centrale Virksomhedsregister, 2025b) and found that out of the 27 leading architectural offices in Denmark, only in 18% of the firms a woman holds the sole ownership. This is against the 52% of the firms owned by men, which are often the bigger firms. The remaining 30% is owned by men and women. Mandrup is one of the few women to be the sole owner of an office. So, even though Denmark has a large history of feminism, gender equality in architecture remains superficial.

3.2. Participation in the discussion

Dorte Mandrup calls herself a feminist (Berlage Keynotes, 2023) and combines her work in the office with participating in the discussion on how to reach full gender equality. She appears in podcasts, holds lectures and writes articles. One such example is a documentary about women in architecture directed by Boris Noir (Skyframe, 2024). Together with Tosin Oshinowo, an architect from Nigeria, Mandrup attempts to increase the visibility of women in architecture and encourage prospecting students. Less recent is an article by Mandrup in Dezeen in 2017, which she wrote after she was mentioned on a list of Dezeen with 50 female architects and designers in honour of International Women's Day. Mandrup argues that singling women out in such a way is a step backward in the journey to gender equality. While it is an effort to make women feel special for once, they will be forgotten until the next list, exhibition or interview comes along. Because when we continue to talk of architects and female architects, the latter will always be considered less. Why are we not talking about male architects? Why can't we just talk of women in architecture as simply architects? Why can't women compete on equal terms with men? As Mandrup says, "I am not a female architect. I am an architect." (Mandrup, 2017). In addition, the jury of the prestigious Nykredits Architecture Prize, which Mandrup won in 2007, praised the 'femininity' in her projects whereas men would never be praised for their 'masculine' buildings. Mandrup argues that she designs buildings as a professional architect and not as a woman. On the other side of the discussion, there is the opinion that women should be grateful for the lists, as a special mention is better than nothing. Mandrup argues against this by stating such thinking is unambitious and will not help to regard women as just architects and not female architects (Mandrup, 2017).

Dezeen's list is not the only list highlighting women Dorte Mandrup has been part of. The books '100 Women: Architects in Practice' by Harris et al. (2023) and 'The women who changed architecture' by Willis et al. (2022) mention Mandrup alongside other woman architects. According to Mandrup, these kinds of lists and books are patronizing and provoked her to write the 2017 article (Top Artist Podcast, 2021). In 2024 she wrote another article about the topic in reaction to comments about the one in 2017. This first article opened a discussion across the architectural field. While some found themselves agreeing with Mandrup, others considered it anti-feminist and controversial. Mandrup reacts to this criticism by saying that she recognizes the importance of highlighting the contributions of women to architecture that are as diverse as forgotten. But what she does not recognize is the fact that there is still inequality and therefore the need for the lists (Mandrup, 2024). Even though there has been some improvement over the years, it will take many more years for society to change. "We cannot wait for change to simply happen." (Mandrup, 2024), so we have to be more radical and take action. Action to change current power structures that are sexist and discriminatory against women. Power can be used to exclude but also to include. What can we do so that women more often hold powerful positions or start their own offices? Or in other words, what can we do so that women will have the same opportunities as men (Top Artist Podcast, 2021; Mandrup, 2024)? One of the actions Mandrup suggests, is for businesses to examine their wages and structure. There should not be a pay gap between genders and a disbalance in the representation of men and women in all layers of the organisational structure (Mandrup, 2024). Not only does Mandrup call others for action, but she also actively implements the suggestions in her own office. There is a one-to-one ratio all the way through the organisational structure. Mandrup also believes that only working with clients and developers who share the same values on equality and diversity helps to spread the discussion (Top Artist Podcast, 2021).

3.3 Conclusion

Dorte Mandrup has experienced what it is to be a woman in architecture in Denmark. She firsthandly knows how unequal the profession is. But while many choose to stay silent, Mandrup decides to take action and let the feminist in her be free. She writes articles about gender inequality in architecture, participates in a documentary about women in architecture, talks in lectures and podcasts about her own experiences as a woman and publishes her views on the website of her office. It can be said that she tries very hard to push for changes, but we won't know if all her efforts will be fruitful. Only time will tell.

Conclusion

Conclusion

This history thesis has examined the relation between feminism in Denmark and Dorte Mandrup in order to give a deeper insight into Mandrup's contribution to architecture as a woman. By conducting a literature study, the question *What is the role of feminism in Denmark in the career and life of Dorte Mandrup?* has been answered.

Feminism in Denmark mainly consists of two feminist waves in the 20th century. Numerous associations were founded to give women a collective voice about their position in society, such as the Danks Kvindesamfund and the Rødstrømperne. During the first wave, the activists focused more on gaining rights for women to vote, work and study. The second wave was more about established gender roles in society. In relation to architecture, women were first admitted to the Royal Academy of Architecture in Copenhagen in 1908. The efforts of the associations of the first and second feminist waves had created the opportunity for women to pursue their interest and passion in architecture. Even though women could now practice architecture, the profession continued to be dominated by men. When women wanted to start their own offices, instead of working for male-led firms, they were met with opposition from society. By the time Dorte Mandrup had decided to study architecture in the 1980s, there was already a precedent of women architects, as many women had become architects and a few had opened their own offices. After some struggles during her journey of becoming an architect, Mandrup decided to start her own firm in 1999. With award-winning projects, her contribution to architecture is celebrated internationally. The earlier struggles shaped her vision on architecture and how she sees herself as an architect. In fact, Mandrup writes in an article that she does not see herself as a female architect but as just an architect. By continuing to talk about architects and female architects, the gender inequality that she has experienced will not be solved anytime soon. Mandrup calls out for change in the profession of architecture that is still dominated by men. Besides writing articles, she also talks about the topic in lectures and podcasts. The feminist waves not only gave Dorte Mandrup the opportunity to study and practice architecture and own an architectural firm but also inspired her to speak up and call for action.

The research for this thesis has been conducted with a literature study. Both primary and secondary sources have been used. Most of the secondary sources have been written by women, which can be a sign that women are more interested in feminist topics than men. For further research, more sources written by men can be found to see if there are any discrepancies in the written history of feminism. In addition, this thesis examined only one case study, but the next step could be to look into more Danish women architects. This would give a broader picture of the relation between Danish feminism and women in architecture, as the outcomes can be compared. More research can also be done on the feminist movement in today's world and not only the movements in the 20th century.

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Appendix

I

Appendix

This small research was done by selecting 27 of the biggest Danish architecture firms. By looking them up in the Danish Central Business Register (Det Central Virksomhedsregister, 2025b), the owners of the firms could be found. Further research can be done by examining all firms in Denmark and not just the biggest or most successful ones. The percentage of shares is also a subject which could be looked into more as this can tell more about the balance in ownership in the individual firms.

Architecture firms

Owners

3XN



Aart Architects



Arkitema



BBP Arkitektur



BIG



C.F. Møller



Christensen & CO



CEBRA



Cobe



Cubo Architects



Dissing + Weitzling



Dorte Mandrup A/S



Entasis



Friis & Molke



Gehl Architects



Henning Larsen Architects



Juul Frost Arkitekter



Mikkelsen Architects



Nord Architects



Tegnestuen Vandkunsten



White Architects



Danielsen Architecture



WE Architecture



Leth and Gord



Sophus Søbye Architects



EFFEKT



ADEPT

