

Two Pioneering Female Architects in South Africa

Gertruida Brinkman and Eleanor Ferguson

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Two Pioneering Female Architects in South Africa. Gertruida Brinkman and Eleanor Ferguson

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This paper continues on from a recently completed research project on shared built heritage of South Africa and the Netherlands from 1902–61, mainly created by Dutch-born architects. It focuses on two pioneering female architects in South Africa, Gertruida Brinkman (1906–77, née Siemerink) and Eleanor Ferguson (also Stakesby–Lewis; 1900–82), both of Dutch descent and married to South African architects. They were not only the first two women architects to lead a private practice in southern Africa, but also introduced ideas of the Modern Movement through their built projects, while continuously demonstrating a great concern for quality of life. Brinkman, graduated from the University of the Witwatersrand, was based in Port Elizabeth (now Gqeberha). She undertook two ‘grand tours’, through respectively Europe (1939) and Brazil (1954), which influenced her oeuvre. The other protagonist, the globetrotter Ferguson, trained at the Delft Institute of Technology (now TU Delft) and relocated subsequently to South Africa. With her third husband, set up a joint practice in Johannesburg in 1938 and acted, under her maiden name, as its principal designer. The personal circumstances of both pioneers resulted in other priorities than seeking publicity in architectural journals. They focussed on designing and building, alongside a general social commitment additional to raising their children. Consequently, their legacies are hitherto scarcely known, except for some incidental references, which triggered our interest. By applying a combination of field, archival and bibliographical investigations with oral history research, we can now draft portraits of these two pioneering women architects. Their discovered portfolios reached far beyond the domestic sphere, including amongst others clubs, office buildings, schools, hospitals and industrial buildings and complexes. These discoveries show that biographical research is essential to augment the limited bibliographical information available on the contributions made by female architects to the built environment.

1. Architectural formation and practice for women in early C20

During 1902–61, South Africa formed part of the British Empire and its architectural norms and professional structures largely mirrored those of the United Kingdom.¹ The legislation that formalized the architectural profession caused great difficulties for immigrant practitioners not educated in the British Empire. They had to pass examinations based on British training and regulations before being allowed to enter private practice, all in English.

These regulations favoured men, who had easier access to technical and/or academic education and professional networks. Women at the time were obliged to be dedicated spouses in support of their husbands' careers. Female aspirant architects where, if not excluded by rules, excluded in practice.

In the Netherlands, the Delft Institute for Technology allowed female students from its inception (1905), but its first female architectural engineer alumnus, Grada Wolffensperger graduated only in 1917.² It was difficult for female architects in the Netherlands to develop a professional career due to various social constraints and prejudices. A Royal decree directed women working in public service to resign from their posts upon marriage. Married women were barred from opening their own banking accounts or taking out insurance, but were dependent on the endorsement of their husbands until 1957. Such social-administrative limitations could eventually be overcome when an architects' couple started a joint practice. Married female architects also needed to take responsibility for running their households and raising children.

In the Union of South Africa, the situation was partly different for educated women of the white minority as they could more easily employ relatively cheap black labour to assist in the housekeeping. Still, in 1934 only three or four female practitioners were registered as architects, though not all were professionally active.³ We have however identified two pioneers who were both formally trained and importantly acting as principal designers of a private practice in southern Africa from 1936 onwards. One was Gertruida Siemerink (later Brinkman), who worked in the Eastern Cape (1932–77). The other was the Dutch-trained engineer Johanna Eleanor Ferguson (later Stakesby-Lewis), being the ninth female to formally register as an architect in South Africa. She established her practice first in Johannesburg (1938–53), then transferred to Salisbury/Harare (1953–61) and finally to Camberley (United Kingdom).

2. Gertruida Brinkman (1906–77)

Ge(e)rtruida Hendrika Siemerink was born in 1906 in Pretoria, South Africa, into a Dutch immigrant family. Her architect father, Hendrik (1870–1944), was acting chief inspector of Public Works at the time and soon after supervised the construction of the Union Buildings there. The Siemerinks relocated to Port Elizabeth (today Gqeberha) in 1915, where Hendrik served as Public Works district engineer for ten years.⁴ Probably inspired by her father's work, Gertruida studied architecture at the Witwatersrand University in 1927–31.⁵

That school by then had fifty students and two staff members, including Stanley Furner, who introduced international Modern Movement architecture to South Africa.⁶ Her years at the University coincided with the emergence of

a group of *avant garde* students, including Rex Martienssen, who advocated a radical turn to modernism.⁷

Following her graduation, she entered the practice of her father, then partnered with Hugh Walker and briefly, Cyril Lane. This firm mainly applied a historicist vocabulary to their commissioned commercial buildings and maintained good contacts with industrial clients. Port Elizabeth, then the second largest seaport of the country and the main economic, cultural, social and administrative centre in the Eastern Cape, was also the major base of the motor vehicle industry. Siemerink & Walker, for instance, designed the assembly plants for both Ford and General Motors (1928).⁸

Gertruida introduced an *avant-gardist* approach to the firm's architectural design, breaking with the Beaux Arts-like traditions and eclectic ornaments, albeit not yet under her own name. The Mill Park Bowling Club (1933) demonstrates her modernist approach: an elegant flat-roofed building with a protruding extension in the centre of the field-facing façade, accentuated by a cantilevered canopy with rounded edges (**Fig. 1a**).

Shortly after Gertruida had married mechanical engineer, Jack Brinkman, she completed her professional registration and in mid-1936 she entered into partnership with her 66-year old father, changing the firm's name into Siemerink & Brinkman and becoming its principle designer.⁹ Some of her early designs, like the Berkeley Court apartment block (1936) with its arched windows and balcony fronts with Art Deco styling, mediated modern elements with the historicist tradition practiced by her father.

She proved instrumental in introducing the ideas of the Modern Movement to the Eastern Cape. The stunning House 'Ridgewood' (1936) built for the Danish-born director of the Ford factory, Axel Stockelbach, is exemplary (**Fig. 1b**). The influence of Erich Mendelsohn, whose work she admired, is clearly visible in the composition of curved volumes and canopies.¹⁰

Another project that reflects her trend towards modernity is the Marine Hotel in Summerstrand. The very reserved Art Deco front and the radically modern side facade (**Fig. 1c**) date from 1939. In the same year the Brinkmans undertook a months-long tour through Europe. Alongside historical highlights, they visited Rationalist projects in Italy and made an excursion to view Wim Dudok's Hilversum Town Hall.



Figure 1. GH Brinkman, [a] Mill Park Bowling Club, 1933; [b] House 'Ridgewood', 1936; [c] Marine Hotel 1939, 1948, all Gqeberha, South Africa. © [a, b] Bryan Brinkman, c.1936; [c] Transnet Heritage Library, 1950.

These explorations had a lasting influence on Brinkman's architecture. The rational 1948 extension to the Marine Hotel (**Fig. 1c**) shows a total architectural control, resulting in a clear articulation and dynamic volumetric expression. Her design for the Mobbs Factory (1952, **Fig. 2a**), constructed in only seven months with half-shell concrete sheds, exemplifies her structural dexterity.¹¹ The Livingston Hospital (1953) is an equally impressive example of her control of programme to deliver a solution that is both rational and aesthetically appealing (**Fig. 2b**).

Inspired by the *Brazil Builds* publication, the Brinkmans journeyed to Brazil in 1954.¹² The Brazilian influence and a lingering reference to the Italian Rationalists is evident in Gertruida Brinkman's subsequent projects. The Port Elizabeth Museum extension (1961) (**Fig. 2c**) and various hospital complexes, such as the large ward blocks for the Provincial Hospital in Port Elizabeth (1960s–77) are exemplary. With the latter, she was expanding the 1917 building designed by her father when in Public Works.¹³ Similarly, she designed extensive new facilities to the General Motors Factory, originally by her father.¹⁴



Figure 2. GH Brinkman, [a] Mobbs Factory, 1952; [b] Livingston Hospital, 1953; [c] Port Elizabeth Museum extension, 1961, all Gqeberha, South Africa. © collection Bryan Brinkman.

Brinkman's professional career spans over 45 years, during which she remained the principal architect of the sequence of practices.¹⁵ Her oeuvre includes numerous modernist private houses, churches, hospitals, schools, museums and factories and she was an important pioneer of both Modern Movement and Brazil Builds ideas in South Africa. She was a trailblazer for women in architectural practice and in society. She acted as honorary secretary and treasurer of the Port Elizabeth Local Committee of Architects and was the first president of the Eastern Cape Chapter of the Soroptimist International.¹⁶ Her son and grandson followed in her footsteps and her legacy lives on today as B4 Architects.

3. J. Eleanor (Stakesby–Lewis) Ferguson (1900–82)¹⁷

Johanna Eleanor Ferguson was born in 1900 in Shanghai, where her Dutch-born father was employed as commissioner of the Imperial (later Chinese) Maritime Customs Service. While a teenager, she relocated to the Netherlands for a proper Dutch education. Subsequently, she studied architecture at the Delft Institute of Technology, being the first woman in her family to do so. Even

before her graduation, she designed her own, very modern house near Breda, where she went to live following her marriage to Ewoud van Everdingen in 1925.

That two-storeyed flat-roofed house, called *Sunnyside*, was constructed in brick and has a semi-circular extension with upper balcony at the eastern side to allow for early morning light in the master bedroom upstairs (**Fig. 3a**). The central entrance is accentuated by a canopy and two long strips with decorative stained-glass windows to light the stairwell.

When she graduated in the summer of 1926—already a married woman, which in itself was pioneering—she was one of the first female architectural engineers in the Netherlands. However, it proved very difficult for her to build up a private architectural practice, particularly after she had given birth to two children. Her main clients were her—divorced—parents. Ferguson designed an expressive reed covered house in Wageningen (*De Huif*, 1927) for her mother. For her father, she designed another version of the first *Sunnyside* near Utrecht (1928) (**Fig. 3b**) followed by a third, smaller-sized, version of the same on the neighbouring plot (1935/36). The wooden built-in furniture of these projects was also made to her design and intended to be both functional and create a cosy atmosphere.

Meanwhile, her marriage floundered and she relocated to the International Theosophical Centre at Naarden, where she married her second husband, Paul Boswinkel in 1934. Professional prospects, especially for female practitioners, were almost non-existent in the Netherlands due to the great economic depression. The newly-weds decided to emigrate (with two little children) to the 'Golden City' Johannesburg.

Upon arrival in early 1936, Eleanor, as she called herself from then onwards, started working as a 'draughtsman' while studying for the compulsory special qualifying exam. Divorced again, she registered as an architect under her maiden name, Ferguson in 1937. She soon found a true partner in work and life and with an interest in theosophy in Stakesby Lewis, whom she married in December 1938. They set up a joint practice in the newly completed modernist Washington House (1938, Harry Le Roith), preferring to keep their professional and private lives spatially separated. This was in part possible because of the availability of cheap labour to staff their home. They likewise maintained clearly defined professional roles: she was the first designer and he was the builder.



Figure 3. JE Ferguson, [a] *Sunnyside*, Breda, 1925; [b] *Sunnyside*, Utrecht, 1928; both the Netherlands; [c] *Cottage AJ du Plessis*; 1943, Johannesburg, South Africa. © [a] Collection Stedelijk Museum, Breda, c1930; [b] collection Eric Ferguson, c.1937; [c] Tsica Heritage Consultants, 2019.

Her earliest Johannesburg works include various ‘Wrightian’–or rather ‘Dudokian’ or ‘Wilsian’–houses built in the suburbs, often covered by low pyramid hipped roofs with large overhangs. As is customary in South Africa, they were often provided with a small loggia or ‘stoep’, which served as shaded outdoor space. A typical example is the cottage for Technikon Witwatersrand staff member, A.J. Du Plessis (1943) (**Fig. 3c**).

The firm was also responsible for new commercial buildings, such as a diamond cutting factory (1943) and an industrial pastry bakery (1944): large cubic building volumes in orange–coloured brick, interspersed with horizontal steel window strips and accentuated by thin concrete frames. This idiom was continued in the high–rise buildings of August House (1946) (**Fig. 4a**), Rondi Ice Cream Factory (1948) and Sterling House (1951). All were executed in a strictly controlled modernist brick aesthetic, which gave the buildings a local expression of the international Modern Movement. August House has an impressive construction of reinforced concrete with conical mushroom columns (**Fig. 4b**). Similar constructions had already been taught and applied in warehouses. Ferguson’s use of these in plain sight in office spaces, as in August House, was pioneering in South Africa and was applied to allow better day light distribution and thereby improve working conditions.

The Bienvenue Shelter on Terrace Road, Bertrams (1944) relates to Ferguson’s social commitment to improving living conditions for lesser privileged South Africans. Alongside her architectural practice, she acted, privately under her married name, as national president of the Theosophical Society in Southern Africa (1946–53), frequently lecturing abroad and supporting various charitable initiatives. Under her leadership it established ties with the Institute of Race Relations, a liberal independent advocacy organisation that aims to address, amongst others, issues of racial inequality and poverty in South Africa. She designed a new Theosophical Lodge *pro bono* in 1949, but it was never executed.

In December 1953 the Stakesby–Lewis family relocated to Salisbury (now Harare), where Ferguson designed mainly private bungalows in the suburbs (**Fig. 4c**). In 1961, in response to political uncertainty, the couple relocated to the theosophist Tekels Park Estate in Camberley, England.



Figure 4. JE Ferguson, [a] August House, 1946, with later art installation by artist R1, c.2019; [b] August House interior, Johannesburg, South Africa; [c] Plan for a bungalow, 1958, Induna Salisbury/Harare, Zimbabwe. © [a] R1; [b] Kim Gurney, c.2018; [c] collection Noortje Loveday.

There she only designed a few new detached houses: two successive houses for herself (1962, 1970) and one for her eldest daughter and her family (1964). These were all built in brick, with large steel-framed windows, strong horizontal lines, a functional layout following domestic preferences and were provided with plenty of storage space. When Eleanor passed away in 1982 in her last self-designed house, she was remembered only in theosophical and local circles. She wrote over twenty publications related to theosophy, but kept her architectural work apart, always remaining proud on her Delft engineer's title. A surviving letterhead from her Johannesburg practice, which includes the abbreviation B.I. (Delft), was the key to start our research into her architectural practice.

4. Reflection

The current historiography of C20 architectural history is largely based on the architectural discourse in the journals at the time and for the Modern Movement heavily coloured by the positive narratives of such authors as Siegfried Giedion and Adolf Behne.¹⁸ With a few exceptions, female architects rarely published in architectural journals. Their particular design contributions are often overlooked due to name changes after marriage or becoming anonymous staff members in public service or architectural offices. We were surprised to discover the work of Eleanor Ferguson and Gertruida Brinkman when investigating the contributions made by Dutch-born architects to the built environment in the Union of South Africa. Such a manifest underrepresentation of women within an already little-known group of immigrant architects prompted us to further investigate. This demanded many hours puzzling together those bits and pieces that are left of the lives and works of these two pioneering women architects in public or private archives. They aspired to equality in their architectural practice and society, stepping out from the shadows to lead and produce architectural oeuvres of great complexity, which now in turn deserve reappraisal.

Oral history, archival and field research are immensely important alongside bibliographical research. We learnt that these female pioneers were involved in all kinds of building typologies, but rather than working for professional fame, they used their architectural and social skills to improve the living and working conditions, both for their families and communities.

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Notes

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