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van Wijk, Charlotte

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Charlotte van Wijk

Women's Studies at the Architecture Department of Delft Technical University

Abstract

This paper discusses the section for Women's Studies at the Department of Architecture in Delft. This section pioneered women's education and training in the Netherlands, promoting the representation of women in the field of architecture and urban planning. The introduction deals with the specific conditions of its origins, in case the second wave of feminism in the Netherlands and related developments at Dutch universities and in Delft. The paper continues with how the first women professionals got a foothold in the architectural department of Delft and the opposition they faced. The first contribution of the Women's Studies section to the curriculum was to address the lack of a female perspective in the curriculum. Gradually, the section developed its own methods, deciding to concentrate not on feminist activism, but rather on introducing themes and methods relevant to a perspective on architecture and urbanism that was to be inclusive of women. The achievements of this earlier generation of female students and staff members makes it a relevant role model for the present generation of students.

Keywords: women's studies, education, research, architecture, urbanism

This paper discusses the section for Women's Studies at the Department of Architecture in Delft. I began this research wondering how it was possible that such a section came to exist at all. Also, I was interested to know what the impact of this section has been.

Methods

An important source for the research is the archive of Women's Studies section, donated by former staff member Anna Vos to the Chair of History of Architecture and Urban Planning of the faculty of A&BE. The archive contains publications by staff members of the section and others, reports of meetings, lecture and seminar notes and slides. Other sources are interviews with former staff members of the section, i.e. Anna Vos and Irene Cieraad.

Last academic year, two events lead to the inclusion of the theme of women practitioners and academics at our faculty in a thesis course. The first was the donation of the Women's Studies Section archive, the second was the travelling MoMoWo exhibition, presented in Delft in June of 2017. In the spring semester of 2017 a group of students researched Dutch female architects and planners. The research by Vita Teunissen, Vera van Maaren and Sophie Dikmans formed the basis for an addition to the MoMoWo exhibition, which was curated by Teunissen. Another group member, Veerle Alkemade, focussed on the Women's Studies Section, and contributed sources to this paper.

Introduction

The societal changes of the 1960s laid the groundwork for the emergence of the section for Women's Studies at the Department of Architecture. The second wave of feminism in the Netherlands started in the late 1960s.¹ Its influence reached Dutch universities around 1974, when students, of social and historical sciences mainly, initiated sections for Women's Studies at their faculties.² And from the late 1970s onward, women active in the academic

field of Women's Studies, or involved in the women's movement, showed increasing interest in the subjects of architecture and urban planning.^{3,4}

Another important change was the increasing influence students had on the curriculum. After the Second World War the student population at Dutch universities and colleges increased in numbers very rapidly. The student population also became more diverse in its socio-economical make-up, since more children of middle class families pursued higher education. During the 1960s these students felt the need to organise themselves to promote their economic and professional interests.⁵

During this period of student revolt and strife for democratisation at Dutch universities, the Department of Architecture at Delft Technical College appears to have been at the forefront of developments.⁶ Perhaps this was a reaction to the large influence that the individual professors had, with the power to block a student's educational progress entirely, based on their subjective aesthetic judgement. Besides, these professors were of an older generation and the students thought they had lost touch with the rapid changes in post-war Dutch society. The students wished that the content of their courses would have greater societal relevance, and that the curriculum be more adequately adapted to the demands of a changing professional field.⁷ During a departmental meeting in 1969 the students managed to convince the board members to cede their mandate. A general assembly of students and staff was to take all decisions at the Department of Architecture from then on. Thus students and junior staff members gained direct influence on the appointment of new staff members, and the curriculum.⁸ However, the process of democratisation at the department did not mean that women gained influence immediately, because they were greatly outnumbered by male students.⁹ In 1970 8 % of architecture students were female, this went up to over 10 % in 1978, to 21 % in 1985, and to almost 35 % in 1990.¹⁰

The Women's Studies Section

By the late 1970s, the feminist activism female students encountered outside of the Department of Architecture inspired a similar attitude in their educational institute. A group of female students started to meet regularly to discuss their professional and personal concerns. One of the issues they addressed was a lack of female teaching staff at the department, which caused the female perspective on the field of architecture and urban planning to be absent in the curriculum. The women's group decided to propose organising a seminar course to provide such a female perspective.¹¹

The reception their proposal got at a meeting of the Departmental Education Committee illustrates how the more conservative staff members felt about women at the Department of Architecture. The dean, P.K.A. Pennink, condescendingly suggested that the final result of such a seminar might be a cake, or the time might be spent knitting.¹² In response the female students published an image of the dean in the guise of Saint Sebastian, shot by knitting needles instead of arrows (**Fig. 1**).¹³ The affair led to some controversy within the department, but many of the reactions to the publication showed little understanding for the frustration the dean's remarks had caused the female students.¹⁴

But Anneriek Vos¹⁵, who was employed as a student assistant with professor Max Risselada, had already gotten the opportunity to reform an existing seminar course on text and plan analysis.¹⁶ This first seminar ran in 1978 and it continued until 1981, when the approach of the section changed, as will be described later.

In order to ensure the continuation and expansion of the subject at the department, Vos wrote a policy document in 1980, recommending to employ a permanent staff member in a dedicated section of Women's Studies.¹⁷ This proposal gradually got the support it needed, also because of a new policy at Delft Technical College to stimulate women to pursue degrees in technical subjects. This led to backing and even an additional funding of fl. 10.000,-

annually from the central board of the college.¹⁶ Starting in 1984 art historian Heidi de Mare and Anna Vos shared a full time assistant professorship.¹⁸

The first seminars were firmly rooted in feminist activism, and their stated object was to ‘gain knowledge to help create the conditions to end the oppression of women’.¹⁹ At the time numerous publications had appeared stating that existing housing and urban planning practise affected women’s societal position by isolating them in dormitory towns and in dwellings that did not provide a space for work or study.²⁰ During the seminar students discussed these and analysed the possible role Dutch public housing policies had and continued to have on the socio-economic position of women, and the family.²¹

Around 1980 the contents and purpose of the field of Women’s Studies in the Netherlands started to shift. There was a move away from the desired applicability of research results in feminist activism, which had been the breeding ground for Women’s Studies, and towards the scientific distance and objectivity typical of an academic field.²² The themes of the Women’s Studies section of Architecture evolved in line with these developments.²³ The more positive subject of ‘the construction of the feminine’, or ‘the construction of gender difference’ came to replace ‘the oppression of women’.²⁴

For the Women’s Studies section in the Department of Architecture a complete move away from applicability of their research was complicated by the fact that most students were more interested in design than in science. Feminist groups such as *Vrouwen Bouwen Wonen* had been promoting ‘building change’ en students came to the section of Women’s Studies looking for the ways to do this. The underlying assumption was that architecture, urban planning and public housing could have direct beneficial influence on the position of women. The section of Women’s Studies felt this approach did not acknowledge the complexity of the relation between the built environment and society. To start with, the diversity in society meant that there was no such thing as ‘the woman’. And the relation between men and women

had turned out to be more nuanced and diverse than 'oppression'. Gender became the object of study, rather than women.²⁵

These developments explain the contents of the course reader published by the section in 1986. De Mare presented a sociocultural approach based on sources such as Levi-Strauss, Foucault and Rossi, in which gender and architecture are questioned as cultural phenomena.²⁶ Vos published her research into the history of public housing; by describing the actors, their objectives, the objects, and in what terms these were discussed Vos offered a new perspective on the historical developments of the architectural task of public housing.²⁷

The continued interest in applicable research in the section is clear from a research report on building norms, commissioned by the ministry responsible for housing and spatial planning in preparation for a new building code.²⁸ The ministry had sought the advice of the section for Women's Studies of the Department of Architecture in response to the persistent complaints about the built environment made by feminists. Previously, the section had criticised the assumption that changes in architecture or urban planning could influence society directly.²⁹

But here was the opportunity to influence the practise of social housing, which in the Netherlands constitutes a large proportion of the built environment. To support their recommendations for a new approach to housing norms, the section needed to investigate the indirect relationship between plan and societal effect. They approached this by analysing the relation between the form and performance of historical social housing projects and the norms that these originated from. In addition, the report used the research by Vos into the historical background of public housing, by paying particular attention to the role the initiators of social housing schemes had reserved for female occupants.³⁰

Finally, the proposed solution was to suggest norms that would be able to accommodate unforeseen changes in society, such as new forms of cohabitation. Therefore, the authors based their recommendations for norms on the spatial requirements of individuals, rather than

on nuclear families as had been done before.^{31, 32} And by providing each individual with a room of his or her own, the norms no longer forced married couples to share one, which had historically left the housewife without her own individual space in the dwelling.³³

Promoting the Visibility of Female Designers

The present generation of female students has taken an active interest in the subject of the position of women in the professional field and in academia.³⁴ The recent activism is inspired by concerns about the persistent gender gap in the field of architecture and urban planning in the Netherlands. In 2016, the Dutch student population of the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment (A&BE) in Delft was 45 % female.³⁵ However, these numbers dwindle after graduation; 23 % of architects, and 32 % of urban planners registered in the Dutch Register of Architects are women.³⁶

The gender-gap in the field of architecture and urbanism in the Netherlands also received attention from students, professionals, academics and organisations during the 1980s and 1990s.^{37, 38} The Women's Studies section addressed this issue by organising lectures by female architects, titled 'A Prologue to Visibility', in December 1987 and January 1988. The invited lecturers were Anna Bofill, Adele Santos, Laura Thermes, Zaha Hadid, and Beth Gali. The speakers also acted as visiting critics in a design studio, in an effort to get more young, female design tutors in Delft architectural education. At the time half of the first year students were female, but the large majority of design tutors were still male. The year after a second edition of this project introduced Madeleine Steigenga, Sabine de Kleijn, Vera Yanovshtchinsky and Marian van der Waals.³⁹

Ritual Space – a Culture-Historical Approach

An international workshop titled 'Ritual Spaces' held in 1989 shows a definitive step away from the activism of 'building change', and the simplistic assumption about the relation between building and society this entails. The section of Women's Studies introduced a culture-historical methodology, connecting the thinking about gender and building.⁴⁰ Object of study were the multi-layered form of both the city and the human existence.⁴¹ The reader composed by the section according to this approach collects 22 architectural, anthropological and historical studies, each discussing, from their different perspectives, how built space is used.⁴² Several editions of this reader served education in seminars for students in the joint Architecture and Social Housing Chairs throughout the 1990s.⁴³

By the late 1990s the second wave of feminism had lost momentum, and many of the Women's Studies sections at other universities in the Netherlands had been disbanded. The Women's Studies section at the Architecture Faculty also lost its support and came to an end. The remaining staff member, Irene Cieraad, moved to Chair of Interiors.⁴⁴ There she continues the cultural history approach to the built environment in research projects, and introduces students to the users' perspective of residents of different ages, cultural backgrounds and gender during research seminars.⁴⁵

Conclusion

I began this research wondering how it was possible that a section for Women's Studies came to exist at the Architecture faculty in Delft. Also, I was interested to know what the impact of this section for Women's Studies at the faculty had been.

Through its research and education, the section for Women's Studies was successful in introducing a more inclusive view on architecture and urbanism to generations of students at the department, which is still present in education today. But it seems that the work of the

section was not quite finished when it was disbanded, as is testified by the gender gap still existing in academia and the profession.

The current activism among students, that has been inspired by this persistent gender gap in the field of architecture and urban planning, creates a context that is somehow recalls the 1970s. Back then, a context of feminist activism and democratisation at the university, and the rising percentage of female students, gave women the chance to gain foothold in academia at the Department of Architecture in Delft. However, this did not happen until external funding and support from the Ministry of Social Affairs & Employment, and the central board of the Technical University had become available. A similar external impulse might be required to enable the next push towards equality to be realised in the near future.

- 1 The publication of an article on the position of women signals the starting of the second wave of feminism in the Netherlands: Joke Kool-Smit, "Het Onbehagen Bij De Vrouw," *De Gids* 130, no. 9/10 (1967).
- 2 Margo Brouns, *Veertien Jaar Vrouwenstudies in Nederland Een Overzicht* (Groningen: Rion, 1988), 7, 8.
- 3 Lisl Edhoffer, Heide de Mare, and Anna Vos, *Vrouwen En De Stad, Deel I*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Delft: Technische Hogeschool Delft, Afdeling der Bouwkunde, Vakgroep 1 Geschiedenis Media en Theorie i o, Sectie Vrouwenstudies, 1986), 5.
- 4 Initially this resulted in criticism of the sexism inherent in common theories or concepts at the time. An example for the field of urban planning is the denomination of the new suburbs as *slaapsteden* (dormitory towns or bedroom communities), because for many women in fact these were the areas they spent not just the night, but also their working life. Brouns, *Veertien Jaar Vrouwenstudies in Nederland Een Overzicht*, 9.
- 5 Frits Toben, "AAG En Demokratisering," in *"Mag Het 'N Beetje Scherper Alstublieft?": Beelden Van Bouwkunde Delft*, ed. Herman Albers (Delft: Technische Universiteit Delft, 1991), 177-78.
- 6 The name was changed to Delft Technical University in 1986.
- 7 Ibid., 177-82.
- 8 H. Baudet and J. H. Makkink, *De Lange Weg Naar De Technische Universiteit Delft Dl. I, Dl. I* (Den Haag: Sdu Uitgeverij Koninginnegracht, 1992), 488.
- 9 Delft Polytechnic admitted the first three female students in 1904. The first woman graduated in 1917, in which year the number of female students was 13 on a total number of 70, or 19 %. This number went down during the economic crisis, in 1930 9 % of Architecture students were female, a number which had dropped to 6 % by 1956. Source: E. Smeets-Klokgieters, "Vrouw in De Bouw. De Eerste Vrouwelijke Afgestudeerde Architecten in Nederland," *KNOB Bull. KNOB Bulletin* 116, no. 1 (2017): 46.
- 10 H. Baudet and H. J. A. Duparc, *De Lange Weg Naar De Technische Universiteit Delft II* (Den Haag: Sdu Uitgeverij Koninginnegracht, 1993), 770.; 'Els', "Over Vrouwen En Politie mannen," *B-nieuws : mededelingen van de Afdeling der Bouwkunde* 12, no. 10 (1978): 193.
- 11 Loes Verhaart and Anneriek Vos, *Een Jaar Vrouwenstudies* (Delft: Technische Hogeschool Delft, 1979), 4.
- 12 Umberto Barbieri et al., "Excuses," *B-nieuws : mededelingen van de Afdeling der Bouwkunde* 12, no. 9 (1978): 169; "Wie Wordt Er Nou Eigenlijk Beledigd?!", *ibid.*
- 13 "Vrouwen," *B-nieuws : mededelingen van de Afdeling der Bouwkunde* 12, no. 7 (1978): 122.
- 14 Centrumgroep Bouwkunde, "Over De Grenzen Van De Vrijheid," *ibid.*, no. 10: 193.
- 15 Later known as Anna Vos .
- 16 Anna Vos, interview by Charlotte van Wijk, (by phone, 30 January 2018).
- 17 Anna Vos, *Beleidsnota*, (Delft: [s.n.], 1980)
- 18 Brouns, *Veertien Jaar Vrouwenstudies in Nederland Een Overzicht*, ii.
- 19 Verhaart and Vos, *Een Jaar Vrouwenstudies*, 5.

- 20 The authors of the first publications with a feminist perspective on the built environment in the Netherlands were urban planners, educated at the Architecture department of Delft Technical College. Henriette van Eys and Hedy d'Ancona, "Het Is Altijd Rustig in Een Nieuwbouwwijk," *Opzij*, no. 11 (1977); Nellien de Ruiter, "Bouwen Op Vrouwen: Letterlijk En Figuurlijk," *Futura* 12, no. 5 (1977).
- 21 Verhaart and Vos, *Een Jaar Vrouwenstudies*, 16.
- 22 Brouns, *Veertien Jaar Vrouwenstudies in Nederland Een Overzicht*, 231.
- 23 Edhoffer, Mare, and Vos, *Vrouwen En De Stad, Deel 1*, 1, 31.
- 24 Ibid., 37.
- 25 Ibid., 42.
- 26 Heidi de Mare and Anna Vos, "Urban Rituals in Italy and the Netherlands," in *Urban Rituals in Italy and the Netherlands: Historical Contrasts in the Use of Public Space, Architecture and the Urban Environment*, ed. Heidi de Mare and Anna Vos (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1992), 7.
- 27 Anna Vos, "Van Woning Tot Architectuur. Van Stedebouw Tot Stad.," in *Vrouwen En De Stad, Deel 1*, ed. Lisl Edhoffer, Heidi de Mare, and Anna Vos (Delft: Technische Hogeschool Delft, Afdeling der Bouwkunde, Vakgroep 1 Geschiedenis Media en Theorie i o, Sectie Vrouwenstudies, 1986).
- 28 Jenneke ter Horst et al., *Normering in De Woningbouw in Relatie Tot Veranderende Woon- En Leefvormen* (s'-Gravenhage: VROM, 1987), 11.
- 29 Edhoffer, Mare, and Vos, *Vrouwen En De Stad, Deel 1*, 1, 41.
- 30 Vos, "Van Woning Tot Architectuur. Van Stedebouw Tot Stad.."
- 31 *Voorschriften En Wenken : Voorschriften Nieuwe Woningen En Woongebouwen 1976*, (s'-Gravenhage: Staatsuitgeverij, 1976), 13.
- 32 Horst et al., *Normering in De Woningbouw in Relatie Tot Veranderende Woon- En Leefvormen*, 12.
- 33 Ibid., 131-32.
- 34 "Inclusion and fair representation in the way we convey history to the presence of role models on the work floor are essential.", source: TU Delft Feminists website: <https://tudelftfeminists.wordpress.com/about/>, (accessed 24 November, 2017).
- 35 "Population Shown by Gender," Delft University of Technology, <https://www.tudelft.nl/en/about-tu-delft/facts-andfigures/education/student-population/>, (accessed 19 January, 2018).
- 36 Jaarverslag 2016, (Den Haag: Bureau Architectenregister, 2016), <https://www.architectenregister.nl/media/1048/definitieve-versie-jaarverslag-2016.pdf>. PDF. 11.
- 37 D. Samwel and G. Keijsers, "Het Glazen Plafond : Vrouwen in De Architectuur," *BladNA*, no. 3 (1999).
- 38 For instance the Bouwnetwerk (Building Network), founded in 1984 to offer women architects and building engineers an alternative to the existing old-boys-networks of the building trade. This network is still active and published reports on the gender gap in the building professions in the last decade. *Bouwen Op Hakken, Vrouwen in De Bouw*, (Huizen: Bouwnetwerk,

2010).; *Getallen Op Tafel : Een Genderprofiel Van De Bouw : Verkenningen Naar De Positie En Doorstroming Van Vrouwen Op Kaderfuncties in De Bouwbranche*, ([S.l.]: Bouwnetwerk, 2006).

39 Anna Vos et al., *Proloog Tot Zichtbaarheid Ii* (Delft: TU Delft, Faculteit der Bouwkunde, 1988), 5.

40 Heidi de Mare and Anna Vos, *Ruimtelijke Rituelen : Het Huis Als Plaats Der Gewoonten* (Delft: TU Delft, Faculteit der Bouwkunde, Vakgroep GMT, Sector Vrouwenstudies, 1992), 7.

41 "Urban Rituals in Italy and the Netherlands," 20.

42 *Ruimtelijke Rituelen : Het Huis Als Plaats Der Gewoonten*.

43 *Studiegids Bouwkunde 1997-1998*, (Delft: Faculteit Architectuur, TU Delft, 1997).

44 Anna Vos left the section in 1997, and Heide de Mare in 2001.

45 Irene Cieraad, interview by Charlotte van Wijk, (Delft, 21 December 2017).

Captions

Fig. 1. Drawing showing P.K.A. Pennink pierced by knitting needles. Anonymous 1978.

Source: *B-nieuws* 12, no. 7 (1978): 122. (Copyright free)