



Histories of Architecture and Feminism windowsill exhibition, Barnard Archives and Special Collections, 2018

Histories of Architecture and Feminism

ARCH 3901 Spring 2020 Tu 10:10-12:00 Barnard Archives and Special Collections Reading Room, Milstein 423

Professor

Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi
asiddiqi@barnard.edu

[Office Hours](#)

M 12-2
Diana 500H

Course Description

What does it mean to write histories of architecture and feminism? Which stories are included and which excluded? What are the objects of these histories? Must we focus on biographies of women? Must we reject them? How do scale and positionality appear in feminist histories of architecture, and how does gender imbue the politics of location? How are race, sexuality, class, colonialism, nation, and ethnicity bound up with architecture and territory? How are questions of domesticity linked with those of power? What is an architect?

This seminar will use such questions to think through historiographical practice and theory. Building upon studies in the history of architecture, art, urbanism, territory, ecology, technology, and material culture, we will examine how histories have been narrated and shaped around feminist questions or practices. We will examine the objects and methods of histories that concern themselves with architecture—defined broadly as well as narrowly—and study how scholars using feminist approaches have attempted to write those histories.

The work of this senior seminar will result in research to contribute to the first ever exhibition on the work of the architect Minnette De Silva (1918-1998), for the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka, slated for 2022. Few careers capture intersections of gender, war, and architecture as does that of Minnette de Silva, for whom modern design embodied conflicting pasts, responding to ethnicized, racialized, and casteist landscapes. A scholar-practitioner of mixed race and caste, a feminist and environmental activist in Sri Lanka, India, England, and Hong Kong, among the first women ever to establish an architectural practice (The Studio of Modern Architecture, Ceylon, 1947), and a rare Asian (Sri Lankan) Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects, she was active in two storied institutions: the arts journal *MARG* (where she was a founding editor) and the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM). Her work was a map of remarkable intersections, with interlocutors such as Indira Gandhi, Mrinalini Sarabhai, Le Corbusier, and Henri Cartier-Bresson, as well as laborers and craftspeople who collaborated with her to fabricate buildings. It was also a crossroads of historical forces: decolonization on the subcontinent, militarized conflict in Sri Lanka, and, in her words, an “Asian” modern movement, organized around the political economic and technological dissidence of handicraft. She is best known for a body of built work, handicraft design, research, writings, pedagogy, and theorization of an Asian modern, and she engaged in holistic practices and processes, which treated architecture as a lived experience and a contemporary expression of the heterogeneous pasts of its makers.

The seminar follows the iterative pedagogical structure of an architectural studio, but emphasizes inquiry through shared readings, primary research, and zine production. The seminar has two aspects. First, we work closely with De Silva’s pictorial autobiography, which she referred to as “my archives,” within the context of an institutional archive, the Barnard Archives and Special Collections, in order to think about how primary evidence is mobilized in the construction of narratives. This self-published work not only reveals an alternate history of the Asian modern, but sets out radical stakes for historiography and the narrative authority of the auto-curated collection. Second, we develop a database of contextual research, including a collective bibliography and interviews with scholars and practitioners whose approaches help to think about De Silva’s work and historical context or histories and theories of architecture and feminism. We will publish this research in the form of zines, in collaboration with the Barnard Zine Library. No prerequisites are required for this course.