



Lofte Stam-Beese, Pendrecht, Rotterdam, Netherlands, 1960s. © Joan Moreno, 2010.

# Women in Modern Neighborhoods: Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky; Jakoba Mulder, Lotte Stam-Beese; and Carmen Portinho<sup>1</sup>

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From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century women architects had played important roles in the making of the built environment. But their presence and participation in the building of the modern city was a fact that has been forgotten over time. This text introduces the case study of the proposals made by four women: Margarete Schütte Lihotzky, Jakoba Mulder, Lotte Stam-Beese and Carmen Portinho. They are just a sample to show the importance of women's contribution in the building of better housing and neighborhoods.

Housing, as an architectural solution to the massive needs of problems derived from the industrialization of cities, comes into being at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, coinciding with the public presence of women, both in the suffragist movements and as university-trained professionals.

Despite numerous obstacles, women began their professional careers as university-trained architects at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both in the United States of America and in Europe. The first women in the profession of architecture were trained outside of the universities. The first woman architect, recognized as such by the AIA (American Institute of Architects), was Louise Bethune (1856–1913) who created her own studio of 25 years' standing, in the city of Buffalo<sup>2</sup> in 1881, after having served 5 years of apprenticeship in the architecture and teaching studio of Richard A. Waite and F. W. Caulkins. The two first architects with university training, both in the USA and Europe, received their degree in 1890: Sophia Hayden (1868–1953) graduate of MIT in Cambridge and Signe Hornborg<sup>3</sup> (1862–1916) graduate of the Polytechnic Institute of Helsinki.

However, the interventions and contributions of women to improve the living conditions of the working class did not wait for recognized and university-trained professionals. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was already a tradition of women intervening in the city, based on assigned gender roles. For example, women from reformist movements<sup>4</sup> approached housing and urban issues in an integral and global way; from the understanding of the difficulties of everyday life; and from the specific needs and capacities of citizens, they proposed progressive and realistic improvements based on the knowledge of the situation and on the personal relationships. The first three members of this activist list, who have often been underestimated as benefactors, are Angela Burdett Coutts (1814–1906), Octavia Hill (1838–1912) and Henrietta Barnett (1851–1936). Through their works these women opened new paths and ways for understanding and acting in the city. Their way of acting, by paying attention to reality and to the needs of the

different groups and their own capacities, is also a characteristic of other women's groups organized at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the large cities of the Eastern USA, from both the *Settlements Movements*<sup>5</sup> and *Municipal Housekeeping*<sup>6</sup>.

Among these experiences we find common characteristics that are still visible today in contemporary proposals formulated from women's experiences, or from a gender perspective and feminism. These characteristics are that we should act from a deep and close knowledge of the reality that enables us to find solutions from the micro to the general, walking away from universal neutrality that hides the hierarchical and masculine experience of patriarchy; and on the other hand, the collaboration and cooperation among diverse agents in structures that tend to be more horizontal than hierarchical. This way of networking, with less individual leadership and unique authorship, makes it challenging to trace the contributions of women architects in the construction of modern neighborhoods.

## The Women of the Modern City

Modern women architects involved in urban transformation, growth and improvement in the period between the wars also used their intimate knowledge of reality, working in an integral and crosscutting way. The actions of four of them will be briefly reviewed, three European: Margarete Schütte Lihotzky (1897–2000), Jakoba Mulder (1900–1988) and Lotte Stam-Beese (1903–1988), and a Brazilian, Carmen Portinho (1903–2001).

Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, since the beginning of her career, was committed to an architecture that was responsible to society. Due to her demonstrated interest for improving the life of people, as a young student, her professors recommended that she visit working class housing in order to understand how they lived and to be able to design as a consequence. For her, the architecture had a sociological meaning that places the act of building in a social and communitarian context.

“We the architects have the duty and the obligation of ‘scratching’ our heads about what needs to be done with the edification of inhabiting in order to facilitate the life of women and men; from the beginning I have wanted to focus, always and exclusively, on the edification of inhabiting with everything involved: institutions for infants, schools, libraries, health centers... what is called social edification.”<sup>7</sup>

One of her first works was for the settlers’ movements, *Siedlebewegung*. These movements began occupying land owned by the municipality, basically to produce food, though little by little to construct cottages for housing. These associations built their houses, and women participated intensively in this construction. She designed for these families an embryo house that was exposed in the *V Viennese Exposition of Family Gardens*. The proposal assumed and proposed the progressive development of the house, from the initial nucleus of a main floor that included a living kitchen, with chimney in the wall, and a wall bed; a bedroom, and a place for the laundry accessible through the garden. After successive proposals of enlargement, the settlers’ home had a living kitchen, a laundry space, three bedrooms, two small bedrooms, an attic, a water closet, a space for animals and a storage room. At the same time, Schütte-Lihotzky’s concern for the city was evident in that, once the seven phases of growth were completed, a group of row houses, with a continuous front, had created an urban structure. The water closet that she proposed was innovative, since she placed it in the interior of the house, and this room included all the needs associated with water: laundry, dishwashing and personal hygiene.

In 1921 Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky worked in the Secretary of Housing of the municipality of Vienna<sup>8</sup>, with Adolf Loos as the head architect since 1920, designing housing and new domestic facilities for the Siedlung Friedensstadt in Lainzer Tiergarten, the first housing cooperative for Austrian war veterans. Later, working independently, she collaborated with Loos in the Siedlungen Hirschstetten (1921) and Heuberg (1923).

Schütte-Lihotzky shared with Loos a political vision and the interest in economizing strategies of rationalization, such as the reduction of housing spaces from a functional decrease of their components. Her professional position allowed her to meet Ernst May when he visited Loos. Soon after their initial meeting, Schütte-Lihotzky soon became May’s frequent collaborator and developed a relationship that lasted many years. Their first collaborations were articles for the journal *Schlesisches Heim* (“Silesian House”). In 1925 May invited her to be part of her project team in Frankfurt, which she would join in January 1926.

In her work she sought to propose solutions to improve women’s lives. In Frankfurt, the social democrat council member Elsa Bauer was insistent that technology and useful knowledge be applied to reduce labor. Also there was the concern to respond to the housing needs of single women, and for maternity schools, child and infant care. These interests coincided with the professional and ethical positions of Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, a situation that was very useful for the project office of May where Schütte-Lihotzky was

the only woman. In 1926 in the Siedlung Praundheim they proposed a housing complex of single-room apartments for young couples and single women. As she would do later with the Frankfurt kitchen, Schütte-Lihotzky used the most modern means of the moment to disseminate her ideas. In both cases, she used short films to explain how to use these houses and kitchens. She saw the need for special typologies for single women, however she did not agree to make buildings only for women as other cities did, as she preferred the integration of different typologies in the same building<sup>9</sup> in order to favor the mix that is essential for the city.

The Frankfurt kitchen of Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, made for the first time in 1927 for the Siedlung Rommerstadt, is one of the most-recognized achievements of the Weimar Republic, communicating through their shiny metal surfaces, their high quality features and specificities, the modular relation of the parts the technological advances, and the transformation of everyday life of modern life. It was a kitchen thought to be efficient for daily work, with minimum travel needed to arrive at the different elements.

This kitchen was disseminated internationally, not only through the periodical publication of *Das Neue Frankfurt*, but also in the international annual exhibition of Frankfurt in 1927, where Schütte-Lihotzky placed the kitchen in an exhibition of a wider context called *Die Neue Wohnung und Innernaubau* (“The New House and its Interior”). The exhibition included pictures, examples, and the construction of a full-size reinforced concrete model of the row housing.

The Frankfurt kitchen is not a closed and unique model, but a kitchen composed of modules that could be organized according to the needs of each house. This modular kitchen, the first in history, was one of the elements that the municipal corporation produced industrially for their housing and, also, for sale to other cities.

Whilst the Frankfurt kitchen was the place of most innovations, the electrified communal laundry room, complete with washing and drying machines, irons and ironing machines, was also acclaimed for its potential capacity to reduce labor. Schütte-Lihotzky calculated that this facility, built in all the large projects of new settlements, reduced the typical laundry day from fifteen to five hours.<sup>10</sup>

However, the crisis of 1929 ended the incorporation of facilities, services and housing that responded particularly to women’s circumstances. In 1930, Ernst May with sixteen architects, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky among them, moved to Moscow to plan modern cities in the Soviet Union.

In the Netherlands, two women can be highlighted at the front of planning offices, Jakoba Mulder in Amsterdam and Lotte Stam-Beese in Rotterdam.

Jakoba(Ko) Helena Mulder graduated in 1926 as Construction Engineer in the Technische Hogeschool in Delft<sup>11</sup> and started working in 1930 in the Department of Urban Planning of Amsterdam. Her first project was the Boschplan, for the current forest of Amsterdam (*Amsterdamse Bos*), which made her famous amongst the citizens who called her “the lady of the forest”. The creation of this natural space was also an employment policy that responded to the economic crisis.



From the beginning of her career, she was concerned by the lack of appropriate places for children to play in the city, asking why there was a lack of them when they were, something so easy to achieve: "I think it is crazy, children need sandboxes and other spaces to play". Her attention to the reality, and to the small details, in scale, but of great influence in the quality of people's lives and based in a personal experience of observation of the reality, led her in 1947 to propose a "bottom-up" system to create public spaces for children to play. Jakoba H. Mulder had observed, from her window, a girl playing in a corner of the street without any resource but imagination, dirt and a can, and she realized that it was possible to create small and economical spaces full of possibilities for children to play, the design of which was offered voluntarily by the young Aldo van Eyck. Her proposed method was always that a person or group would identify and propose empty lots, corners, sidewalks and other unused small urban lots to transform them into playgrounds; the city government responded once the viability was demonstrated. Through this system, 700 playgrounds were created between 1948 and 1978, scattered throughout Amsterdam, and Aldo van Eyck had the opportunity of designing them from his office in the city's public works department. A series of simple elements allowed a creative use of these elements by girls and boys<sup>12</sup>.

In 1947 she proposed for the suburb Watergraafsmeer Frankendal, a change from the system of parallel buildings, built following the directions of Van Eesteren, to L-shaped buildings that organized interior spaces, and squares that could be adequate as playground spaces<sup>13</sup>. This system of land parcels was used since then for the extensions of the city to the west. According to Hema Hellinga, this return to more closed spaces could be explained as the result of the neighborhood ideal.

In 1958 Jakoba Mulder succeeded Cornelis van Eesteren as director of planning in Amsterdam, after being previously the vice-director. Between the two World Wars their team designed the most famous Dutch urban plan, which was the extension of Amsterdam. Its importance was reflected in the scale of the plan that allowed the city to grow from 750,000 inhabitants in 1930 to almost a million at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The plan set the base for the growth of the so-called garden towns (*tuinsteden*) such as Sloterveer. After 1945 the plan was applied much faster than expected and, according to Stephen Ward,<sup>14</sup> should be considered one of the most successful between the wars efforts of the great European cities.

This plan sets an interesting trend in the professional evolution of planning since it was the first plan consciously prepared and presented as result of a team work: the research work of Theo van Lohuizen and the planning work of Jakoba Mulder under the leadership of LSP Schefker, head of urban planning, and the Director of Planning Cornelius van Eesteren. This plan was an evidence of the profound and diverse growth of the knowledge needed in planning that implies a new way of working; since the plan of Amsterdam of 1939 planning would become a team-work process.

The second protagonist of modern Dutch planning, Lotte Stam-Beese was of German origin and her vital trajectory is essential in understanding her great personality. Stam-Beese was, from 1946 until her retirement in 1968, the head architect of planning in Rotterdam. For her, the city project was the result of a community and not of an individual, and the role of the planner was to know how to interpret and advance strategies to enable the representation of society.<sup>15</sup>

Between 1926 and 1929 she studied at the Bauhaus, which marked her future, both because, based on her words, she found there a community to create in an integral way, and because she met Hannes Meyer. After graduation, Lotte worked in the studio of Meyer and Hans Wittwers that worked similarly to the workshops of the Bauhaus.

From when she was a student in the Bauhaus she maintained a complicated relationship with Hannes Meyer until 1932, and from this relationship they had their first son Peter. Between 1929 and 1933 Lotte Stam-Beese lived in different cities from Dessau to Vienna, Berlin, Brno, Prague, Moscow and finally Kharkiv. In each city she was in contact with groups of modern architects and developed works in different studios of well-known architects. In 1933, in Kharkiv she ran into Mart Stam, a colleague since 1928 from the Bauhaus urbanism courses. Stam was part of the so-called May Brigades, led by Ernst May, that worked in the design of new cities in the Soviet Union. A little bit later, Lotte became part of the team, at the same time with Margarete Schutte-Lihotzky. At the end of 1934 they decided to leave the USSR and move to the Netherlands, where Stam came from.

In October 1940 she decided to register in the School of Architecture of Amsterdam, because, despite having wide experience, she lacked degrees to certify her knowledge. She finally graduated in 1945, two years after her separation from Stam. Two months later, Stam-Beese moved to Rotterdam, and a bit later she commenced her activities in the Department of Planning, being the director until 1971, when she retired. Only a few times would Stam-Beese put into practice her independent architectural design skills, apart from the renovation of her own home and the design of single family housing in Nagele with Groosman. Urbanism would be her specialization.

In 1948 she started the project of Pendrecht through which she defines the neighborhood as the extension of the city and not as a suburban and isolated community. She recognized the great diversity of people who inhabit the city, and therefore the neighborhood could not isolate them as a homogeneous community. In the case of Pendrecht, she designed, taking as point of departure the neighborhood unit, repetitive, differentiated, composed of a complex of buildings surrounding rectangular green spaces that housed 300 people. Contrarily, in the project for Alexander Polder, she determined a detailed road structure leaving residential parcels more undefined, as spots for which the design would be more open. Pendrecht is considered a transitional project between the neighborhood project and the large scale projects of the 1960s that were without form.



**01** Lotte Stam-Beese, Pendrecht, Rotterdam, Netherlands, 1960s. © Joan Moreno, 2010.



**02** Ernst May and Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, Siedlung Romerstadt, Frankfurt, Germany, 1927 © Roser Casanovas, 2009.

In the group of women with dedication to modern urbanism we find Carmen Portinho,<sup>16</sup> born in Corumbá, Brazil, who lived in Rio de Janeiro from the age of five. Although she was the third Civil Engineer of Brazil in 1925, she was the first woman trained in urban planning. As a student, she was part of one of the pioneer educative experiences in Brazil, led by Lucio Costa, who sought to train integral professionals for the new era. From the time and the environment where she developed her training and career, her admiration and defense of modern architecture; the new materials and forms of buildings tied to new programs that responded to unsolved social needs, marked her professional and political action.

From her early young years, she took feminist positions. In 1919 she participated with Bertha Lutz in the organization of the Brazilian suffragist movement<sup>17</sup>, and was part of associations such as the Feminine University Union that she created in 1932. The goal of the Union was to gather together recently-graduated young Brazilian women and to help them to improve their careers, and avoid the suffering of sexual discrimination. In 1932 Brazilian women won the right to vote. In 1937 she also founded the Association of Brazilian Engineers and Architects (ABEA), being its first president. She was trained as an urban planner in a Masters program in London where she witnessed the decisions that would later develop the New Towns projects.

She proposed the creation of the Department of Housing in Rio de Janeiro (*Departamento de Habitação Popular*) and she was its director for two decades. One of the first interventions of the Department was the Pedregulho housing complex, designed by Affonso Eduardo Reidy, architect and municipal staff. In addition to its discursively pioneer form, the program of the complex defined by Carmen Portinho had a pioneer character from the beginning. In the same way as other women architects, such as the other three

women mentioned in this article, Portinho thought housing should be part of a wider complex of the neighborhood and services should be collectivized to liberate women from domestic work. The program of Pedregulho, in addition to housing of different sizes, proposed a school center, child-care in the same building, spaces to play, and communitarian laundries.

*Without the toughness of Carmen and her predisposition to face all the challenges, the project of Pedregulho could have hardly been developed, as a symbol of a period when housing was viewed as a social service and not a commodity. As a defender of the idea, Carmen enabled a social project that includes a synthesis of the arts: the innovative architecture of Reidy, the panels of Portinari and Anísio Teixeira, the gardens and mosaics of Burle Marx and the mechanized laundry service to free women from the slavery of domestic work<sup>18</sup>.*

She was the sentimental partner of Affonso Eduardo Reidy and, responding to their criteria of modernity, they shared 30 years together, until he died, without getting married, seeing their own lives as a declaration of principles. They shared two homes, one urban and one of leisure, that they designed and built together. They were two houses of reduced dimensions, since their economic income as municipal staff was reduced.

As a public servant, Portinho led the construction of the Flamengo embankment, deciding the location of the Museum of Modern Art at the seafront, proposing and defending modern proposals for the building and the integration of the arts in the work. The design of the Museum was prepared by Reidy, but during the construction she led and controlled its execution.

Her last public job was as director of the Superior School of Industrial Design (ESDI), an *avant-garde* institution, where





03 Jakoba Mulder, *Amsterdamse Bos*, Amsterdam, 1929. © Carles Baiges, 2014.

she dedicated 21 years of her life. She opened, for these years, the horizontal debate between students and professors about the objectives, reach and methods of education. During the military dictatorship of the 1960s, at the beginning of being director, she defended the students in front of the police who tried entering the building.

### Common Characteristics

In the foregoing examples we can confirm that the contribution of women to modern city planning is essential because of their response to the needs of everyday life such as domestic tasks and their efficient incorporation, individually and collectively, with the objective of reducing women's time that had to be dedicated to these tasks; the understanding of diverse needs and, therefore, not providing universal solutions; the acknowledgement of the community's needs; the attention to the needs of children by thinking of safe leisure and play spaces close to home; as well as the services needed to develop life in the community. ■

### Notes

- 1 Text based on the forthcoming book *Casas y Ciudades: Experiencias de Mujeres*.
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