Daniela Turazza
Chiara Santi
AIDIA (Italian Association of Women Engineers and Architects), Florence Section | Italy

Women Who Build:
Giulia De Appolonia, Ulla Hell, Elisa Burnazzi

Introduction

Twenty years ago, there were just a few female architects largely known; today there are a multitude: you can find not just female 'archistars' but also female professionals, who carry out their work every day, vigorously and naturally at the same time.

This is a report of the roundtable 'Future Architecture – Women who build' (promoted by the Architects' Order of Trento), focused on three young female architects, which took place on 13 October 2016 in Trento (Italy) as part of the national event *Festival delle Professioni*; architects Ulla Hell, Giulia de Appolonia, Elisa Burnazzi were invited to show their projects and to talk about their professional and personal life, inseparable from one another.

The event is presented by members of Architects' Order Council: President Susanna Serafini tell us that women architects 'find it difficult to reconcile work and family life having at the same time a satisfying income; in Trentino region women are 35% of the Order members (compared with an average of 42% in Italy). Testimony of several successful women helps to encourage other women'. Vice President Ugo Bazzanella reminds architects' crisis in Italy:

> Crisis means not only lack of work but also prejudices and vilification; as members of the Order we undertake to defend the dignity of profession. The public body equalizes architects' job with any firm providing services, without assigning any value to intellectual work, to creativity; procurement processes based on the lowest offer are not fear. In other countries, like Germany and Sweden, professional fees are defended.

Ugo introduces us to the moderator, architect Maria Grazia Piazzetta,[1] seventh woman enrolled (1964) in Architects' Order of Trento since its foundation.

Rapporteurs' curricula are extremely rich and different from each other.

Giulia de Appolonia was born in Pordenone in 1969 and was enrolled in the Facoltà di Architettura, Politecnico di Milano in 1988. In 1991–92 she was awarded the 'Erasmus study abroad scholarship' to attend University in Lisbon. She resided in Portugal from 1991 to 2004 where she began her professional career, at first collaborating with architect J.L.Carrilho da Graça, later (2000) leading her own office; her most important project in Portugal is the *Viva Science Centre* in Bragança (Portugal International Competition, first prize). In 2005 she came back to Italy and founded a new office in Pordenone; the office participated in several tenders and contests and won the international competition for the Congress Centre for *Istituto Zooprofilattico di Brescia*. In 2008 she created the firm ABDA srl with architect Camillo Botticini, developing national and international projects that brought her visibility and recognition (among the most important projects the Multifunctional Building in Assago near Milano - Housing complex, Educational complex and University facilities) and led it to winning an international competition in Portugal (Urban park and facilities in Arcos de Valdevez, 2011). In 2014 she opened her own office Giulia de Appolonia – Officina di Architettura in Brescia.

Ulla Hell, born in San Candido in 1973, is an architect trained in Austria (University of Innsbruck) and in the Netherlands (TU Eindhoven, TU Delft). She is one of the four partners of the international architectural practice Plasma Studio[2] (founded in London in 1999; by now offices in Beijing (Peking), Hong Kong and Bolzano) which she joined in 2002[3]. She has 15 years' experience with all phases and scales of architectural, urban and object design with focus on systemic, context and material driven architecture and a strong interest in the building processes of architecture. She was also involved in teaching assignment of the Reiseuni Lab at the University of Innsbruck, Austria.

In 2003 she came back home to Italy (Sesto Pusteria, Bolzano province) and she opened a branch office of Plasma, where she carries on her professional activity worldwide, by a cooperation web

1 Graduated in Venice, teaching by the time great professors (Gardella, Albini, Piccinato, Belgiojoso, Zevi) Maria Grazia is founding partner of studio Schweizer-Piazzetta, dealing with many public and private commissioners and cooperating with University in design seminars; "studio's skill is combining traditional elements and contemporary architecture" (Ugo Bazzanella).

2 "Plasma Studio," Plasma Studio, http://www.plasmastudio.com/index.html, (accessed January 3, 2018).

3 Ulla is one of the four partners of Plasma Studio with Eva Castro, Holger Kehne and Chuan Wang. 'The term Plasma comes from Classic Greek and means modelling, form, fabric, imagination, fiction. In Physics the Plasma State- or fourth state of matter- describes a unique condition of matter arising at a complex overlay of external forces. Plasma, a charged field of particles, conducts energy.' ("Plasma Studio About," Plasma Studio, http://www.plasmastudio.com/about.html (accessed January 2018)).

based, with Plasma colleagues and collaborators; some of the widely published projects of Plasma studio were built right here. Here, at home, she finds peace and isolation that are necessary to her work and, more, she has the opportunity to stay close to her family. At the moment they are five at her italian practice, majority of them (four) are women and this trend is going on since several years. Ulla believes that, in her experience, 'being a woman has never represented an obstacle'; actually she never asked herself 'whether man or woman'.

Elisa Burnazzi, born in Rimini in 1974, graduated in Venice, presented her professional experience as a 'partner work': two partners both in life and in architecture, since university, Davide Feltrin and Elisa Burnazzi, are driven by a passion for architecture as a creative act. After working a few years with leading architects, in 2003 they founded in Trento the firm Burnazzi Feltrin Architects.[4] Their projects –always original and updated with respect to the international architectural panorama– reveal an inclination to paying extreme attention to every single detail, besides the purely architectural aspect, thus trespassing into high quality design. They won many awards, both national and international; in 2016 Elisa has been the only Italian shortlisted for the international award 'Women in Architecture Awards' category 'Moira Gemmill Prize for Emerging Architecture';[5] she has been listed, the only Italian designer together with Lina Bo Bardi, among the 15 women architects who have designed exceptional projects by Archdaily[6] and she has been invited to join the jury panel of the international award American Architecture Prize (2016 and 2017). In 2012 Burnazzi Feltrin Architects took part in the 13th Venice Architecture Biennale and in 2013 in the 2nd Biennale of Public Space 2013.

They take care of any new project themselves, dealing with just a few collaborators; first ideas are always developed through sketches; graphics rendering is moderately used, just at an advanced stage of the designing process and whilst requested by public administration. Containing growth in their activity seems their lifestyle choice: quite every assignment has been given directly by private or public customers; in very rare cases they were engaged in design competitions: 'Recently – Elisa tells us - the situation is changing positively about national contests, with respect to a greater likelihood to realize the winning proposal so our firm is now participating in some of them'.

4 "Burnazzi Feltrin Architetti," http://www.burnazzi-feltrin.it/it/ (accessed January 15, 2018).

5 'Moira Gemmill Prize', one of the four awards of 'Women in Architecture Awards', promoted by The Architectural Review in association with the Architects' Journal, awards that celebrate excellence in design and promote role models for women in practice. 'Moira Gemmill Prize for Emerging Architecture', founded in 1999 recognizes excellence in design and a bright future for women designers under the age of 45, with an emphasis on achievements and completed projects. Renamed in memory of Moira Gemmill, museum director (Museum of London; Victoria and Albert Museum) tragically dead in 2015. ("The Architectural Review – Awards," https://www.architectural-review.com/awards (accessed January 13, 2018)).

6 Victor Delaqua, "In Honor of Women's day 15 Exceptional Projects,, ArchDaily, https://www.archdaily.com/783347/in-honor-of-womens-day-15-exceptional-projects (accessed January 15, 2018).

Left: Elementary School Zanella in Villafranca (Verona) by Giulia de Appolonia 2014–2016.
Source: Giulia de Appolonia – Officina di architettura Photo Archive.

Center: Residence Dolomitenblick Sesto Pusteria (Bolzano) by Ulla Hell (with Plasma Studio) 2012.
Source: Plasma Studio Photo Archive.

Right: Single Family House PF in Pergine Valsugana (Trento) by Elisa Burnazzi and Davide Feltrin 2006-2009.
Source: Studio Burnazzi Feltrin Photo Archive.

Giulia is the first to start her presentation; her statement is that 'in my opinion women do play a different role in architecture compared to men'. She shows a project for refurbishment and extension of *Elementary School Zanella* in Villafranca (Verona),[7] a construction site recently completed (Fig.1). The school is situated 'inside a plot of land at the edge of town, uncharacterised and bordering agricultural soil; a building enclosed inside a paddock, no connection with surroundings'. The construction process lasted nearly three years, including five design steps due to project variations; meanwhile school stayed open the whole time. The first funding (by Ministry MIUR[8]) was destined to the enlargement but a negative report about structural and seismic safety forced the administration to look for more funding; more than that they managed to have a second funding to improve energy efficiency. The project consisted on demolition and rebuilding of a part of the school built during the fifties – 'An opportunity to supplement and improve the existing buildings, by inserting a canteen and a gym' - and a seismic upgrading of the remaining building. The fragmentation of the construction process obliged the project team to 'take decisions having a short range of visibility, having a continued creative effort and spending a lot of energy without a clear target'.

The idea behind the project was the intention to 'state the public function of the building and drive it out of the paddock'. The entrance, for safety reasons, was moved to the back road and part of the garden was transferred to the public administration; it was planned to create educational vegetable cultivations and a drainage concrete pavement. Main existing building was kept in place but introducing a new skin: the base is a plastered wall and at first floor stands out a translucent facade made by polycarbonate and enlightened by a light source behind: a lamp effect visible both inside and outside.

7 Giulia de Appolonia,"Primary School Zanella," Giulia de Appolonia, Officina di Architettura,http://www.deappolonia-arch.com/primary-school-zanella-villafranca-it-3/ (accessed January 20, 2018).

8 MIUR, Ministero Italiano Università e Ricerca.

Regarding interior design we find the theme of colours –used to distinguish and identify the classrooms– the attention to acoustic (soundproofing ceilings) and to lighting (a diffuse luminance inside the hall and the classrooms), the care of details (information signs and plaques).

Ulla Hell says she has never asked herself, during her daily work, what it was the role of women; actually she did some research after had been invited to express her opinion about this subject:

> According to Architectural Review survey, 70% women architects answered that at construction site it hasn't yet accepted the presence of women; the survey shows that one in five women wouldn't choose to become an architect if they could turn back time but I believe men would answer same way!

At Plasma studio we work in team, we base work on cooperation by several professionals web connected, living anywhere:

> I need to stay here to work well, close to my roots, my mountains, my family. Alto Adige gave us the opportunity to realise buildings; later we won a competition in China and the firm moved its seat from London to China.

First assignments consisted in temporary installations and interior design, then Plasma Studio developed its activity to architectural and landscape design: 'Quite every project process starts with landscape design'. Ulla presents their *Horticultural Exhibition in Xian (China) Masterplan*: 'The request was to create a lake and some hill in a flat area; we imagined a bridge and an axis, where you could choose to follow different directions: some hands which leaned over to reach the lake'.

At the same way the project for *Strata Hotel* in Sesto Pusteria starts with landscape design:

> Level curves, the theme of stratigraphy that we tried to take also inside; it was fundamental the trust of the customer, who wanted a building where recognize themselves and more than that let a young architect to be given full freedom.

The project for her own home *Paramount Residence Alma* is based on the themes of light cuts and

the separation between functions: work space, son's space, and common spaces; same approach we find in contemporary *Residence Dolomitenblick* architectural design (Fig. 1).

Elisa Burnazzi identifies female skills in sociability and hosting: 'Women who are part of a group tent to keep it together'. In her opinion quality architecture means paying attention to details at every scale, from interior to urban design, because 'architecture should be directed to improve life conditions of community'. In every project she presents us, you can find a special care to furniture, often tailor made, and an issue of continuity from the outside to the inside because 'architecture should deal also with emotional aspects'.

In the assignment for *Aggregation Center in L'Aquila*, destined to earthquake victims (2015), the theme was the attention to sociability.

> The assignment came from a construction firm involved in reconstruction of L'Aquila. This building should remember the earthquake but giving trust to people at the same time. An alive building, thought to be used, which could fit into mountain landscape; to give trust we used references to nature: a wooden covering and a green roof which continues along the facades.

The *Single Family Dwelling BL* in Pergine Valsugana is a medieval house-laboratory: at the ground floor spaces to work, at the first floor the dwelling spaces, at the second floor the spaces to relax; the building is composed of cubic blocks completely white colored – 'the Building Commission imposed to use a single color; we would like to use several colors as homage to painter Fortunato Depero';[9] the hearth of the building is the kitchen, where we opened ad large window south oriented.

Multifamily complex GI in Caldonazzo is a holiday home, built in front of the lake, situated in a high quality environment. The choice was to create a compact volume and minimise the impact, especially the views from the lake: lodges instead of balconies and plastered walls, which continue along the roof.

Another dwelling in Pergine Valsugana - *Single Family House PF* (Fig. 1) – is a refurbishing and extension architectural design: structure of the new block is independent from the existing one; first floor deck is supported by a Vierendeel bean, in order to obtain a free house plan. It leaves an impression of a 'cold white heart covered by nature: a lower heavy part against an upper light part, completely hidden by a wood batten frame'.

Moderator Piazzetta opens the final debate pointing out the 'life's tension' all three relators have in common though, for the rest, 'three personalities totally different from each other in this age of standardisation"'.

M.G.P.: 'Could you recognise anything referring to womanhood either in contents or in architectural

9 Fortunato Depero (1892–1960), painter from Trento's province, important member of Futurism.

design language? For example in a different approach or a particular attention to social issues?'

Ulla: 'No! Character is more important; for instance I'm interested in volume, dialogue between volume and context and the way the volume is developed inside'.

Giulia: 'What makes the difference are not goals neither tastes but the way you deal with design process and making decisions'.

Elisa:

> Creativity is an impulse, having no sex nor age. In the past women had to start with small objects design because nobody let them deal with big things; maybe they are supposed to be more analytical compared to men just why work opportunities were restricted to small things design.

M.G.P.: 'In your opinion is it true that women are less competitive and ambitious than men? '

Elisa: 'Dacia Maraini[10] encourages women to be disrespectful.'

Here it comes an answer by the audience, a male colleague, in defence of women: 'It's a matter of power: there is the necessity of a seizure of power by women; you lost power but you can get back into power if you want'.

10 Dacia Maraini, born 1936, well known Italian writer. She won 'Campiello Prize' in 1990 (winner book *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*).