

**Designing Against the Current:
Female Architects and the Politics of Postwar Modernism**

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This capstone investigates the question: How did political context affect the evolution of modernism through female architects in the postwar era? The approach is grounded in a combination of historical inquiry and comparative analysis, understanding architecture not only as a physical artifact but as a reflection of broader social and political forces. Rather than treating modernism as a singular, universal style, this project views it as a flexible framework shaped by local conditions, institutional structures, and individual agency. In particular, the work centers on how female architects navigated and reshaped modernism in environments which often limited their visibility and authority.

At its core, this research draws from a socio-cultural perspective on architecture, which understands design as inseparable from its historical and political context. This aligns with scholarship that critiques the idea of modernism as a neutral or purely functional movement, instead emphasizing how power structures, including gender and governance, influence architectural style. The project also engages with feminist historical research, which seeks to recover overlooked contributions of women and to question why certain figures have been excluded from dominant narratives. By combining these perspectives, the capstone frames female architects not as exceptions, but as active participants whose work reveals how the modernist movement adapted across different political contexts.

Background

Modernism has been understood as one of the defining architectural movements of the twentieth century, often characterized by its emphasis on functionalism. History frequently frames modernism as a universal, progressive movement, driven by a desire to construct an architectural language suited for an industrialized world. Foundational texts such as *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* by Kenneth Frampton reinforce this narrative by tracing a lineage of key projects which position modernism as a cohesive movement (Frampton, 2007). However, this interpretation has been increasingly challenged by more recent scholarship, which argues that modernism was neither singular or neutral.

Historians and theorists have emphasized that modernism developed unevenly across geographic and political contexts, functioning less as a fixed style than as a flexible framework adapted to local conditions. As Sarah Williams Goldhagen argues, modernism should be understood as a set of “situated practices” rather than a universal doctrine, shaped by the specific cultural and political environments in which it is produced (Goldhagen, 2005). This perspective is particularly relevant to the postwar period, when global political and economic shifts significantly influenced architecture. In the United States, the postwar era was marked by economic expansions and suburbanization. These developments created new opportunities for buildings yet reinforced hierarchical professional structures (Hunting & Murphy, 2025). In contrast, countries such as Brazil experienced rapid modernization alongside political instability, including transitions between democratic governance and military dictatorship (Ioris, 2014). As Louise A. Mozingo notes in *Pastoral Capitalism*, modernization in the twentieth century was

often closely tied to broader political and economic agendas, shaping both the form and function of the built environment (Mozingo, 2016).

Within this broader reevaluation of modernism, feminist architectural history has played a critical role in uncovering the contributions of women who were historically excluded from dominant narratives. Early histories of modern architecture largely omitted female architects or minimized their roles, framing them as collaborators rather than primary authors. In response, scholars such as Despina Stratigakos have argued that these omissions are not incidental, but reflect structural inequalities within the profession of architectural history itself (Stratigakos, 2016). Feminist scholarship seeks not only to recover overlooked figures, but also to question the criteria by which architectural significance has been defined. By examining issues such as access to education, authorship, and professional networks, this body of work demonstrates how gender has shaped both participation and recognition within the field (Hunting & Murphy, 2025).

Studies focusing on women in American modernism have shown that female architects played significant roles in shaping design, often working within systems that limited their visibility and authority. Mary Anne Hunting's *Women Architects at Work: Making American Modernism* highlights how women contributed meaningfully to the development of modern architecture in the United States, even as they navigated barriers (Hunting & Murphy, 2025). These constraints often influenced the types of projects available to women, as well as the ways in which their work was documented and received. At the same time, scholarship in Latin American modernism emphasized the region's distinctive engagement with modernist ideas, shaped by processes of nation-building, cultural identity, engagement with the environment, and political transformation. In Brazil, modernism became closely aligned with national

development, creating a dynamic context in which architects responded directly to shifting governments and cultural priorities (Cleempoel, 2024).

Despite these advances, there remains a gap in scholarship that explicitly connects gender, political context, and the evolution of modernist architecture across different regions. While feminist histories have successfully recovered individual figures, they often focus on biography with fully situating these architects within broader political frameworks. Conversely, studies that examine modernism in relation to political systems frequently overlook the role of gender in shaping access to participation in architectural practice. As a result, the intersection of these factors remains underexplored. Addressing this gap requires a comparative framework that considers both the professional trajectories of individual architects and the conditions under which their work was produced.

The selection of case studies for this project reflects this need for comparative analysis. By examining architects working in distinct political and cultural environments, it becomes possible to identify both shared challenges and context specific responses. In the United States, postwar architectural production was often tied to corporate clients or access to personal connections, creating a restrictive environment for women unless they were of high social standings. In contrast, Brazil's mid-twentieth century context involved rapid urbanization, producing a more fluid and uncertain professional landscape. These differing conditions shaped not only access to commissions, but also the expression that emerged through the architecture (Cleempoel, 2024).

Understanding these dynamics is essential for analyzing how female architects navigated their professional environments and how their work contributed to the evolution of modernism.

Rather than viewing their contributions as secondary, this project positions them as central to the development of regionally specific modernisms. Their work reflects both individual approach and socio-political conditions, revealing how modernist principles adapted in response to context.

In addition to historical and feminist scholarship, this project is informed by theoretical perspectives that position architecture as a product of socio-political forces. As Beatriz Colomina argues, architecture operates within systems of representation and power, shaping and reflecting cultural values rather than existing as a purely functional practice (Colomina, 1994). Applying this framework to the study of modernism allows for a more nuanced understanding of how design operates within specific political contexts, and how architects negotiate the constraints imposed upon them. Bringing these bodies of scholarship into dialogue establishes a foundation for examining the relationship between gender, politics, culture, and architecture in the postwar era. The background outlined here provides a gateway to the methodology which follows in the research of the question: how did political context affect the evolution of modernism through female architects in the postwar era?.

Approach

To investigate this question, the primary research strategy will be a comparative, biographical precedent study focused on two female architects working in the post-World War II period: one based in the United States, Eleanor Raymond, and one in Brazil, Lina Bo Bardi. These locations were selected due to their distinct political and cultural conditions during the mid-20th century. The United States, emerged from the war as a global superpower and experienced economic expansion and ‘institutional consolidation’ which shaped architectural

practice through corporate and academic systems (Chapin, 2021). In contrast, Brazil underwent rapid modernization alongside shifting political regimes, including periods of democratic governance and military dictatorship, which influenced architectural expression (Ioris, 2014). Comparing these contexts reveals how differing political climates affected opportunities, constraints, and design approaches for women in architecture.

The precedent study will be supported by a literature based methodology, relying on secondary sources such as books, academic journals, archival publications, and existing biographies. Key texts including Mary Anne Hunting's *Women Architects at Work: Making American Modernism*, and Louise Monzingo's *Pastoral Capitalism*, will provide a foundation for understanding modern architecture in the United States, with Hunting's text emphasizing the role women had in shaping modernism. Additionally, sources on Brazilian modernism and political history will be used to contextualize the second case study, especially *The Space Between: Literature and Culture 1914-1945*, published by the University of Southern California, a peer reviewed journal dedicated to cultural responses leading up to the end of WWII. While this is not explicitly post-war, understanding Brazil before and after the war will be vital to contextualizing the capstone. Through this research, each architect's history within the field will be analyzed in relation to the political conditions in which it was produced, paying attention to factors such as access to commissions, institutional affiliations, and public reception of their work.

In terms of specific tactics, the project will involve close reading and synthesis of scholarly texts, as well as visual analysis of architectural drawings and built projects. Comparative diagrams may be developed to map relationships between political events and

architectural developments, helping to make the connections more explicit. While the primary focus is on written scholarship, the inclusion of visual material will support a more comprehensive understanding of each architect's design approach. If available, primary sources such as interviews, letters, or archival documents may also be incorporated to provide additional insight into the architects' perspectives and careers.

The scope of the project will be delimited to maintain clarity and depth of research. The research will focus on the postwar period, roughly from the mid 1940s through the 1970s, a time when modernism was widely adopted, yet actively contested (Whyte, 2009). Geographically, the study will be limited to two countries with differing contexts, the United States and Brazil, allowing for a focused comparison between two distinct yet influential contexts. The project will also focus on modernist architecture, while acknowledging that modernism itself encompasses a range of interpretations. Finally, the selection of two case studies: Eleanor Raymond and Lina Bo Bardi, ensures that the analysis remains manageable while still allowing for meaningful comparison.

The research will be conducted over two semesters, with each semester dedicated to one case study. It should be noted, while I have selected these case studies right now, they may be tentative to change once I begin my capstone research. The first phase will focus on Eleanor Raymond's work within the United States and it will begin with a broad review of postwar political and architectural history, followed by an in depth study of her biography and work. This will include identifying key projects, analyzing her design characteristics, and situating each project within its political context. The second semester will follow a similar structure for Lina Bo Bardi, while also incorporating ongoing comparative analysis between the two contexts.

A preliminary sequence of work is as follows:

Semester 01:

Phase 01: Conduct background research on postwar modernism, political context, and feminist architectural history. Finalize selection of case study architects.

Phase 02: Develop detailed research on the first case study including biographical analysis and project documentation.

Phase 03: Synthesize findings from the first case study and begin drafting the written analysis

Semester 02:

Phase 04: Repeat research and analysis process from the second case study, while integrating comparative insights.

Phase 05: Refine comparative framework, complete final writing, and develop any supporting visual material.

Conclusion

Through my approach, this capstone aims to demonstrate that modernism is not a fixed ideology, but a dynamic field shaped by political forces and individual actors. By focusing on female architects in particular, the project highlights perspectives that have often been marginalized, offering a more nuanced understanding of the evolution of modernism throughout the post war period.

References

Chapin, Christy Ford. “United States Financial History” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*. Oxford Academic, 2014. Chapin explores the American financial system and its relationship to political power and industrial expansion. This source contributes to the capstone by providing economic and political context for the United States postwar, helping to frame the context of Eleanor Raymond’s work in the US.

Cleempoel, Koenraad Van. “How Social Values Can Alter Architectural Memories: Lina Bo Bardi’s Strategies with the ‘As Found’” *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation History, Theory, and Criticism*. University of Minnesota Press, 2024. Retrieved from <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/fta.2024.a964497>. Cleempoel examines the socially driven practice of Lina Bo Bardi through her adaptive reuse projects. He argues that Bo Bardi favored an “anthropological” approach to enforce cultural authenticity in civic buildings. This article is useful to the capstone because it demonstrates how she used postwar modernism as a political and social tool for empowerment, while encouraging public engagement with her designs.

Colomina, Beatriz. *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*. MIT Press, 1994. Colomina argues that modern architecture cannot be understood solely through built form, but must be examined as part of a broader media culture. This framework is useful for analyzing how female architects may have been excluded not only from practice but also from the media narratives which defined modernism.

Frampton, Kenneth. *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*. 4th ed., Thames & Hudson, 2007.

Frampton provides a comprehensive historical survey of modern architecture, emphasizing critical regionalism and the sociopolitical forces shaping architectural production. The text is foundational in outlining the evolution of modernism, yet largely centers male architects, revealing gaps in history. This omission is useful as a point of examining how women were marginalized within dominant architectural narratives.

Goldhagen, Sarah Williams. "Something to Talk About: Modernism, Discourse, Style." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 2005. Goldhagen explores how modernism functioned as a discourse shaped by criticism and context. She argues that modern architecture emerged through competing interpretations rather than a singular ideology. This perspective supports an analysis of how gendered voices were often excluded from shaping the discourse that defined the movement.

Ghisleni, Camilla. *Architecture and Coloniality: Brazilian Modernism in Critical Perspective*. ArchDaily, 2025. [Architecture and Coloniality: Brazilian Modernism in Critical Perspective | ArchDaily](#). Ghisleni critiques Brazilian Modernism by examining how modern architecture in Brazil was shaped by systems of governmental power despite its progressive ambitions. The article reevaluates modernist projects in Brazil through emphasizing their political and cultural consequences. This source is valuable to the capstone because it provides a framework for understanding Brazilian modernism and its debates over identity and power in architecture.

Hunting, Mary Anne, and Kevin D. Murphy. *Women Architects at Work: Making American Modernism*. Princeton University Press, 2025. Hunting and Murphy foreground the contributions of women architects in shaping American modernism, challenging the traditionally male dominated field. Through case studies and archival research, they reveal the barriers women faced while also highlighting their agency and impact.

Ioris, Rafael R. *Transforming Brazil: A History of National Development in the Postwar Era*. Routledge, 2014. Ioris analyzes the political, economic, and cultural transformations that shaped Brazil during the Postwar period, focusing on modernization and national development initiatives. He demonstrates how architecture became a tool of representation for national identity and political ambition. This source provides historical context for the political and social conditions that shaped Brazil during the period of analysis for this capstone.

Mozingo, Louise A. *Pastoral Capitalism*. MIT Press, 2016. Mozingo examines the relationship between corporate landscapes and capitalist development in the twentieth century, focusing on how design mediates economic and environmental concerns. While not centered on gender, the book provides important context for understanding corporate systems within the given context. This source will be integral in situating architecture into the broader frameworks that shape postwar modernism, especially in the United States. This perspective aids the capstone by providing a structure of corporate architecture to parallel the civic modernist projects also appearing at the time.

Stewart, Danielle. "Feminists and Fashion Plates: The Brazilian Mulher Moderna in O Cruzeiro, 1928-1940." *The Space Between: Literature and Culture 1914-1945*. Retrieved from

1928-1940." *The Space Between: Literature and Culture 1914-1945*. Retrieved from

scalar.usc.edu/works/the-space-between-literature-and-culture-1914-1945/vol18_2022_stewart.

Stewart analyzes representations of the modern woman in Brazilian media, arguing that visual culture played a key role in shaping gender identities during the early twentieth century. By examining how femininity and modernity were constructed in popular publications, this source provides a cultural framework for understanding how societal expectations influenced women's participation in modernist movements.

Stratigakos, Despina. *Where Are the Women Architects?* Princeton University Press, 2016.

Stratigakos investigates the historical and ongoing absence of women in architectural recognition and leadership. She critiques the structural and cultural barriers that have limited women's visibility and advancement in the field, while also exploring efforts to address these inequities. This work is essential for framing the broader political and institutional conditions affecting female architects, both historically and today. It provides a theoretical foundation for understanding gendered exclusion within architectural practice, and contextualizes why many women architects narratives were often marginalized by male counterparts.

Whyte, William. "The Englishness of English Architecture: Modernism and the Making of a National International Style, 1927-1957" *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 2, *Special Issue on Material Culture*. Cambridge University Press, 2009. William Whyte, a member of the Oxford Historical Society, not to be confused with the urban theorist sharing the same name, examines the evolution of the modern movement in architecture. Although some of this text is oriented around the evolution of modernism particular to England, this work creates a timeline for the resistance or acceptance of architecture world wide as well. This source aids the capstone in understanding how modernism was pictured as a "foreign invasion" even after becoming more dominant in architectural culture postwar.