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## Architecture in Europe



Interview with: Selma Harrington  
7 March 2010 - Issue : 876

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In Brussels for their General Assembly the Architects Council of Europe President Selma Harrington found some time to talk with Alia Papageorgiou on how she became involved in Architecture, what it still means to be a European architect and how the profession is coming out of the economic crisis.

Being a female President of the Architects Council how would you describe the role of women in architecture today? In the last years there are more and more girls actually in schools of architecture and because I'm involved in teaching myself I can see that in the classes often that you do have more women students. When they graduate and go into work practices, partly because perhaps of traditional roles and demands of the family, and because probably still the perceptions that architecture and all its relations to the construction industry, it is largely male dominated, somehow that bigger number of students of architecture, gender defined as female, disappear and seem to be lost, and then on the building sites or in the positions probably of more prestigious or influence - you do see less women. It's a matter of staying and pursuing the profession for female architects. It's not down to anything else but staying on and demonstrating skills equally.

**Is this a big moment for architecture in the world? I know politics is very much in favor of green jobs, greening the economy..**

We are the right profession to oversee and motivate this process of greening jobs because by our training and professional profile and our problem solving skills and our contextual thinking, I think we are equipped well to bring together all the necessary components in this process of greening of the economy so maybe it is our opportunity. It remains to be seen because we are witnessing a very hard time for our profession, in a recession, lack of opportunities to engage in project work, maybe it's another opportunity to rethink, review and re-imagine what our profession is. We are the ones who should be asked to participate in strategic living, how our spaces should be created and how that reflects on human behavior or even conflicting situations in relation to migration or urban poverty or crime prevention. We believe that the spaces we create can alleviate some of these problems and can help human life and life of society at large. We would wish to see ourselves involved more in planning and urban development, but on a strategic level with the decisions are being made or conceived of how to go about a longer term projection.

**How would you describe a green building?**

There are a couple of very frequently used terms in relation to climate change, environment, and Co2 emission reductions. Sustainability, eco buildings, green buildings, and in one sense there is a fashion or a need to stick these words on to justify almost any



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action or project or process that somebody is undertaking these days but I suppose to me a green building, greening of building, can be kind of perceived as a process of creating this space with materials and resources that are in harmony with its natural environment that are safe for use that have a longer term efficiency in the way these materials products and resources that the buildings uses. But I think if buildings fit the space and are used in a similar fashion then we can talk about green buildings, the buildings that are healthy, in harmony and balance with the user and the environment.

### Is that the same as a sustainable building?

Again there are a lot of uses of sustainability – it is a fashionable word. In that sense I also like the way the French say – architecture durable –translated into English – enduring, long-lasting architecture. If you think of buildings in Europe in particular, which is full of old buildings, our buildings are long-lasting - they all have longer life than humans.

### What would be the immediate differences between architecture associations across Europe? What's the main thing they're looking for from you?

Our organization consists of members from over 27 countries now with different types of statuses as well, and 46 national organizations representing architects, they come from all regions of Europe. Members of this organization are also a product of diversity in Europe, both cultural, climatic, traditional, historical, we have somewhat different practices, we have somewhat ways of being educated and accessing the profession, this all comes at a variety of issues that we bring forward in our discussions and in our aims to first identify what are the practices and how we maintain the diversity in one way but agree on a common platform and agree on a harmonized approach to a variety of issues.

### What makes a good architect, what does architecture mean to you?

Architecture is also a reflection of socioeconomic conditions of a time, to me to be a good architect or to say that something is good architecture, I would see it as an adequate response or adequate solution between a very pragmatic analysis and a resolution to needs of the client, human needs, needs of user and occupier, and then subtle elements of creation of the space of sort of integration within the existing context which very often in the really good works of architecture has this element of "awe" and excitement perhaps fun, surprise, a sort of innovation if you want. It also educates, it makes us feel better, behave better very often that in its self results in the many other things that can result and penetrate through society. There is a very nice saying that applies to all design you know - "a good design enables, a bad design disables" - the topic of universal access, it's a good caption and we feel it even though we don't have to have a trained eye as architects.

### What is contemporary European architecture?

I sometimes see Europe and European architecture as if it's a distinguished, mature, elegant lady with a couple of deep character wrinkles and charming shiny eyes and elegant appearance, there is an element of being there and knowing it for ages because after all we do live on an old continent. So what is contemporary architecture; there are fantastic examples – we have very good architects in Europe because they are product of that experience and diversity and they are inspired. We don't fear for our architecture; we just need a bit more nourishment. I hope that we will be entering into new age of enlightenment where architectural design and that art and culture will be seen as celebrated as a major contributor to the well-being of European citizens.



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