

## Celebrating HERstories in architecture and planning on International Women's Day

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**Caroline Newton**

explorer educator researcher

## **Celebrating HERstories in architecture and planning on International Women's Day**



As a woman working in the fields of architecture and academia, I've faced my fair share of challenges. But I'm proud to say that I've never let those challenges hold me back from pursuing my dreams. And along the way, I've been fortunate enough to come across people and organisations who recognise the importance of merit and knowledge over connections, and I have been fortunate enough to have a platform from which I can share my ideas and perspectives and my passion for community development and social justice with others.

However, as a woman, I know that my experiences are not universal and that my story is just one of many. There are countless women out there who have faced even greater obstacles on their journeys.

That's why, in this blog post, I want to celebrate the success of a number of women who are my heroes and who made a difference in the fields of planning and community development, and at the same time, put the spotlight on the contributions of women who have been historically marginalised and silenced. Women, particularly those from the Majority

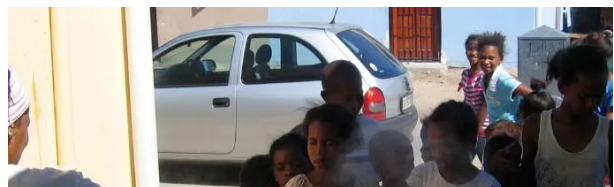
World, have historically been invisible and excluded from decision-making processes, including those related to urban planning and community development.

The underrepresentation of women in conventional historical records was, and still is, challenged by several activists and female authors as they began investigating the significant role women have played in various fields. Exemplary is the work of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Natalie Zemon-Davis, and Sheila Rowbotham, to name a few. Discovering women's significant role in the organisations and highlighting their impact on the housing practises of grassroots communities across many continents adds to a more complete, comprehensive, and accurate portrayal of the world (Haraway, 1988, p. 579). Women have been omitted from the conceptual history of design and planning techniques for a long time.

At the dawn of **International Women's Day**, I want to highlight the importance of feminist solidarity and the need to amplify the voices of these women who have been at the forefront of local organisations and planning in their communities. Too often, these women have been overlooked in the writing of (planning and design) history. By celebrating their contributions, we honour their work and challenge dominant narratives that perpetuate the erasure of women's experiences and perspectives.



Women play a crucial role in this small riverside community in Phnom Penh, where fish loans provide a sustainable source of income and promote economic empowerment.



In Netreg, Cape Town, one woman, despite her limited resources, launched a youth club, set up a soup kitchen and supported mothers in the community, enhancing a sense of community in the neighborhood.

Did you know that women are behind many successful housing projects that put people first? These projects aim to give people more control over their living spaces and improve their quality of life. But sadly, these women often don't get the recognition they deserve. They are overlooked by the media and the academic world. Women from different backgrounds and fields have worked together to create international networks that support people-centred housing. They include community leaders, activists, architects, and educators who share their knowledge and

experience, for example, Somsook Boonyabancha, Perween Rahman or Patricia Matolengwe. But also numerous local community leaders, working in their communities and making a difference on a daily basis, running saving schemes, building houses or setting up community centres.

People-centred housing is not a new idea. The popularity of grassroots housing movements has increased from the 1970s to the present. From the fundamental work of John Turner in the 1970s to the recent popular projects, such as Aravena's iconic project in Iquique (Chile), the emphasis has been on giving people power over their housing (process). In both the academic literature (e.g. Bromley, 2003; Harris, 2003) and the popular media on planning and design (e.g. ArchDaily, Dezeen or Archinect), the focus is on the male international expert (John Turner, Mike Davis or AbduMaliq Simone, to name a few), international organisations (e.g. Worldbank, UN-Habitat, Habitat for Humanity or Architecture sans Frontières) or the architect designer (such as Aravena, Teddy Cruz or Caracas Urban Think Tank). Less attention has been paid to the grassroots organisations themselves, and even less or no consideration has been given to the crucial women who have frequently made these ideas and programmes a reality on the ground, and are often not seen as experts by the design and planning worlds.

Between 1985 and 2010, the involvement of female activists, designers, and planners in a small number of influential organisations has been critical in influencing local people-centred grassroots approaches to housing. Influential female mediators (local community leaders, intellectuals, and architects) forged international networks and alliances that enabled the exchange of ideas and practises across several continents. These women have significantly impacted the global landscape of grassroots housing approaches and helped shape the field as it stands now.

Gender has recently become a prominent topic in urban planning (Fenster, 2005). Feminist perspectives on urban planning address a variety of urban issues, such as the homogenisation of public spaces. Less consideration has been given to the impact of women's roles in developing neighbourhoods through grassroots housing strategies.

Women perform the majority of work inside community-based organisations. Women in CBOs are not only workers but also leaders. They are proactive in overcoming daily difficulties and adversities (Lind, 1997; Lind & Farmelo, 1996; Mohanty, 2002). They are also innovative in

finding solutions and creating opportunities for themselves and others. They are agents of change who contribute to social development and gender equality. As an example in South Africa 53% of the 98,920 non-profit organisations (NPOs) are community-based organisations (CBOs), 60% of NPO employees are women, and 49% are volunteers (Swilling & Russell, 2002).



Community leaders Bangkok



Meeting of Community Leaders Phnom Penh

Hassim (2005) draws our attention to the irony that this intense activism falls within the maternalistic politics vested in this level. Personal accountability and concern motivate these women and contribute to the formation of a microscale, influential women's movement. Although frequently not recognised as radically feminist (Newton, 2008), these ordinary activities rooted in maternal concerns motivate action and change. Mohanty (2003, pp. 5–6) argues that feminist praxis operates on multiple levels: at the everyday level, through collective acts in organisations; networks organised around social transformation; and at the theoretical level, through the production of knowledge.

Diversity and difference are not regarded as insurmountable; instead, the practice of solidarity focuses on groups of individuals who have voluntarily chosen to work and struggle together.

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This idea of feminist solidarity, according to Mohanty (2003, p. 7), **“constitutes the most principled way to cross borders—to decolonise knowledge and practice anticapitalist critique”**.

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Somsook Boonyabanha, talking to students about the power of community savings (Phnom Penh, may 2014).

One woman who exemplifies the power of feminist solidarity is Somsook Boonyabancha. A social activist and architect from Thailand, Boonyabancha has spent her career fighting for the rights of the urban poor. She has worked with communities to develop participatory planning processes that centre the needs and desires of residents rather than those of developers and politicians. Boonyabancha's work has had a profound impact on the lives of countless individuals and families in Thailand, and her advocacy for community-led development is an inspiration to architects, designers and planners around the world.

Another woman who deserves recognition for her work is Perween Rahman. A Pakistani architect and urban planner, Rahman devoted her life to empowering marginalised communities in Karachi. She co-founded the Orangi Pilot Project, which focused on improving sanitation and housing conditions in the city's informal settlements. Rahman's approach was based on community participation and self-help, and she believed that the residents of these settlements were experts in their own needs and should be the ones leading the way in finding solutions. Sadly, Rahman was assassinated in 2013, but her legacy lives on through the work of the people she inspired and the impact she had on the lives of thousands of Karachi's residents.

Patricia Matolengwe is another woman who is a true inspiration when it comes to community-led development. Her tireless efforts have led to significant progress in providing affordable housing for homeless communities, and she has been instrumental in the establishment of the Victoria Mxenge housing project in Cape Town. Her work has not only focused on providing shelter but also on creating meeting spaces and ensuring that communities have a say in the planning and development of their neighbourhoods. Through her work with the South African Homeless People's Federation, she has demonstrated the power of grassroots organising and feminist principles in creating sustainable and equitable solutions to urban challenges. Through her work, she has demonstrated that women's leadership and community-led development are key to creating more just and sustainable urban environments.





Victoria Mxenge  
neighborhood



Victoria Mxenge  
community centre



Drawing of a house in  
Victoria Mxenge by an 11  
year old girl

These women, and countless others like them, remind us of the power of feminist solidarity and the importance of amplifying the voices of those who are too often overlooked. Their work challenges us to rethink dominant narratives about urban planning and development and to prioritise the needs and desires of communities over those of developers and politicians. As feminists, we must continue to support and uplift the work of women like Booyabancha, Rahman, and Matolengwe, and work to create spaces where the voices of women are heard and their contributions are celebrated.

**Feminist solidarity is a powerful force for change.** It's about recognizing the interconnectedness of women's struggles and standing together in the fight for equality. In the world of architecture and planning, this means celebrating the vital role that women have played in shaping our built environment and giving voice to those whose contributions have been overlooked.

It's important to acknowledge that women have often been instrumental in the formation and organisation of local communities, yet their contributions have been ignored or minimised in the writing of planning history. As we celebrate International Women's Day, we must take a moment to reflect on the countless ways in which women have shaped our communities, and make a concerted effort to amplify their voices and bring their stories to light.

Feminist solidarity also requires us to recognize the diversity of women's experiences and struggles. Women are not a monolithic group; their experiences are shaped by factors like race, class, and sexuality. We must understand that the fight for gender equality cannot be separated from the fight for social justice more broadly.

Take, for example, the environmental injustice faced by low-income women of colour in urban areas. They may live in neighbourhoods with high levels of pollution or lack access to safe and affordable housing.

Feminist solidarity means recognizing the ways in which these issues are interconnected and working together to create meaningful change.

**As we celebrate International Women’s Day, let’s come together in solidarity to promote gender equality and social justice. By amplifying the voices of marginalized women and standing together to address the many forms of injustice they face, we can build a more just and equitable society for all. Feminist solidarity is not a slogan or a buzzword – it’s a powerful force for change that requires our active participation and ongoing commitment. Let’s show up for one another and create a world where every woman is valued, respected, and heard!**

**Previous work that touches on some of the issues addressed in this blogpost can be found here:**

Newton, C. (2010). Vrouwen die bouwen. *Agora*, 26(1), 28–32.

Newton, C. (2012). Victoria Mxenge: A Story About More Than Women Building Their Community. *Urban Forum*, 23(2), 197–207. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12132-012-9150-4>

Newton, C. (2013). The peoples housing process ... getting the quality in the quantity? *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, 1-13 LA-English. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10901-013-9349-2>

Newton, C. (2016). The successful transferability of community driven housing programs in South-East Asia and the role of international NGOs. *ISOCARP 2016. “Cities We Have vs. Cities We Need.”*

Newton, C., & Schuermans, N. (2013). More than twenty years after the repeal of the Group Areas Act: Housing, spatial planning and urban development in post-apartheid South Africa. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, 28(4). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10901-013-9344-7>

INTERNATIONAL  
WOMEN'S DAY SERIES  
国际妇女节特别策划

2023.03.11.SAT.

15:30-17:30

ART23当代艺术馆  
ART23 Contemporary Art Gallery

广州越秀区启明三马路23号  
ART23 No.23 Qiming 3rd Rd. Qiming Community Guangzhou

# 建筑 VOICES OF WOMEN IN 她力量 ARCHITECTURE

15:30-15:40

荷兰驻广州总领事Frank van Beuningen先生致开幕词  
Opening remarks by Mr. Frank van Beuningen, Consul General of the Netherlands Guangzhou

15:40-16:25

"她故事"分享  
HER stories

- 蔡雯瑛 DOFFICE创办合伙人  
Jasmine Choi, Doffice
- 曹睿芝 (线上) MLA+中国区副总监  
Ruizhi Cao (online), MLA+
- Wendy Saunders 恺慕建筑设计 设计总监, 联合创始人  
Wendy Saunders, AIM Architecture
- Garrett Hwang (线上), UNStudio总监  
Garrett Hwang (online), UNStudio
- 杨绿野 AECOM城市设计师&项目经理  
Luye Yang, AECOM
- Caroline Newton (线上) 建筑师、城市规划师、政治学家和代尔夫特理工大学副教授  
Caroline Newton, TU Delft (online)

16:25-17:15

对话环节 (Frame China主编周三霞主持)  
Panel discussion, hosted by Chief Editor of Frame China, Rita Chou

17:15-17:30

结束语&茶歇  
Wrap-up drinks



主办方 Organizer

**NL** 荷兰

特别鸣谢 Special Thanks

 ART23  
当代艺术馆  
Contemporary  
Art Gallery

媒体伙伴 Media Partner

Caroline is invited to join the panel [Voices of Women in Architecture](#)  
Organised by the Consulate General of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Guangzhou.

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📌 **Feminism, International Women's Day**

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<https://carolinewton.com/2023/03/08/celebrating-herstories-in-architecture-and-planning-on-international-womens-day/>