ARCHITECTURE AND FEMINISM?

- ÁSTA MARÍA ÞORSTEINSDÓTTIR -

HOUSING BY HÖGNA SIGURÐARDÓTTIR AND SIGVALDI THORDARSON REDISCOVERED THROUGH FEMINIST THEORY

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Introduction

Architecture can be seen as a reflection of the political economy and social context of its time. For centuries, women have been underrepresented in society and this has affected the built environment, where prevailing gender ideologies are translated into architecture. In the light of changing social patterns and developments in feminist debate, it's important to understand and contextualize architecture in relation to gender.

This paper aims to rediscover housing by two Icelandic architects, Högna Sigurðardóttir and Sigvaldi Thordarson, through the scope of feminist theory. Both architects were influenced by modernist principles, yet they had very different approaches to housing design. The goal is to explore how gender roles are represented within their residential buildings, and which factors may have influenced their design choices. Therefore, the research question is: In what way are gender roles reflected in the work of Högna Sigurðardóttir and Sigvaldi Thordarson? -And were they critical about gender issues in their design due to their own gender, or were there other factors that influenced their design choices?

The theoretical framework of the thesis will be based on the writings of several feminist scholars. The publications by Matrix are used as a starting point for conducting a feminist analysis of architecture. Case studies by Högna and Sigvaldi will be studied with the use of archival material found in Hönnunarsafnið, Tímarit, and Teikningavefur Reykjavíkur. There are few published texts on the two architects, however, there do exist several newspaper articles and interviews, which provide a good basis for the research. To place the thesis in a historical context, there will be reviewed books on Nordic and Icelandic modernism and post-war context. Existing literature does not cover Icelandic modernist architecture from a feminist perspective and this paper will attempt to fill this gap.

The structure of the thesis consists of four chapters. In the first chapter, the research topic will be placed in a theoretical context. It

provides an overview of the feminist academic literature that has been consulted, introducing the feminist angle and analytical approach. The following chapters will introduce the Icelandic context and examine how certain socio-cultural aspects and gender relations are mediated into architecture. The second chapter introduces the Icelandic building tradition and the rural society before the 20th century. The different responses of the architects to local tradition will be looked at, and how it may have affected the perceived gender roles within their homes. The third chapter discusses the post-war context, and the different design processes of the architects, which will be placed in context with the definition of a feminist approach to architecture. The fourth chapter will look at women's position in society in the post-war years, and how gender relations are expressed in the work of the two architects. Finally, there is a concluding chapter where the research question will be answered.

1. Theoretical context

Introduction

The following will introduce the feminist lens and the literature which forms the theoretical framework of the research. The texts that were consulted have a multifaceted nature and investigate gender, space, and architecture from a feminist perspective. Ideas about the position of women within the home, the difference between female and male architects, and feminist design processes will be looked at and placed into the Icelandic context.

Research on the topic of gender and architecture appeared in the late 1970s and remained at the beginning internal to the architectural discipline. In the 1990s texts such as Sexuality and Space, by Beatriz Colomina, brought in ideas about gender from other fields such as anthropology, art history, and philosophy, and placed it in context with architectural studies. Such work provided an interdisciplinary context to the discussion of gender and architecture.[1] The multifaceted approach to gender theory and architecture will be used as a tool for understanding the architectural history and the context of the architects.

Second wave of feminism

The feminist movement in Iceland has always been tightly knit with the movement in Europe. Icelandic feminists were particularly influenced by feminist thinkers from Nordic countries and later from America. Theorists such as Simone De Beauvoir and Betty Friedman helped shape the second wave of feminism in Iceland, their texts were considered radical and caught the attention of local media.[2]

While the first feminist wave guaranteed women basic equal rights such as the right to vote, the second wave was more about changing perspectives and social values. The idea of the woman as a housewife was starting to shift with more women entering the paid workforce. This shift in values was in some ways mediated into architecture and will be examined further in the following chapters.

The difference between the first and second waves of feminism

1 Jane Rendell, *Gender Space Architecture: An interdisciplinary introduction* (Routledge: London, 2000), 6.
2 Bjarni Ólafsson, "Upphaf Rauðsokkahreyfingarinnar og inntak," *Samvinnan*, no.5 (October 1971): 14-15.

can also be described as a shift in focus from equality to difference. In the first wave, equality was defined in the terms of how women could be equal to men. In the second wave, however, women fought for equality in terms of difference: women could be different from men yet equal.[3] Simone De Beauvoir's text, The Second Sex, was prominent in this debate. According to Beauvoir humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself. Women are 'other' to men and therefore cannot be defined in male terms since they are different from men.[4]

Do women design differently than men?

On the topic of the difference between men and women, members of the feminist design co-operative Matrix have often been asked whether women design differently from men. According to Jos Boys, if there is a difference between male and female architects, it is a social construct, not a biological one. In architectural education and professional practice, there is an attempt to iron out any differences that may exist between men and women architects.[5] Women in the architecture world often must acquire a similar mindset to middle-class males, the dominant group in the architectural profession, if they want to succeed. Although we perhaps shouldn't expect there to be a difference between men and women architects, there is a possibility that women's designs can come off as less alienating than the man-made environment. This is only likely to occur, if there is a feminist consciousness in the female architect, and this depends partly upon the existence of a feminist movement.[6]

A feminist architecture may not be defined by a specific recipe, but perhaps by the design approach. Jane Rendell touches upon this topic in her text Gender Space Architecture. Rendell describes the role of the architect as an enabler, rather than a genius, allowing the user to take part in shaping their environment. Feminist thinkers have suggested that it is in this area in the design process that there may

3 Rendell, *Gender Space Architecture*, 15-16.
4 Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier (New York: Vintage books, 1949), 26-29.
5 Jos Boys. *Is there a feminist analysis of architecture?* (Alexandrine Press, 1978), 33.
6 Matrix, *Making Space: Women and the man made environment* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 11.

be an evident difference between man and women designers.[7] In the following chapters, the different approaches of Högna and Sigvaldi will be examined through a feminist lens.

Women and the home

For centuries, women have been placed within the home by many social forces. Leslie Kanes Weisman, a feminist architect, and writer wrote in her article Women's Environmental Rights about the position of the woman within the home. Her work is built on the premise that the built environment is an expression of the prevailing social order, that space can reflect and sustain existing gender, racial, and class relations in society. Weisman describes the home as an architectural icon, no less powerful than the phallic skyscraper, a tool to reinforce gender stereotypes and sustain traditional family structures. Even though the home has long been considered the domain of the woman, the homemaker has no place of her own within the home. The man is given the spaces of privacy (his own study), and spaces of leisure (workshop, lounge, or parlor). The woman is attached to the service spaces of the house: "She is a hostess in the living room, a cook in the kitchen, a mother in the children's room, a lover in the bedroom, a chauffeur in the garage." [8]

In the postwar years, women's position in society started to shift as they entered the paid workforce in increasing numbers. Women were no longer *kept* in the privacy of the home but started claiming space in the public sphere. In Iceland, the mechanization of the fishing fleet and agricultural sector aided this development. However, there was still a prevailing ideology in the society of the woman as a housewife. According to Jos Boys, this contradiction, of women working outside the home, and the housewife ideology, was solved by making housework appear as no work.[9] These conflicting social values were translated into spatial reality, and is e.g., evident in kitchen design in the 1950s and 1960s.

Fig. 1
Local advertisement from 1964
"Hard work…or? Carpeted floors- Every housewife's dream for a beautiful home and more spare time."

7 Rendell, *Gender Space Architecture*, 230.
8 Leslie Kane Weisman, "*Women's environmental rights: A manifesto,*" Heresies no. 11 (1981): 6-8.
9 Boys, *Is there a feminist analysis of architecture?* 27.

What is a feminist analysis of architecture?

Taking Jos Boys' definition as a starting point, a feminist analysis of architecture not only looks at the position of women in society, but equally emphasizes gender relations, ideologies, and the importance of individual experience.[10] This means not making assumptions about what women want but recognizing that women from different backgrounds have different experiences. Differences in class, sexuality, or race should not be ignored. It also entails viewing architecture not as something inflicted from above, but as a set of political, social, and economic priorities that can, even unintendedly, influence women's position in the built environment.[11] This understanding of architecture as a reflection of the socio-political environment leads us to examine the Icelandic context through the lens of feminist theory, in an attempt to expose the means of the architects.

10 Boys, *Is there a feminist analysis of architecture?* 25.
11 Boys, *Is there a feminist analysis of architecture?* 26.

2. Response to vernacular architecture

Introduction

The following will examine the vernacular architecture of Iceland and the dominant family structure before the 20th century. Iceland's geographical isolation, in combination with a harsh climate and lack of suitable construction materials, is reflected in a lack of an ordinary history of architecture. The gap between modern and vernacular architecture was too big for a gradual transition. The local tradition was therefore abandoned by most architects and modernity became a central theme throughout the 20th century.[12] Högna Sigurðardóttir and Sigvaldi Thordarson had different responses to the traditional Icelandic architecture, and this may be one factor in how gender roles are expressed within their work.

Fig. 2
Laufásbær turf house, 1956-1965

Icelandic building tradition

Before the 20th century, architecture in Iceland was constrained by a lack of permanent construction materials. Nearly all Icelanders lived in turf houses, made from local materials such as turf and wood. Iceland was a rural society, and the economy was mainly based on agriculture and fishing.[13] The turf farm was therefore not only a home but also a workplace, often housing more than one family. In 1901 the average household had 11,6 people. Outside the nuclear family, i.e., married couple and their children, other household members often included relatives, workers, and children that were placed in foster care.[14]

The work distribution within the turf farms relied on contributions from both genders. All residents took part in certain farm work such as haymaking and women did hard work, both inside and outside of the home. The gender roles within the turf houses were however partly determined by the number of residents. In smaller households, everyone helped with all types of chores. In larger households, more traditional gender roles could be maintained, where women mostly worked within the home and men worked outside of it.[15] The harsh climatic and economic conditions affected women's position, whose work contribution was equally important to the men's.

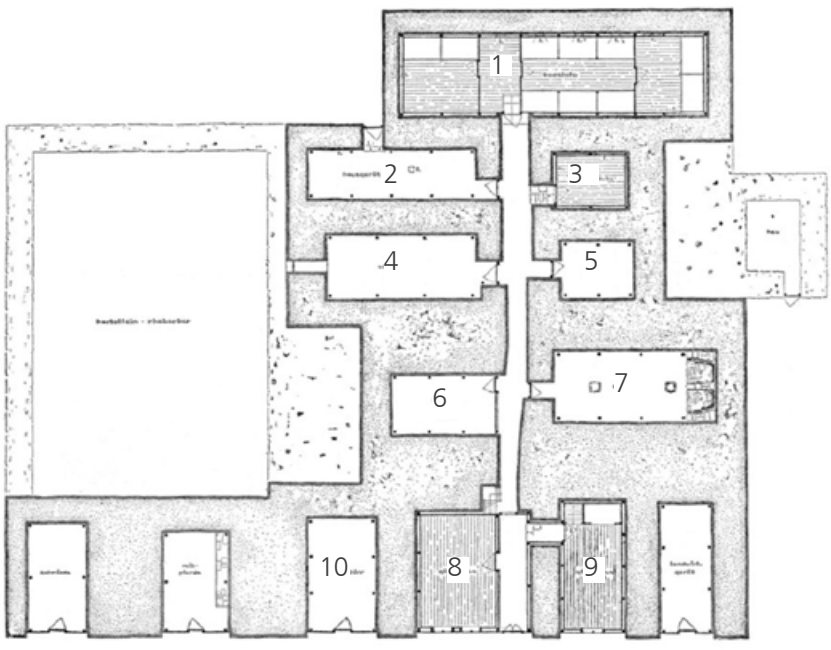
12 Peter Cachola Schmal, I*celand and architecture?* (Berlin: DAM, 2011), 33.
13 DOCOMO, *Modern Movement Scandinavia: Vision and Reality* (Aarhus: Fonden Til Udgivelse af Arkitekturtidsskrift, 1998), 99.
14 Anna Lísa Rúnarsdóttir, *Á tímum torfbæja: Híbýlahættir og efnismenning í íslenska torfbænum frá 1850* (Reykjavík: Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, 2007), 34-35.
15 Rúnarsdóttir, *Á tímum torfbæja*, 36-37.

Nevertheless, there was little relationship between women's work and their political rights. Women did not gain financial independence or the right to vote until the 20th century and working-class women and married women did not enjoy the same legal rights.[16]

The spaces of the turf house were divided up according to the activities that took place there (figure 3). All turf houses had a kitchen, pantry, and a main living area called baðstofa, where everyone lived, slept, and worked. The baðstofa is a particular space and fundamental for the understanding of social relationships. There were practical reasons for people gathering in one space to provide warmth, but this however also had social implications. The baðstofa was a space where inhabitants came together to read and tell stories and it, therefore, holds an important meaning in Icelandic cultural heritage. However, with societal changes and an increasing need for privacy, the baðstofa slowly lost its place as the heart of the home. Communal sleeping areas were added, making a separation between the family and workers and sometimes between genders, or generations.[17]

With the industrial revolution, there came improved housing standards and living conditions that affected social relationships. The traditional structure of the turf houses, which facilitated men

Fig. 3
Glaumbær in Skagafjörður / Floorplan
Drawing by Edwin Sacher



1 Baðstofa (main living room)
2 Entrance
3 Classroom
4 Pantry
5 Pantry
6 Pantry / extra baðstofa
7 Kitchen
8 Guest room
9 Guest room
10 Barns

16 "Heimastjórnartíminn," *Stjórnarráð Íslands*, accessed April 4, 2022, www.stjornarradid.is/rikisstjorn/sogulegt-efni/heimastjorn-1904-1918/heimastjornartiminn/.
17 Rúnarsdóttir, *Á tímum torfbæja,* 41-42.

and women to share the same position in the household was slowly abandoned and certain spaces of the house became gendered. Although the turf houses did evolve and adapt to changing needs, there came a point where they could not live up to the new standards of a modernized society. With the mechanization of the agricultural industry, many jobs were relocated outside of the home which affected the role of the turf house as a workplace. The advent of electricity had a major effect on housing practices, and the turf houses were no longer suitable due to fire hazards.[18]

Response to local tradition

The two architects had very different views on Icelandic traditional architecture. While Högna took inspiration from the past, Sigvaldi firmly believed in progress and modernity. Perhaps this difference can be partially explained by their age gap. Högna was a decade younger and did not grow up in a traditional turf house. Sigvaldi on the other hand, like many people who grew up on the turf farms, did not think fondly of them.[19] It was uncommon in the postwar years for Icelandic architects to seek inspiration from local traditions. The Icelandic architectural and artistic movements in the 1950s were based on the idea of a universal law of visual forms and a new aesthetic, influenced by the ideas of Mondrian and Bauhaus. It can be hard to distinguish between the work of some Icelandic architects from this period, as they followed the same visual principles. Everything from the past was considered obsolete, people believed that technology and science would create a new and better world.[20] Perhaps the social aspect was forgotten in the search for modernity and a new cultural identity? There might as well be an economic aspect to these views, as the turf houses were associated with decades of rural poverty. Architects such as Högna Sigurðardóttir might have looked beyond this and recognized their social value.

18 Rúnarsdóttir, *Á tímum torfbæja*, 10.
19 Hörður Ágústsson, "Sigvaldi Thordarson arkitekt fimmtugur," *Þjóðviljinn*, no. 298 (December 1961): 6-7, timarit.is/page/2794476.
20 Egill Helgason, Pétur H. Ármannsson, "Steinsteypuöldin," *RÚV*, 29 September 2016, video: 4:30, www.ruv.is/sjonvarp/spila/steinsteypuoldin/18675/5i351k.

Sigvaldi Thordarson

Sigvaldi Thordarson was born in 1911 in Vopnafjörður, one of the most rural settlements in the country. In fact, he did not experience the city until he was an adult. Long after people moved to the city, there was often a part of their heart that belonged to the countryside. This was not the case with Sigvaldi, he cut all ties with the rural country. It would never occur to him to seek inspiration in vernacular architecture. He was modern in thought, everything he did was formed by modern perspectives. In his opinion, like many others, the turf houses represented centuries of dark, narrow, and uninhabitable spaces.[21] Sigvaldi's architecture is in a way a response to the vernacular way of building. His houses represent light and beauty and are free from all resemblance to the past.

In the interior layout of many of Sigvaldi's single-family homes, there is an emphasis on the privatization of family life. His housing schemes can be described as characteristic of the architectural trend of the time. Private bedrooms became common in Iceland in the early 20th century, replacing the communal baðstofa. In Sigvaldi's houses, the bedrooms are often located in a secluded wing or on a different floor, separated from the rest of the house. The private spaces such as the study or parlor, are often assigned to the husband. One could speculate whether this emphasis on privacy, is a reaction to the past crowded way of living. In the traditional Icelandic house, people were often cramped together and there was little or no privacy. However, the way that the private spaces are assigned can perhaps be seen as a reflection of the dominant gender ideologies of the time.

Sigvaldi's views on vernacular architecture were most likely influenced by his educational years in Denmark. He began his education before the Second World War but had to pause his studies without completing his degree. He returned to Denmark after the war and graduated from Akademiet for de Skønne Kunster in Copenhagen in 1947.[22] During the early years of his studies, there was a rapid rise in socialist policies in Denmark and other Nordic countries. Sigvaldi

21 Ágústsson, "Sigvaldi Thordarson arkitekt fimmtugur," 6-7.
22 Þór Sandholt, "Sigvaldi Thordarson," *Morgunblaðið,* no. 93 (April, 1964): 11. timarit.is/page/1357403.

was a socialist and very politically active, which might have influenced his design thinking. Radical architectural journals such as Kritisk Revy, formed by left-wing intellectuals, were influential in Denmark at the time and played an important role in forming Scandinavian modernism. One of their goals was to distance people from outdated moral norms and traditional values. By rejecting styles and building methods from previous eras, the aim was to find permanent solutions to modern living.[23] The rational thinking of the modernists affected housing design, and Sigvaldi's ideas were likely influenced by the common Nordic discourse. Form became the focus of many early European modernists but often there was a discrepancy between outer form and social responsibility.

Changing social patterns were influential in shaping the spaces of the modern homes that replaced the turf houses, this is especially evident in kitchen design. The kitchen in Sigvaldi's houses is typically small and located in a separate space, often connected to the laundry room. In the traditional Icelandic house, the kitchen was also located separately from the living and dining room to prevent smoke from spreading throughout the house.[24] In the 20th century, with the advent of stoves, locating the kitchen separately was no longer due to practical reasons, but the result of a social construct. The kitchen, which was perceived as the domain of women, was seen as a space of production, not a space for socialization, and this is evident in the housing schemes of Sigvaldi (figure 5-6).

Fig. 4
Sigvaldi (second right) on a visit to the Soviet Union, 1951.

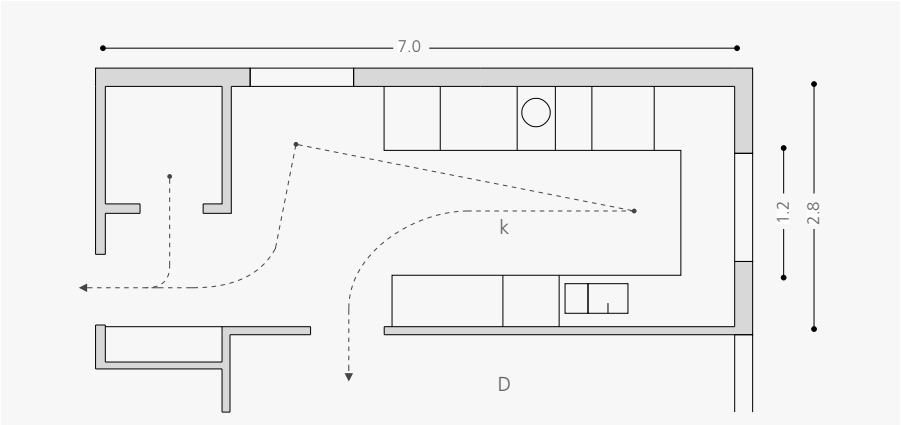


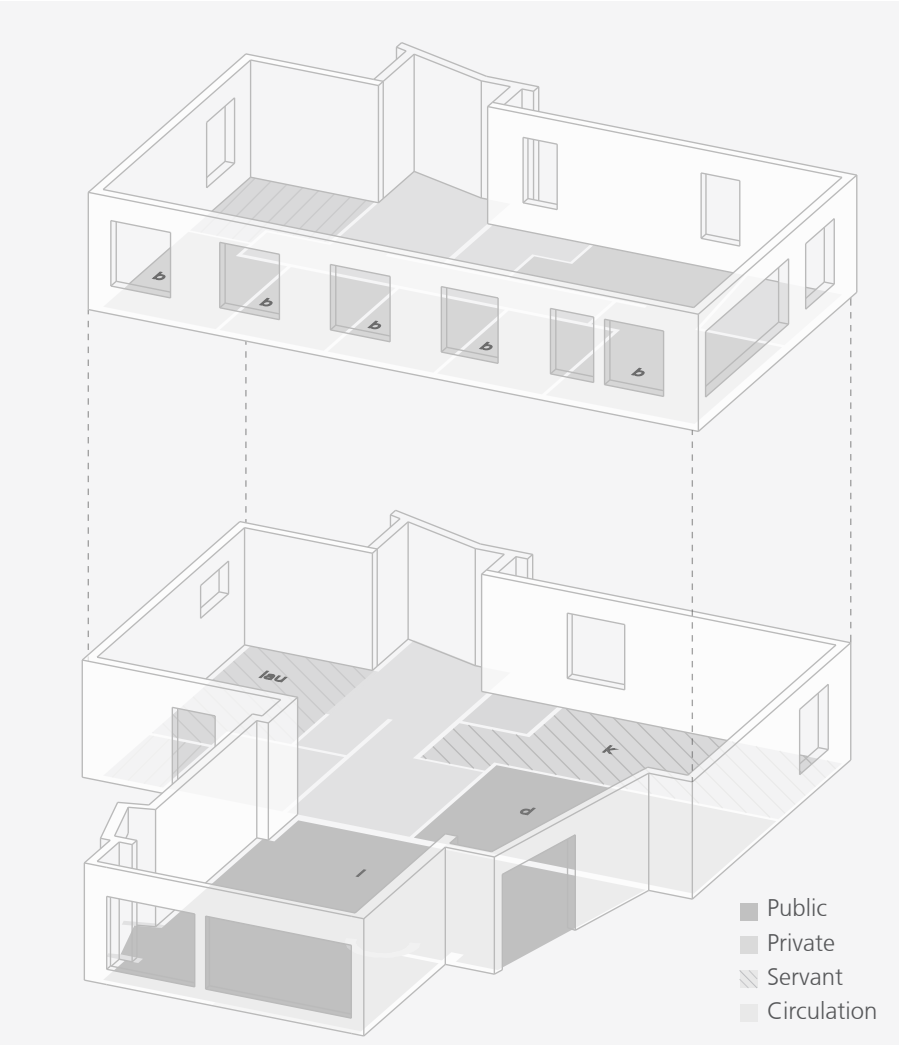
Fig. 5
Analytical drawing of the kitchen in Ægissíða 80, designed by Sigvaldi Thordarson in 1956.

23 Mark Mussari, *Danish Modern: Between art and design* (London, Bloomsbury, 2016), 21.
24 Rúnarsdóttir, *Á tímum torfbæja*, 47.

Fig. 6
Analytical drawing, Ægissíða 80
Designed by Sigvaldi Thordarson,1956

Bedrooms
The bedrooms are kept separately on the first floor, emphasizing the privatization of family life.

Kitchen
The kitchen is located in the back of the house and is unlikely to be a room where one might enjoy spending time.



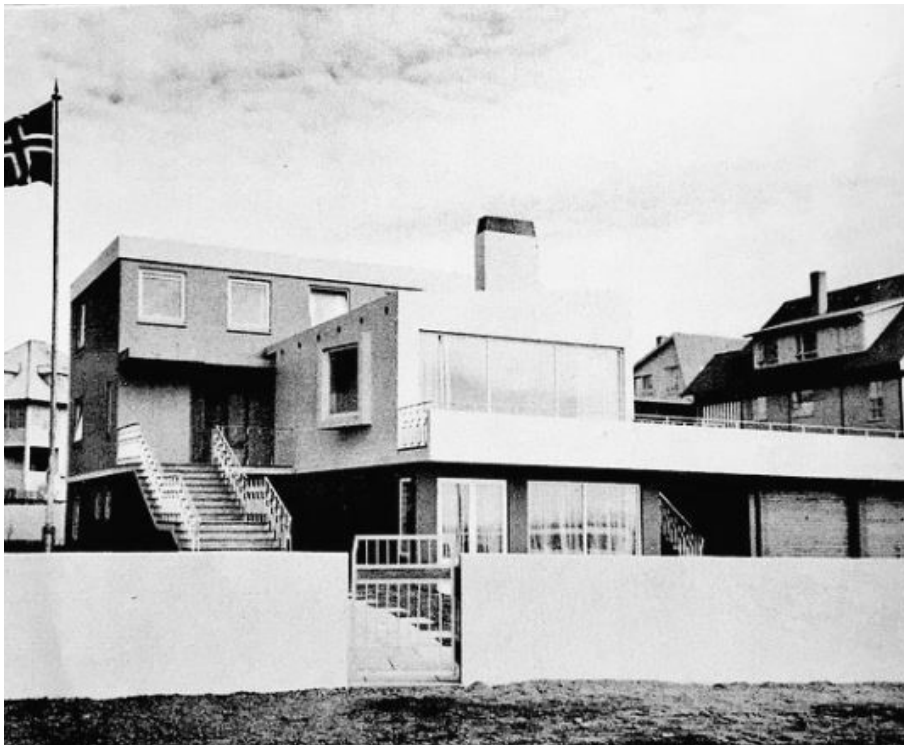


Fig. 7
Ægissíða 80, Reykjavík
Designed by Sigvaldi Thordarson in 1956.

Högna Sigurðardóttir

Högna Sigurðardóttir was born in 1929 in Vestmannaeyjar, an island on the shore of Iceland.[25] Unlike Sigvaldi, who rejected anything of the past, Högna's houses can be seen as a reinterpretation of the traditional turf houses. This is evident in the exterior of her houses, in the use of raw concrete (which replaced stones) and turf on the roofs. The reason why Högna embraces the vernacular way of building might be twofold. Firstly, she did not experience the turf houses firsthand and therefore might romanticize the past. Secondly, she spent most of her adult life in Paris, and the distance from Iceland made her appreciate nature and local traditions even more. The Icelandic traditional architecture was about building in harmony with nature, and this is as well the core of Högna's work.

Fig. 8
Högna Sigurðardóttir, 1962

Högna often mentioned the turf houses as a frame of reference and states that her houses were marked by the overwhelming Icelandic nature. The traditional house was a shelter against the cold winter, in order not to be blown away it was dug into the earth and became part of the topography.[26] This is reflected in Högna's work, her homes are like shelters and are integrated in harmony with the site and nature. The street facade often has few windows, and from the exterior, her houses seem closed off. On the interior, however, her homes are filled with light, and often open toward the garden.

The spatial division in Högna's homes has many similar features to the traditional turf house, such as the emphasis on flexibility, social aspects, and an a-hierarchical home structure. The idea of a central living and sleeping area (baðstofa) can be seen in her work, for example in Bakkaflöt 1. Although people do not sleep in the living room, the bedrooms can be connected to the main living area with sliding elements. Her houses are designed as one open space, which can be divided up according to the needs of the residents. Even though the home can be used as one open space, there are nooks of a more intimate nature. The residents can decide for themselves whether they opt for privacy.

25 Guja Dögg Hauksdóttir, "Heimþráin og ljóðrænar byggingar Högnu," Interview by Halla Þórlaug Óskarsdóttir, *RÚV*, 17 February, 2017.

26 Marja-Riitta Norri, Maij Kärkkäinen, *Högna Sigurðardóttir Anspach: Revealing the social content* (Helsinki: Museum of Finnish architecture, 1992), 48.

Fig. 9
Bakkaflöt 1, Garðabær
Designed by Högna Sigurðardóttir,
1965-1968

In the construction of her houses, Högna looks back to traditional craftsmanship. The turf walls and roofs required particular knowledge and solutions for waterproofing. The casting of the raw concrete also required skilled craftsmen. Modernism is typically associated with industry and standardization and dislocation from craft and decoration, which can be read as ‘feminine’. Högna took inspiration from the local craft and used concrete in a way that respected the local building heritage.

Fig. 10
Bakkaflöt 1, Living room

The living room in Bakkaflöt 1 has references to the old baðstofa. At the center of the house is a fireplace, which was also common in the old turf houses. The interior spaces can all be opened up toward the main living area.

Fig. 11
Sunnubraut 37, Kópavogur, Living room
Designed by Högna Sigurðardóttir, 1963

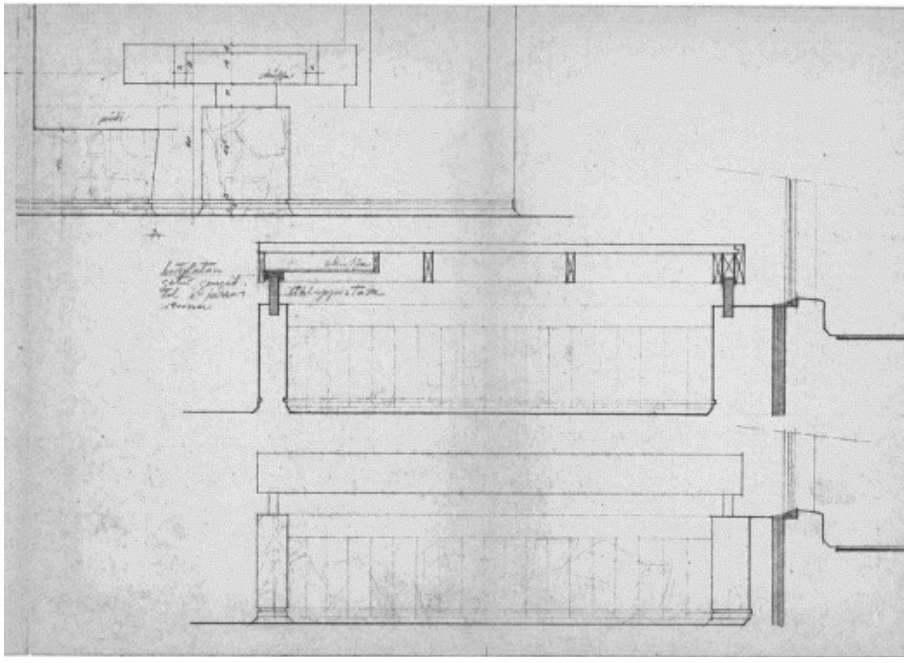


Fig. 12
Sunnubraut 37, Kópavogur
Working drawing of a concrete dining table and bench, 1963-1966

The reference to the turf house is evident in the way that Högna's dwellings are organically formed. The spaces flow together and seem to be carved out of the ground due to the play with height difference. In that sense, her houses have a sculptural quality. Högna saw the interior and exterior as an architectural whole. In her homes, she designed most of the furniture, which was often cast in concrete.

Conclusion

The architects responded differently to vernacular architecture, and this is partly reflected in the gender relations within their homes. The main difference in their design in this regard is different interpretations of privacy (figure 13). The traditional Icelandic house was centered around the main living space where the residents had little privacy. Sigvaldi Thordarson, perhaps reacting to the past, emphasizes family members being private from each other. In the houses he designed, the sleeping spaces and servant areas (the kitchen included) are separated from the living room. New types of private spaces such as the man's parlor or study were introduced in his homes, which reflect the dominant gender relations in society in the post-war years. The increased demand for privacy may also be seen as a reflection of a liberal individualistic Iceland in the decades leading up to the independence from Denmark. Social interdependency became less valued – even within families. Högna's work can be seen as a social agency in the built form against individualism. Högna emphasizes the social aspect, and the homes that she designed convey a sense of togetherness. Her houses are like shelters, protecting the residents from the outside world. The interior spaces revolve around a central living area, similar to the vernacular turf houses. Flexibility in the use of space is a central theme and the users have control over their own space.

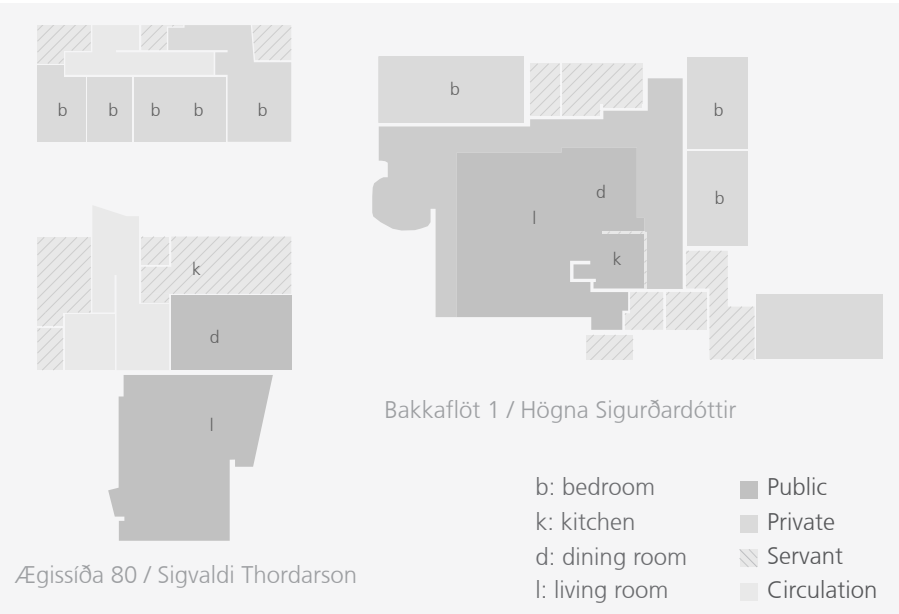


Fig. 13
Analytical drawing: spatial division in housing by Högna and Sigvaldi.

3. Design approach

Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century in Iceland, housing design and construction processes changed drastically from the way that the vernacular dwellings were previously constructed. The vernacular houses were built by locals, who were owners, builders, and occupiers. The relationship between the users and producers of buildings became more complex with the industrialization of society and the professionalization of the practice of architecture. In the first decades of the 20th century, the emphasis on individualism affected housebuilding and the role of architects.[27] Feminist writers have suggested that the key to a feminist architecture does not have a specific recipe but lies within the approach. The following will therefore introduce the different design approaches of Högna and Sigvaldi, as well as their views on the role of the architect. Whether their approach to architecture was influenced by gender is also something that will be examined.

Sigvaldi Thordarson

Sigvaldi Thordarson's legacy in Icelandic modernist architecture is of major importance. He left 297 recorded works in a short career span of around 20 years.[28] Sigvaldi believed in the role of the architect as a master and had an absolute belief in the specialized knowledge of the architect in his field. He believed that homeowners did not have the same sense and knowledge of architecture, and therefore the architect sometimes had to take over control from the clients.[29]

Sigvaldi's views on the position of the architect perhaps stem from the situation of architects in the post-war years. In the years after the war, architects did not build for contractors or investors, but directly for people who intended to live in the houses. Icelandic architects at the time did not receive much respect as specialists, and the law did not require an architectural education to design houses. The number of Icelandic architects up until the sixties was less than 30. Engineers and technicians, therefore, designed most of the housing

27 Davíð Roach Gunnarsson, "Sigvaldahúsin í bænum," *RÚV*. 10 December 2016. https://www.ruv.is/sjonvarp/spila/steinsteypuoldin/18675/5i351k.
28 Davíð Roach Gunnarsson, "Sigvaldahúsin í bænum."
29 Skúli H. Norðdal, "Minningarorð", *Alþýðublaðið*, no. 93 (April 1964): 4-5, https://timarit.is/page/2331161.

since architects could not handle the growing demand during the housing crisis. Working closely with home builders had its pros and cons. Homeowners were often adamant, and architects often had a hard time convincing them of their ideas.[30] This is perhaps why Sigvaldi was such as strong-willed character and had to fight for respect as an architect. However, authority does not have to exclude a participatory process, Högna is an exemplary figure in this respect.

Högna Sigurðardóttir

Högna Sigurðardóttir had a more inclusive design approach and in her work, she emphasized the social aspect. She worked closely with her clients and took into consideration their spatial needs. Högna designed four single-family homes in Iceland, which were considered eccentric and would likely not have been constructed without complete trust from her clients. Högna was living in France when she was given the commission of the single-family homes, and she relocated part-time to Iceland to oversee the construction. When she was not able to be on-site, she mainly communicated with her clients and carpenters in letters and drawings.[31] Her drawings are extremely meticulous, and she would often write notes on them explaining every detail.

In interviews, Högna states multiple times that her main interest is people: "Everything I design is based on how people choose to lead their lives." [32] The essential thing for her was that the occupants liked the house. She even states that sometimes users understand the usability of a building even better than the architects.[33] There is a humility to her approach, she understood that people can choose for themselves how they want to live.

Högna's approach to architecture was likely influenced by her stay in France, where she lived and worked since 1960. She graduated with honors from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where she received mainly classical training. According to Högna, the students had a bigger influence on her architectural approach than the professors. The

30 Eggert Þór Bernharðsson," Að byggja sér veldi," *Ný Saga*, no. 1 (January 1995): 84-87. https://timarit.is/page/5363758.
31 Norri, Kärkkäinen, *Högna Sigurðardóttir Anspach*, 46.
32 ELA, "Íslenska sagan er sterk í manni," *Dagblaðið Vísir*, no. 48 (February 1994): 25. https://timarit.is/page/2623576.
33 Norri, Kärkkäinen, *Högna Sigurðardóttir Anspach,* 50.

Beaux-Art was comprised of several ateliers with around 200 students. In general, women were refused entrance to the ateliers, and Högna's studio was the only one to accept female students. The students worked in groups with older and younger people mixed. Högna described the collaboration with students from different backgrounds as inspiring, and perhaps her interest in people was sparked from there.[34]

Although Högna did not like to be defined as a woman in architecture, her approach was likely influenced by the fact that she was a woman and a mother. Women's social position tends to foster a different value system, emphasizing certain qualities such as inclusiveness, ethics of care, subjectivity, and flexibility in design. Women designers and users might therefore value different kinds of spaces.[35] Högna's care for the residents might therefore be characteristic of a woman designer.

Conclusion

One could wonder where the difference in approach stems from. Was it expected of Högna to be more user-oriented/caring because she was a woman? Did Sigvaldi claim the position of the modernist master because he was male? Several factors may have affected their approach, gender is most likely one of them. Sigvaldi was more focused on the emergence of artistic and technological aspects, whereas Högna was deeply interested in the social aspect of architecture. Icelandic architects were in a difficult position in the postwar years, working directly with clients proved hard for many, and perhaps Sigvaldi was trying to gain respect by asserting his strong will. Högna most likely understood the need of women better, being a mother of two alongside working outside of the home. She understood the spatial flexibility required by women's social roles. Despite Högna's inclusive approach, she is no less of a modernist master than Sigvaldi. In her work there can be seen references to architects such as Tadao Ando, Alvaro Siza, and Le Corbusier, yet her original approach shines through.[36] She

34 Norri, Kärkkäinen, *Högna Sigurðardóttir Anspach*, 50.
35 Rendell, *Gender Space Architecture*, 232-233.
36 Norri, Kärkkäinen, *Högna Sigurðardóttir Anspach*, 49.

was assertive and followed the construction of her houses through every step, making sure everything was up to her standards, while still maintaining humility towards the users. In this sense she is a role model, displaying another approach in practice than the typical top-down approach.

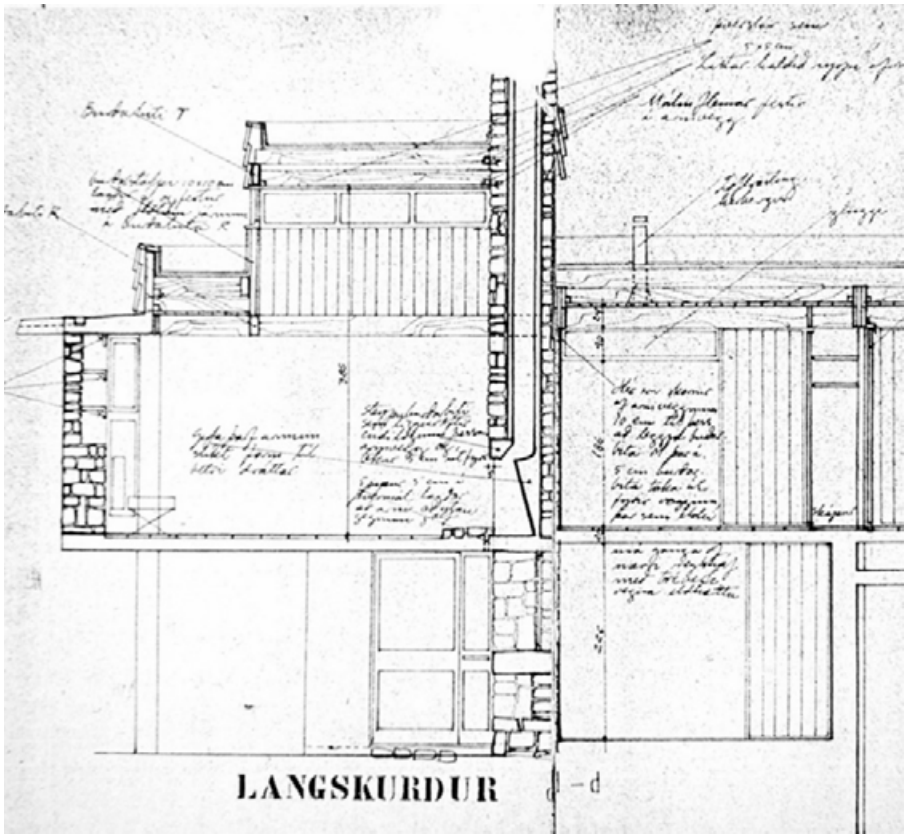


Fig. 14
Bústaðarbraut 11, section.
On the drawing, Högna wrote notes to the builders.

4. Gender roles

Intoduction

The following will look at women's position in Icelandic society in the post-war years and the dominant gender ideologies. The prevalent family structure will be introduced, and how it affected the development of housing design. The different ways that gender relations are expressed in the work of the architects will then be examined, as well as which factors may have influenced their design choices.

Position of women in postwar years

The mechanization of the fishing and agricultural industry in the mid-20th century called for more women into the paid workforce. Despite the growing demand for women's labor, the prevailing ideology of society was that women should be mothers and housewives. The standard family structure in postwar Iceland consisted of a male breadwinner and a wife who did household chores and took care of the children. Despite an expanding market and a growing number of companies, there was still production happening within the homes, where women made important contributions.[37]

To encourage employment among women, a bill was passed in 1957 that allowed married women to pay only half of their taxes. The argument was that if women were to enter the paid workforce, they would have to hire domestic help and the tax reduction was supposed to counterbalance this. It was not considered an option that the housework could be divided equally between the husband and wife.[38] Icelandic feminists criticized this bill in the second feminist wave. The law only specified married women, single- and gay women still had to fend for their own, working outside of the home for a low salary and doing all the housework.[39] Not all women enjoyed the same privileges, class as well as gender operated as a tool of oppression.

When Icelandic women started entering the architectural profession in increasing numbers in the 70s and 80s, they faced several challenges. Personal and political relationships often determine the

37 Eggert Þór Bernharðsson, S*veitin í sálinni: Búskapur í Reykjavík og myndun borgar* (Reykjavík: JPV útgáfa, 2015), 38-44.
38 "Réttindabarátta íslenskra kvenna á vinnumarkaði," accessed April 4, 2022, *Jafnréttisstofa*, www.jafnretti.is/is/um-jafnrettisstofu/greinar/rettindabaratta-islenskra-kvenna-a-vinnumarkadi.
39 Ólafsson, "Upphaf Rauðsokkahreyfingarinnar og inntak," 14-15.

commission of projects, and this aspect was still male-dominated. The government rarely turned to women architects for bigger projects such as hospitals or schools, even though these institutions were mainly run by women. Perhaps the reason for this is that few women were in positions of power, and they did not have a say in choosing the architect.[40] When women entered the architectural field, at first, they were mostly involved in housing design, Högna was the first woman to build a house in Iceland in 1960.[41]

The political male-dominated climate had a direct effect on the homes. In the nineteen sixties, less than 2% of the members of parliament were women.[42] Matters such as kindergartens and daycares were not on the table. There was a shortage of places in kindergartens, so people could often only leave their children for half a day. Since men were paid a higher salary than women, it was the woman who had to work part-time or even be a full-time caretaker of the children.[43] Architecture is a reflection of the socio-political environment, and the position of women in society was translated into spatial reality and material culture.

Expression of gender roles in architecture

The following will examine how gender roles are expressed differently in the work of the two architects. The plan of a house can tell a lot about how women are expected to lead their lives. Buildings can contain ideas about women's proper place within the home, but they do not determine how we live. The architectural intention of the architects will therefore be compared to the reality of the use. Looking at how their architecture constructs a reality for women by determining what is private and what is public, what is put together and what is separate, and what the appropriate behavior for women is in each space. Whether the gender relations were consciously or subconsciously designed by the architects will also be examined.

40 Sigrún Jónsdóttir, "Við höfum ekki rekist á neina veggi," *Vera,* no. 6 (September 1985): 28-29.
41 Sigurgeirsdóttir, "Efni og andi í byggingarlist," 10- 11.
42 "Konur á alþingi," *Alþingi*, accessed April 4, 2022, www.althingi.is/thingmenn/althingismannatal/konur-a-althingi/kjornar-konur/.
43 Gerður G. Óskarsdóttir, "Viðhorf rauðsokka til barnaheimilismála," *Samvinnan*, no.5 (October 1971): 28-29, timarit.is/page/4293292.

Sigvaldi Thordarson

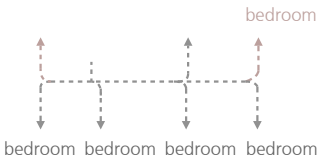
Sigvaldi's residential buildings exemplify the idealization of family life in the post-war years. A central theme in the plans of his houses is the privatization of family life. This came about during the industrial revolution, when modern houses were divided into rooms with specific functions, accommodating the nuclear family, which was the dominant household form.[44] Although women were tied to the home more than any family member, the individual's right to privacy was not extended to them. The housewife was located in the spaces that served the family, such as the kitchen. The husband however was given a space of his own, usually a study or a parlor. In Sigvaldi's schemes, it is common to find spaces marked as "Bóndi" which refers to the man of the house. The man's space is usually located in the front, next to the living room, with large windows facing the street. The more public functions were placed in the front of the house, while the service spaces and private ones were placed in the back.

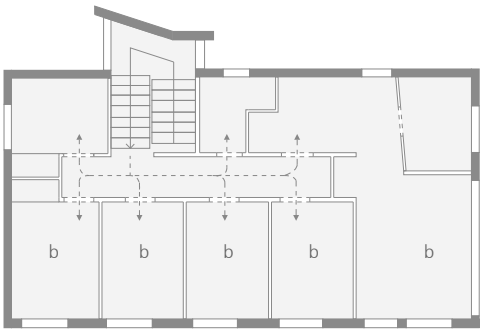
In European housing design in the 1950s, there was a common assumption that housework was not shared by members of the household but done by the woman. There was a focus on efficiency to relieve the burden of working women so that they could continue to take care of the household while also working outside of the home.[45] These ideas can be seen in Sigvaldi's housing schemes. The kitchen is categorized as a space of production and designed for one person to work-the housewife. Although the goal was to make life easier for women, the resultant effect was that they became isolated from the rest of the family. In many of Sigvaldi's housing schemes, the kitchen has small windows and is separated from the dining and living room. There is usually no visual connection through the house, or towards the street. The kitchen is clearly defined as a service space and is often located next to the laundry room.

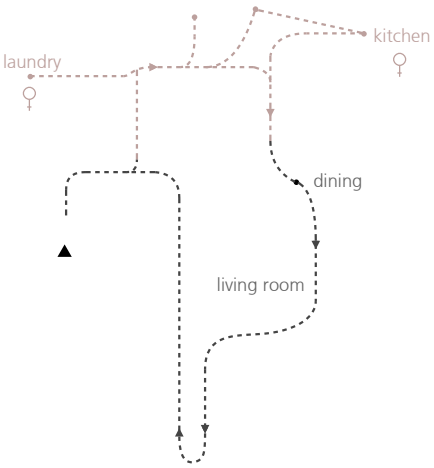
44 Matrix, *Making Space,* 67.
45 Matrix, *Making Space,* 99.

Fig. 15
Analytical drawing, Ægissíða 80
Designed by Sigvaldi Thordarson.
1956

From the kitchen, there is no visual connection to the dining room or toward the street. The woman's 'proper' place is in the back of the house where the service spaces are located.







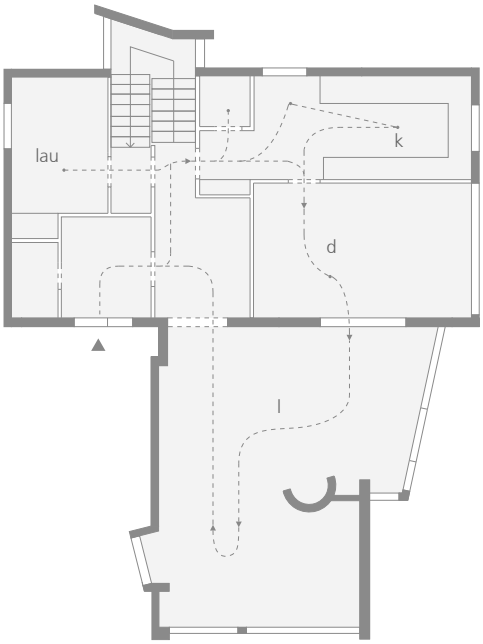


Fig. 16-17
Ægissíða 80, living room and kitchen

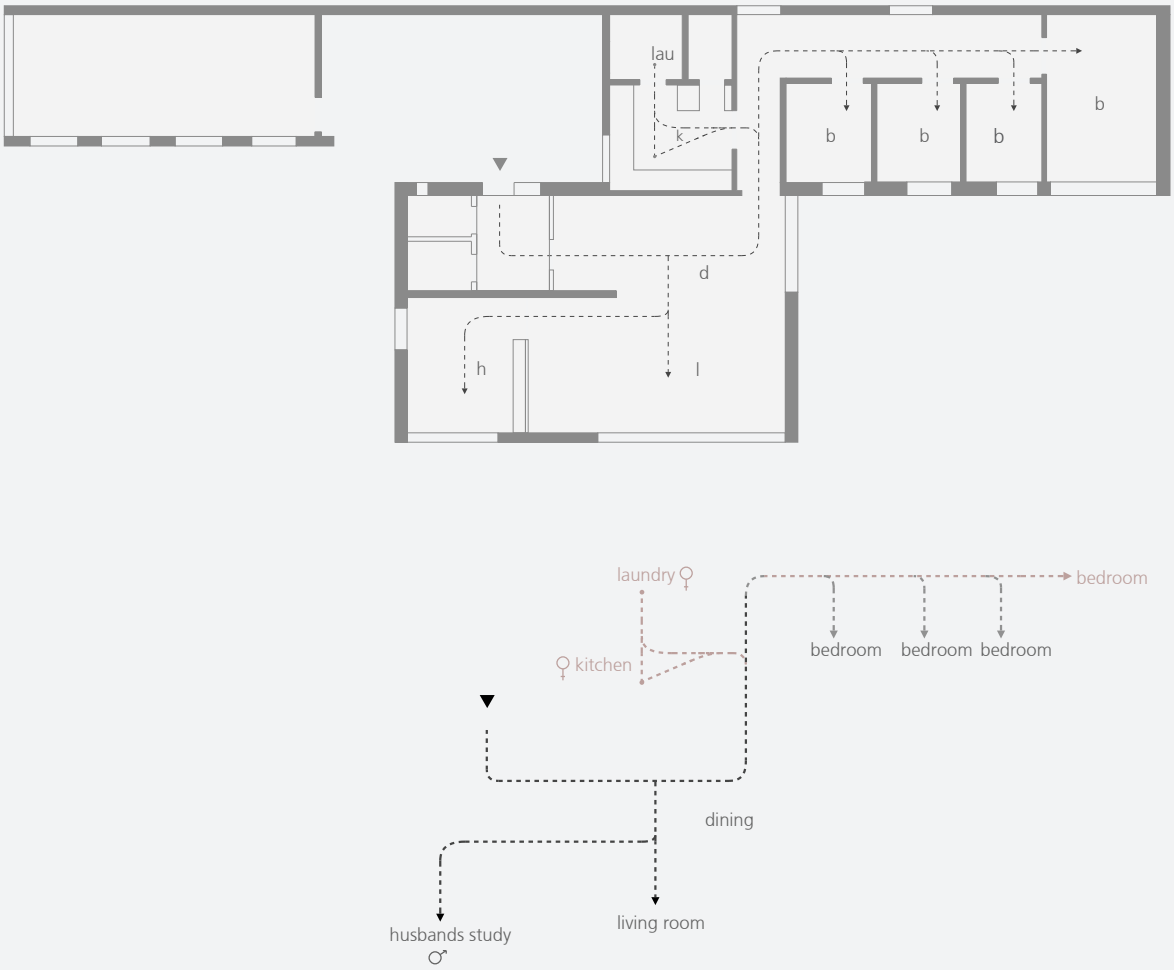


Fig. 18
Analytical drawing, Grænatunga 7
Designed by Sigvaldi Thordarson,
1963

Working kitchen

The kitchen is designed as an efficient working space for one person (the wife). It is connected to the laundry room.

Husband's study

A private study for the husband is located next to the living room, with large windows and a view toward the street.

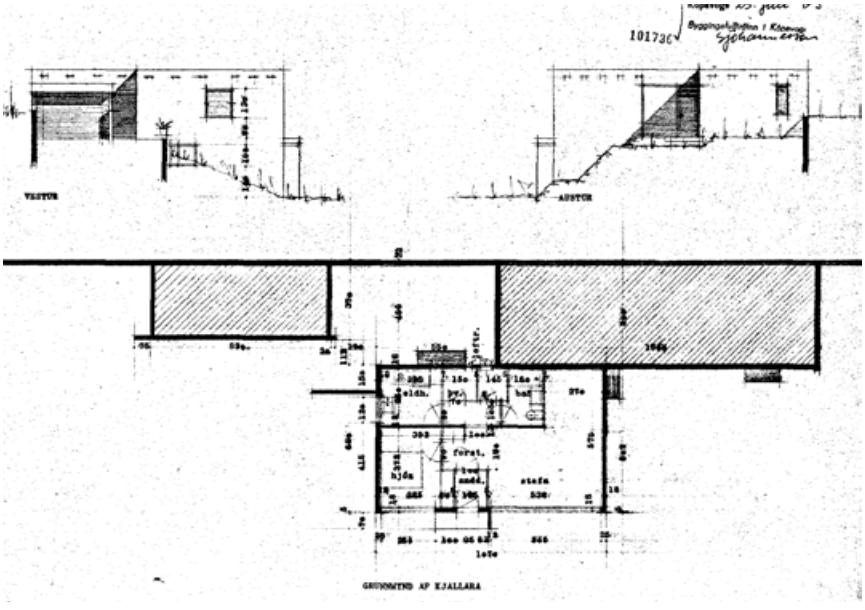
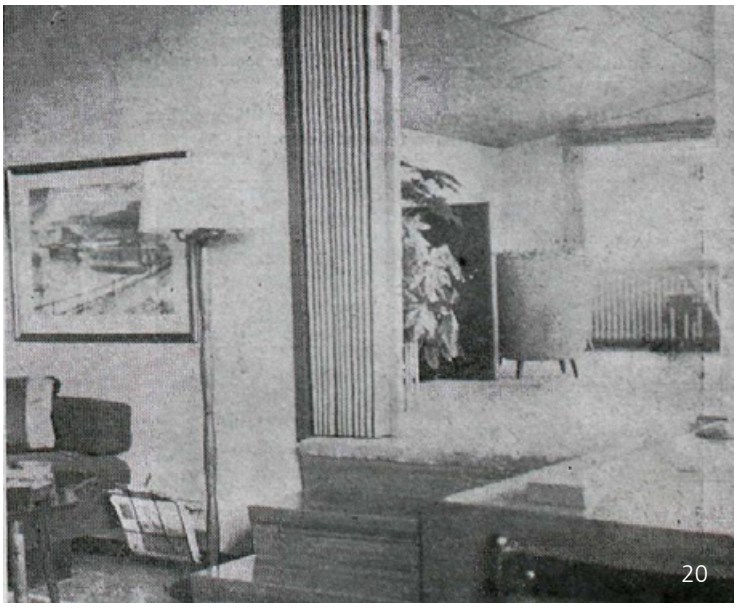
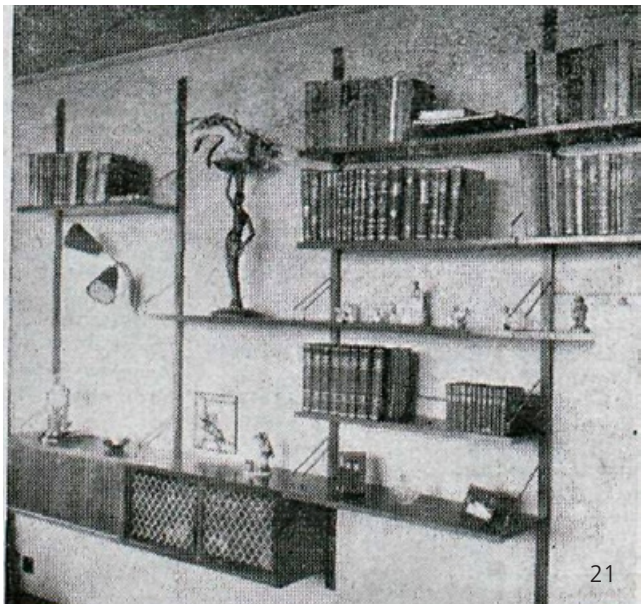


Fig. 19
Grænatunga 7, floorplan and elevation (Sigvaldi Thordarson, 1963)





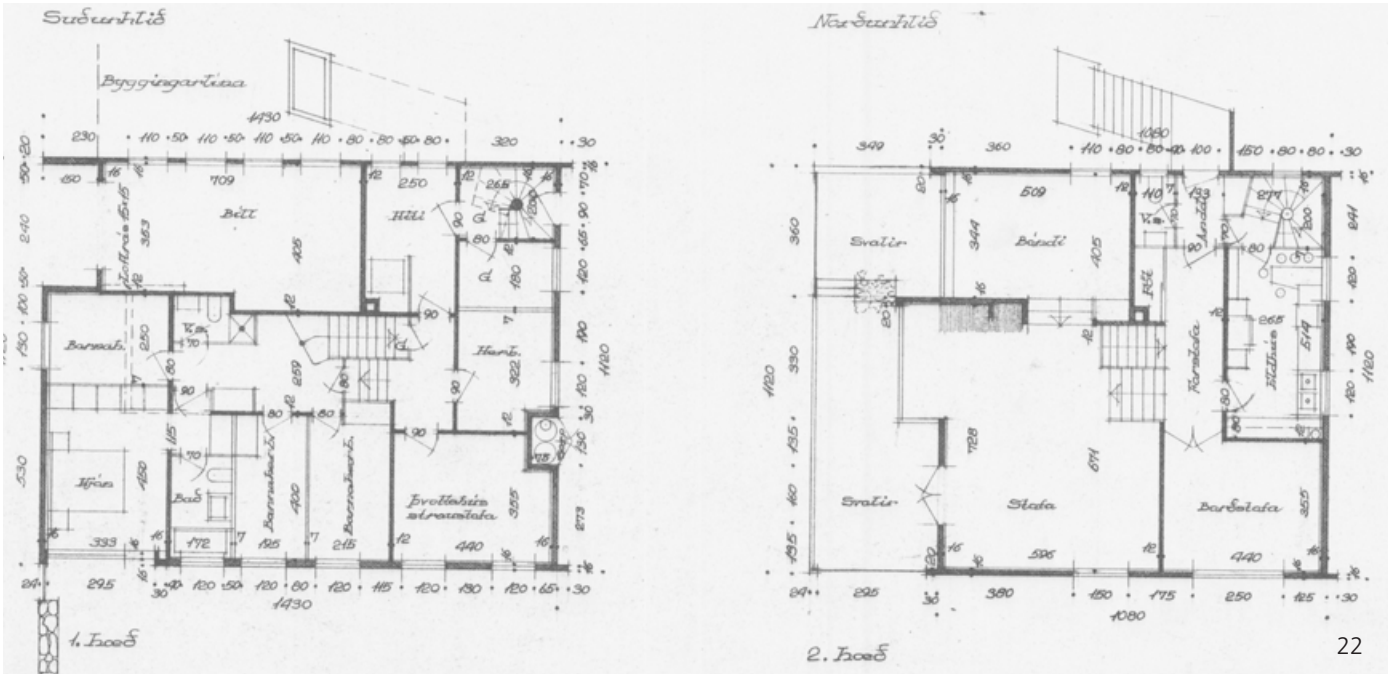
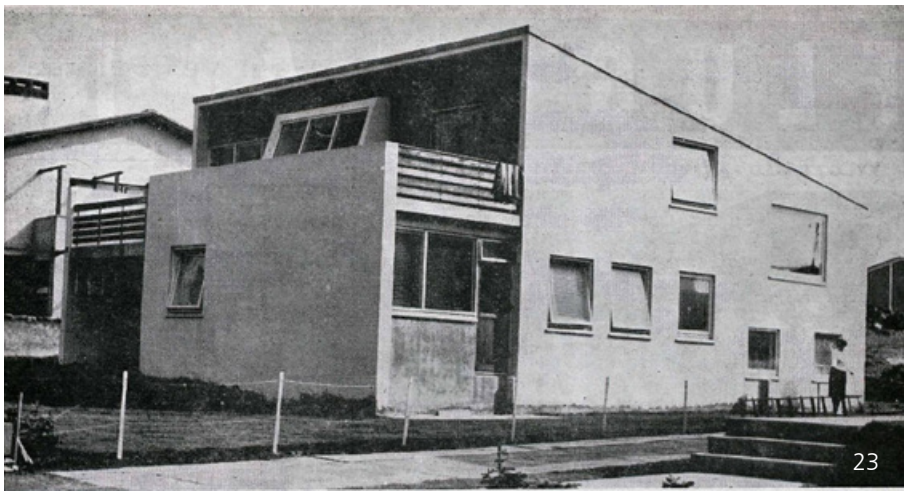


Fig. 20
Selvogsgrunn 23, designed by Sigvaldi Thordarson in 1955, looking from the husbands parlor into the living room.

Fig. 21
Selvogsgrunn 23, husband's parlor

Fig. 22
Selvogsgrunn 23, floor plan
Sigvaldi Thordarson, 1955

Fig. 23
Selvogsgrunn 23, taken 1959



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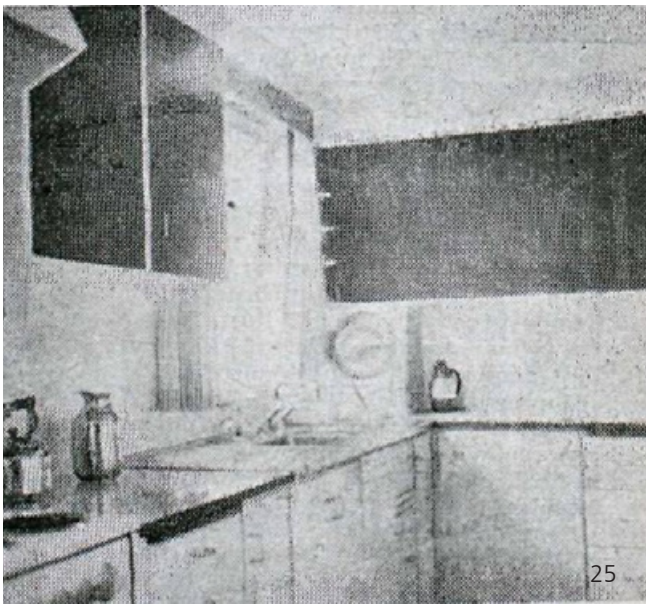
Space of leisure



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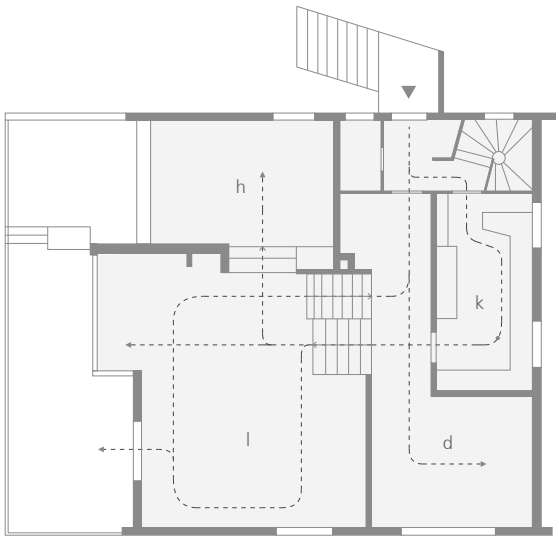
Space of service



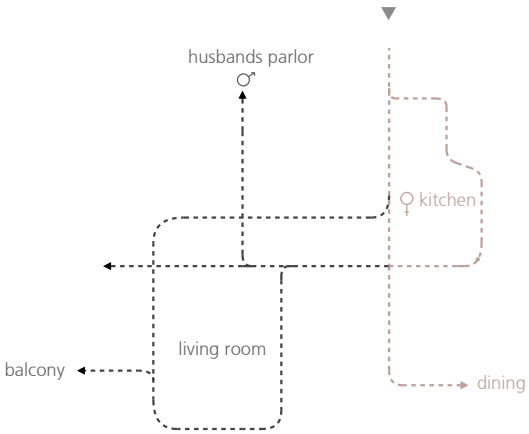


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Fig. 24
Selvogsgrunn 23, looking from living room into husband's parlor

Fig. 25
Selvogsgrunn 23, kitchen

Fig. 26
Analytical drawing, Selvogsgrunn 23

The husband has a private parlor next to the living room (fig. 24). The woman has no place of her own within the home. The kitchen is located in the back of the house with no visual connection to the living- or dining room (fig.25).

Fig. 27
Ragnheiður Jónsdóttir, client of Bakkaflöt 1

Högna Sigurðardóttir

Flexibility in the use of space and an a-hierarchical order is a central theme in Högna's homes. Her work was the most progressive contribution to Icelandic architecture of the 1960s. The influence of post-war American architecture was evident in many single-family homes at that time and this can be seen in Högna's work. A new architectural trend arrived, of open space planning and flexible utilization of space. Emphasis on horizontality was expressed in both the exterior and interior, with sliding walls and movable partitions allowing for flows between spaces.[46] Högna's single-family homes mirror the open space planning, and her work combines influences from Le Corbusier and regional modernism.[47]

In Högna's house in Garðabær (1965), she works with open space planning and uses raw concrete as a medium for a sculptural expression. Sliding elements from wood are placed instead of walls. The children's bedrooms can therefore be joined into one playing area during the day for better use of the space. There is an a-hierarchical home structure, the children have as much control of their own space as the parents. The users can decide for themselves if they opt for privacy or togetherness. There is not a strong emphasis on front and back, the spaces are designed around a central living area.

In Högna's houses, there is an emphasis on the communal areas, and the private spaces are not assigned to a specific family member. There are however examples, such as in Bakkaflöt where private spaces are assigned to a woman. The resident, Ragnheiður is an artist and was at the time working from home and taking care of five children. Ragnheiður, like many women of the time, struggled to fit in her work and interests with the house chores and motherhood. The double garage was transformed into an artist studio where she still creates art to this day.[48] This was in many ways unconventional; a large private space being assigned to the woman.

46 Schmal, *Iceland and architecture?* 31.
47 Guja Dögg Hauksdóttir, "The search for meaning through concrete: matter and mind in the work of Högna Sigurðardóttir architect," *The Journal of Architecture*, no. 20 (June 2015): 489-509. DOI:10.1080/13602365.2015.1045920
48 FI, "Í heimsókn," 10-11.

Högna's letters to her clients express forward-thinking ideas on spatial planning. In one letter she writes about connecting the kitchen to the living room so that the wife does not need to be alone, while the guests are in the living room.[49] Her empathy and understanding of the position of the woman within the house are evident. In the homes that she designed, the kitchen is considered a social space, where everyone has the opportunity to help out. This was uncommon for the time, Högna was the first to design a home in Iceland with an open kitchen layout.[50]

Högna's buildings are designed from the point of the user. Women tend to design the spaces of a house first; the exterior is formed by the interior. This tends to be the opposite with some men, who start by designing the shape of the building.[51] This is evident in the case of the two architects. Sigvaldi's buildings are like abstract paintings. His design starts from the exterior, and he uses strong colors to define surfaces. Högna's homes seem to grow organically from the ground. The exterior is raw with an absence of color or ornaments, the spatial qualities are nevertheless extraordinary.

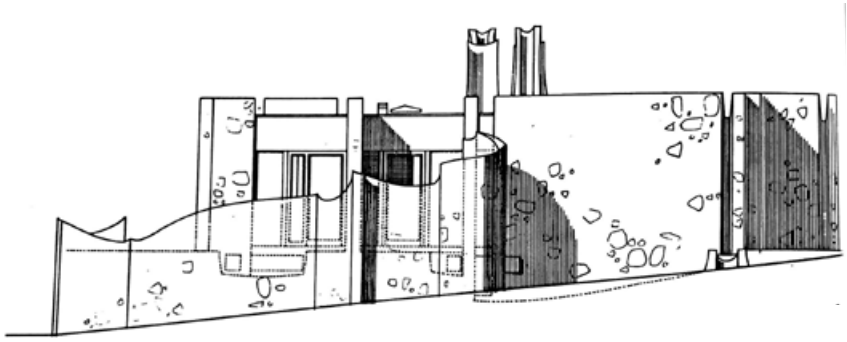

Fig. 28
Bakkaflöt 1, elevation

The house grows organically from the ground.
"**I am not light, I am heavy "**- HS

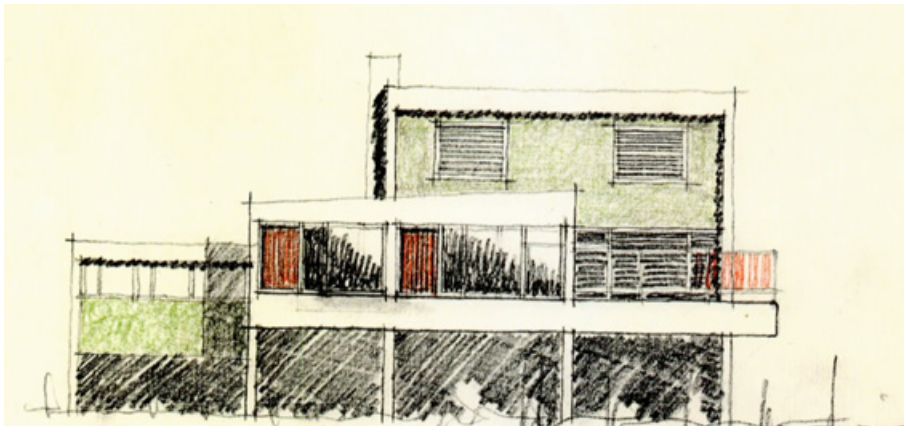

Fig. 29
Sketch by Sigvaldi Thordarson

The exterior is like an abstract painting.

49 Guðbjörg Sigurgeirsdóttir, "Efni og andi í byggingarlist," *Eyjafréttir*, no. 26 (July 2010): 10- 11, timarit.is/page/6125119.
50 Lísa Pálsdóttir, "Snert á arkitektúr," *RÚV,* 31 March 2018, ruv.is/frett/konan-einangradist-i-eldhusinu.
51 Hauksdóttir, interview.

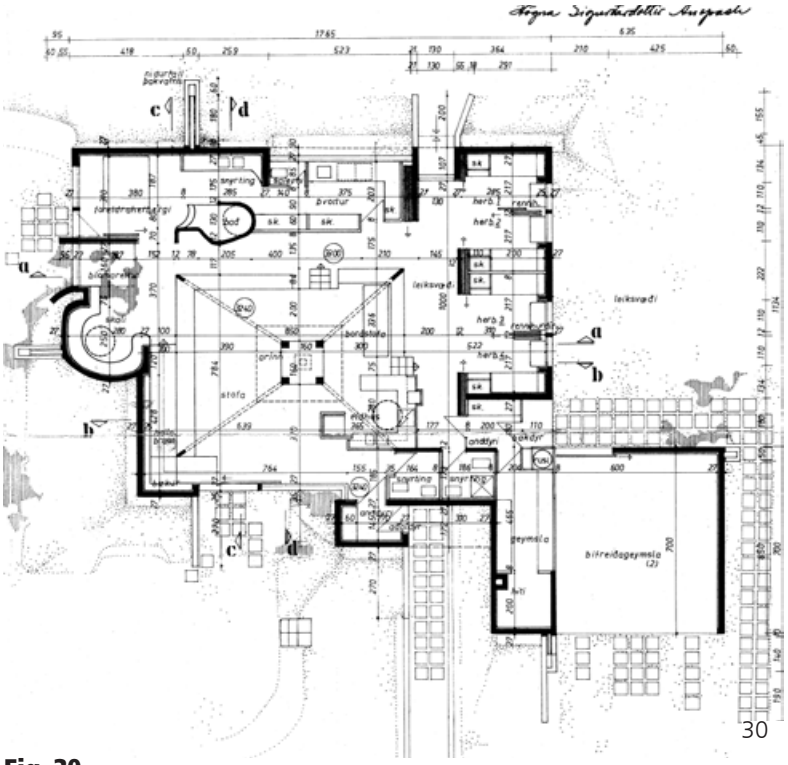

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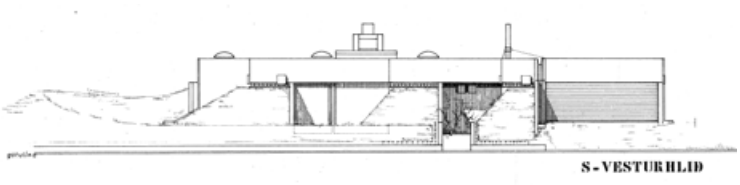
Fig. 30
Bakkaflöt 1, floor plan, 1965-1968

Fig. 31
Bakkaflöt 1, kitchen

Fig. 32
Bakkaflöt 1, elevation west

Fig. 33
Bakkaflöt 1, sliding elements



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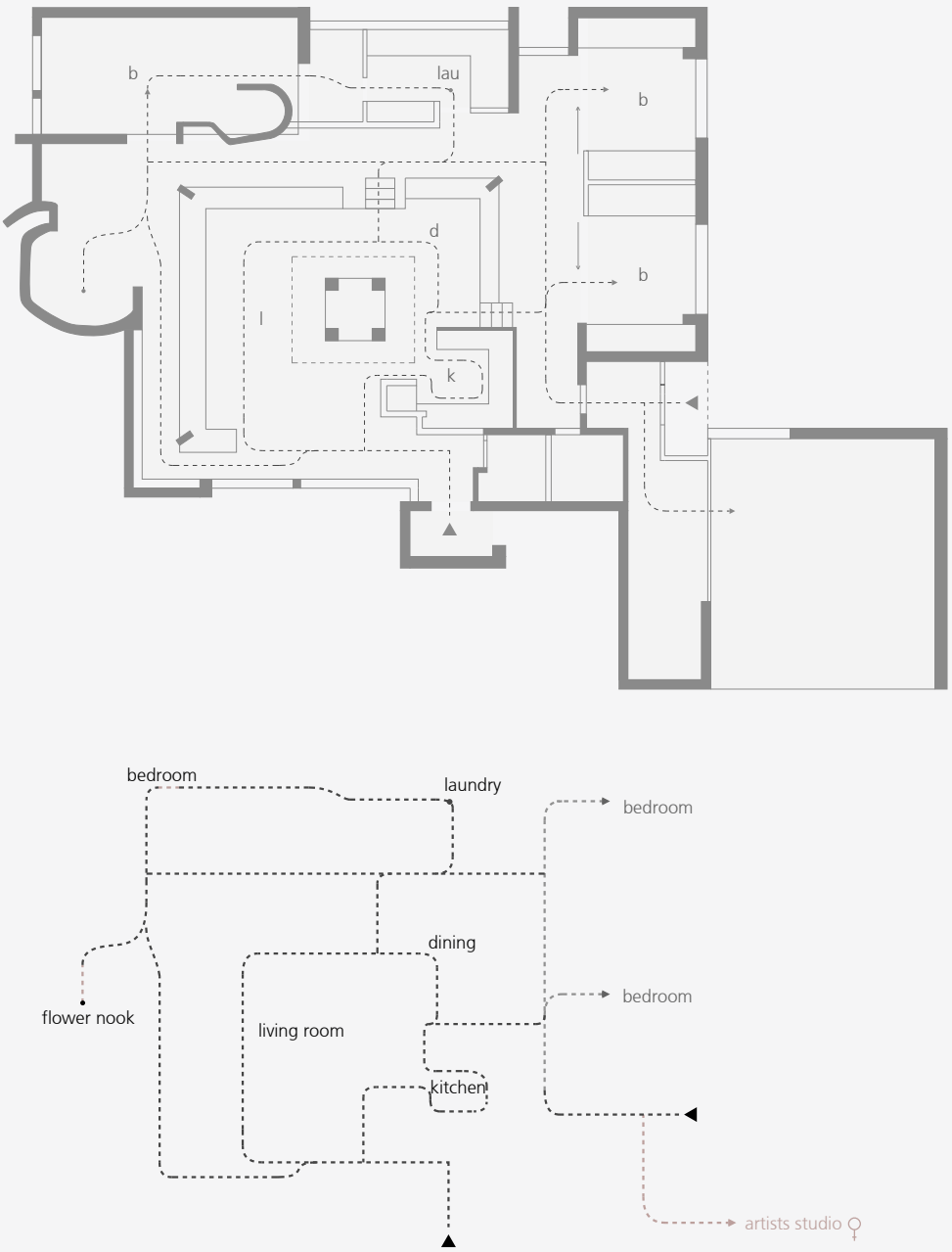

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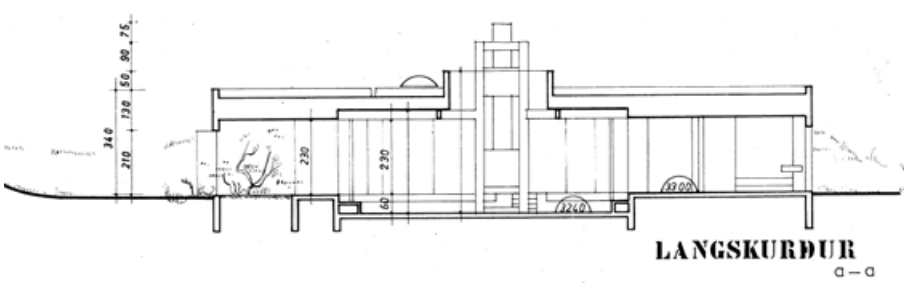

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Fig. 34
Analytical drawing, Bakkaflöt 1

An a-hierarchical home structure where the interior spaces flow together.

Fig. 35
Bakkaflöt 1, section

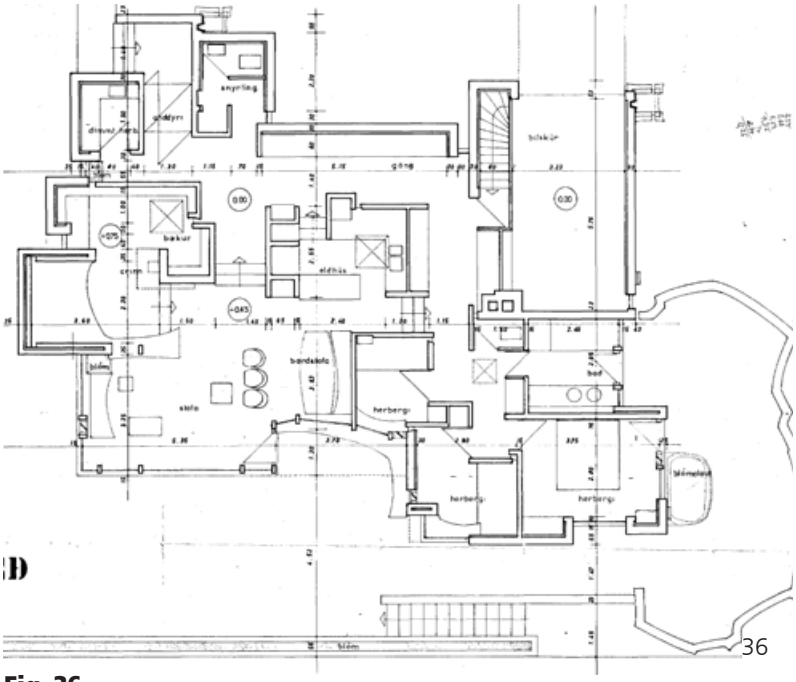

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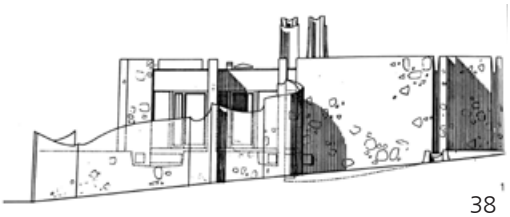
Fig. 36
Sunnubraut 37, floor plan, 1963

Fig. 37
Sunnubraut 37, kitchen

Fig. 38
Sunnubraut 37, elevation

Fig. 39
Sunnubraut 37, living room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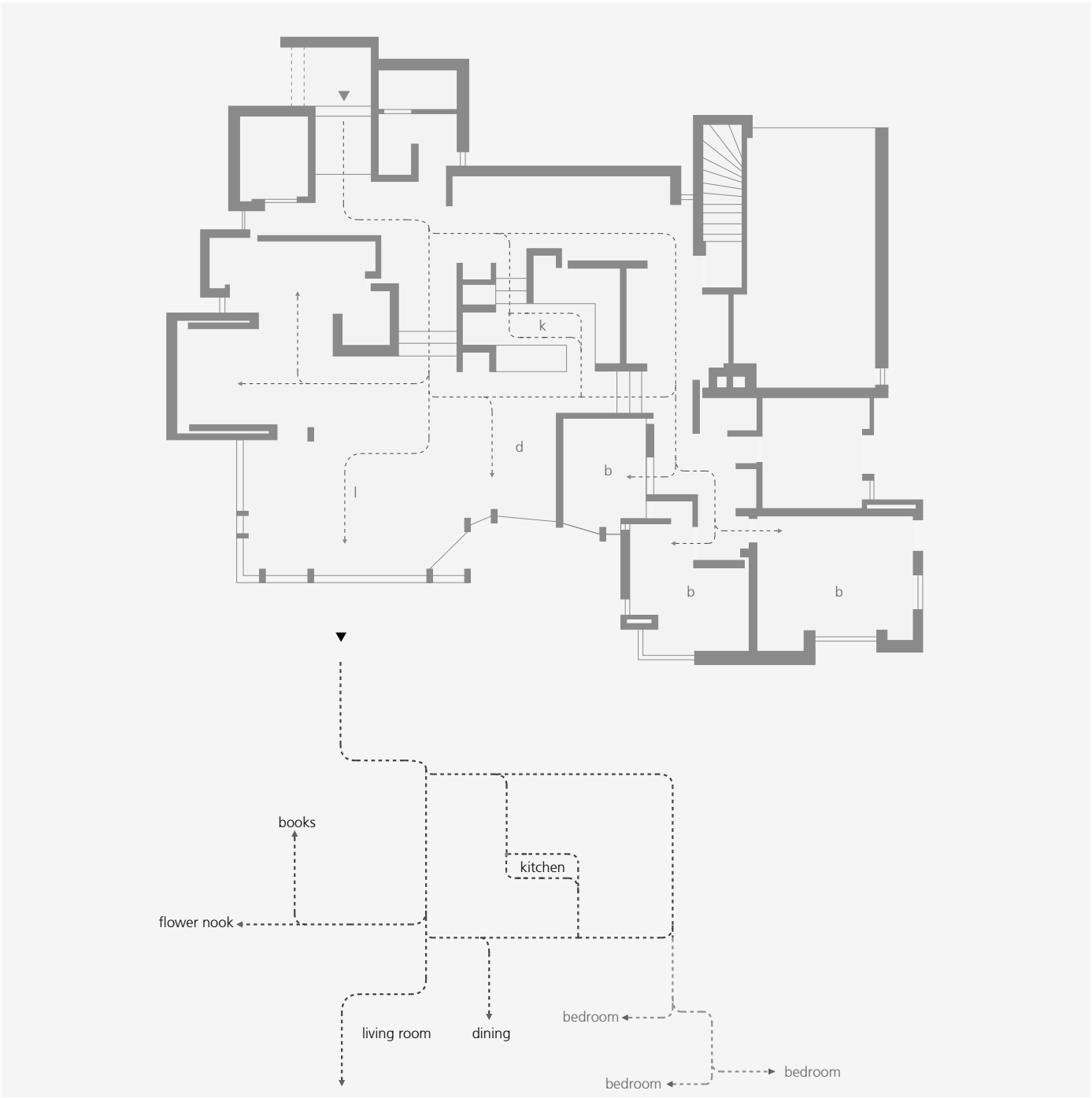

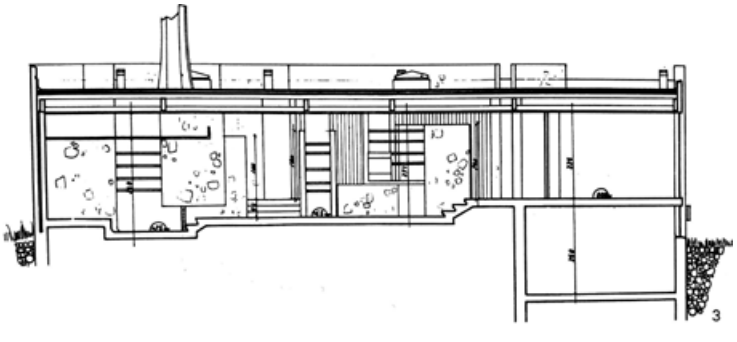

Fig. 40
Analytical drawing, Sunnubraut 37

The kitchen is at the heart of the home, overlooking the living- and dining room.

Fig. 41
Sunnubraut 37, section

Conclusion

The two architects, although sharing many similar traits, responded differently to their environment, affecting the reflected gender roles within the homes that they designed. Sigvaldi Thordarson rejected the vernacular architecture, which perhaps translated into his emphasis on privacy. Högna Sigurðardóttir's architecture is a reinterpretation of the traditional Icelandic houses, where the home structure is a-hierarchical with an emphasis on flexibility.

The design method differed between the two, and their views on the role of the architect. Sigvaldi had absolute faith in the specialized knowledge of the architect, and his role as a master. He was assertive, and his clients were not able to get much input in the design process. Högna had a more inclusive, bottom-up approach in practice, allowing the users to participate in creating their own space. She worked closely with her clients and was aware of the position of the woman within the home.

The prevailing gender roles in the post-war years are reflected in the architecture of Sigvaldi. The way that the interior is organized, places the woman in the service spaces while the man is assigned the spaces of privacy and authority. There are no references to Sigvaldi consciously being aware of gender issues in his design. Most likely, the way that gender roles are expressed in his homes is a byproduct of other influences and a reflection of the society. The single-family homes designed by Högna facilitate an alternative family structure and were revolutionary at the time. She was the first Icelandic architect to design an open kitchen layout, reclaiming the kitchen as a social space. Högna Sigurðardóttir was deeply interested in the social aspect of architecture and was in a way critical of issues of gender in her design. Although she did not like to be defined as a female architect, her gender condition may have made her empathetic toward women's positions, and is reflected in her inclusive design approach.

Several factors may have affected the design choices of the two architects, most likely gender was one of them. Architects, however,

do not act alone but in the context of diverse influences, which can as a result affect women's position in the built environment. It is important to understand the relationship between architecture and the male-dominated social construct, and how gender relations are translated into spatial reality. In the post-war years, the position of men and women was quite polarized. Today these gender ideologies may be less polarized, and the influence on housing design more subtle. Therefore, it is even more critical for architects and designers to be aware of how the built environment can affect family structures and internal social relationships.

Epilogue

This thesis has taught me a lot about feminism in architecture. As a woman and a feminist, I have always considered myself well educated on the topic of women's rights. However, I had never thought much about feminism regarding architecture, and how women's oppression in society is reflected in our built environment, not only in the urban fabric but in our homes as well.

By looking at the story of the two architects through a feminist lens, I discovered the complex and multilayered factors that a feminist analysis of architecture consists of. Architects can act as agents of certain views and values; however, they do not act alone but in the context of diverse influences. I believe that architects and planners have an opportunity to influence the restructuring of our built environment to a more egalitarian one. This however requires a feminist conscious as well as architectural expertise. We need to recognize the complex social values, norms, and beliefs that form our built environment, and listen to the needs of women and the most marginalized societal groups. Critical feminist architectural theory and history have the power to unlock the male-dominated socio-spatial reality and show how women can experience the built environment differently from men. It can at the same time reveal how architecture has normalized women's inequality and add to the understanding of our own position in society.

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Illustrations