Building equal foundations

What can be done to alleviate the long lines at the women’s restrooms in auditoriums, stadiums and theaters? Why, when thinking of “big-name” architects, do women or minorities seldom come to mind? These are just a few questions discussed in Architecture 301 GB, Gender and Race in Architecture. Taught by Kathryn Anthony, professor of architecture, this unique course was introduced last fall.

The class touches upon topics such as discrimination in the constructed environment, architecture of different cultures, and barriers that women face in practice.

“I think this class is an eye-opener for the students,” Anthony said. “We talk about issues that many are aware of but have not been able to discuss in the open.”

Students taking the class are looking forward to finding answers.

Graduate student Orsijanya Mittrakasem wants to find similarities between the United States and her home in Thailand, where she says women are treated well in school, but are discriminated against in the work force. “I would like to know if things are different or the same,” Mittrakasem said. “I think it’s the same.”

Mira Metzinger, also a graduate student, is looking for answers herself. Living with a African-American roommate for four years has made her more aware of racial issues. “It opened my eyes to what my roommate has to deal with,” said Metzinger, who wants to find out how architecture helps or hinders social equality.

Anthony says one of the main issues discussed in her class is the fact that in the white male-dominated profession, many women and minority architects do not receive credit. “The emphasis on the ‘superstar designer’ has in fact eclipsed the perceived value of many women and people of color in the field,” Anthony said.

Ripal Patel, a graduate student who took the class last fall, said she discovered architects she would not have heard of if she had not taken Anthony’s class. “It never really occurred to me that there was a whole area being left out,” said Patel. “Minority architects—you never hear of them, not even the successful ones.”

The class examines why women and minority architects have been hidden. Whereas in most fields, talented individuals can rise to the top, Anthony says that success in architecture usually requires wealth. “With a lot of money and high visibility, there is a greater chance to have your work published,” Anthony said.

However, Anthony says if one is not so wealthy—as is the case of most women and minority architects—work might be hard to find.

According to Anthony, women and minorities need to learn to tap into the system. “They should look at magazines like Working Woman and Ebony and find out who is being profiled. They should write and ask if they may need some buildings designed in the future,” she said.

Anthony said that the importance of contacts was stressed to graduates during last spring’s architecture commencement, in which Jack Travis, an African-American architect, spoke. Travis, who received his master’s degree in architecture from the University in 1978, was the consultant to film director Spike Lee for the movie Jungle Fever in which the main character is an African-American architect. Travis recently wrote a book used in the class. The book, African-American Architects in Current Practice, portrays black architects across the country. Published in 1991, it is only the one of its kind.

Another main issue discussed in the class is gender and race discrimination in design. Anthony explains that in large-scale public buildings such as auditoriums, theatres and bus stations, the long line is always found outside women’s restrooms, while men just zip in and out. But, Anthony says this is not only a female problem. “Any man who comes out of the bathroom and finds his wife or girlfriend still in line can surely empathize,” she said.

Public buildings are not the only places in which gender discrimination is seen. According to Anthony, in older homes the kitchen is usually cut off from the rest of the house, making it difficult to engage in conversation with others. “But today,” she said, “more kitchens are open to living and dining rooms.”

Anthony says the discrimination in design is not limited to women. “Some men have felt discriminated against because they feel relegated to certain parts of the house like the basement or the garage, or even outside.”

The class also discusses the discrimination women and minority architects face after entering the job market. “There is a much bigger problem of discrimination in practice than in school,” Anthony said. “Academia is a somewhat safer place than the work force because there are many safety nets such as policies and committees.”

Anthony wants to make sure her students get a first-hand account of the discrimination occurring in the field. Last year she took her class to Chicago, where they met members of Chicago Women in Architecture, who gave personal accounts of discrimination.

One other topic that Anthony discusses is the low number of African-Americans in the field. Less than one percent of the nation’s architects are black. Last year at the University, only 24 out of 788 architecture students were black.

Although Gender and Race in Architecture only has “floating class” status, meaning that it might or might not be offered in a given year, Anthony hopes the class will become permanent.

But Anthony does note a positive side. Women are now beginning to take leadership positions in this field. In 1993, Susan Maxman will be the first female president of the American Institute of Architects.

Graduate student Anne McDermott says it is the first architecture class she has taken that was geared towards people. “In design classes,” she said, “you usually ignore the fact that you are dealing with people.”

Architecture classes that deal with people are rare, but Anthony says architecture classes dealing with race are even more so. She says that only about 12 schools of architecture in the United States have offered a course on gender in architecture, but she only knows of one other school that has offered a course in race in architecture.

“There was one class at Berkeley,” she said, “but I think it, too, was experimental.”

Anthony says courses such as hers have not become a part of the mainstream. “Hopefully in the near future,” she said, “there will be more.”

Architecture professor Kathryn Anthony leads a discussion during class.

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