

## BOOK REVIEW

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Despina Stratigakos

### ***A Women's Berlin***

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 256 pp., 77 b&w photos, \$75.00 (cloth), \$24.95 (paper)

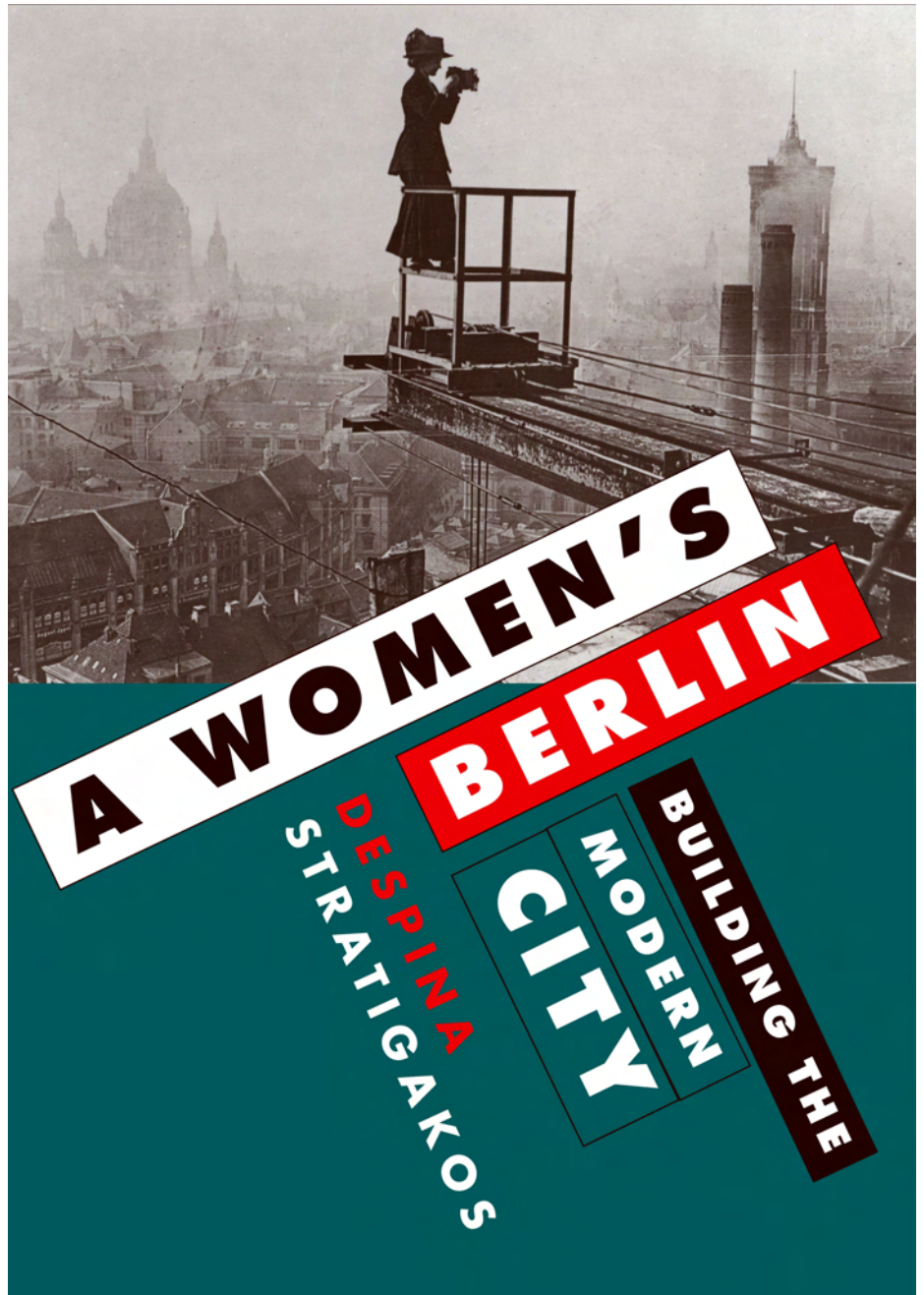
ISBN: 978-0-8166-5322-5 (CLOTH), 978-0-8166-5323-2 (PAPER)

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In her book *A Women's Berlin*, Despina Stratigakos traces the female struggle for equal rights in the German capital at the turn of the twentieth century. The author, who teaches architectural history at the University of Buffalo, presents a fascinating account of the spatial aspects of Berlin women's increasing presence in the professional domain, thus showing that, during the period of spiked helmets and belligerent politics, the patriarchy was only seemingly as imperturbable as the Prussian military order.

The general admission of women to Prussian universities in 1908 was perhaps the most consequential of numerous small victories that the growing women's movement was able to achieve at the time – it took another decade until they were granted the right to vote in 1919, another fifty years until they were allowed to seek employment or open a bank account without their husbands' permission in 1958, and another century until, in 2005, Germany became one of currently only five countries worldwide governed by a woman.

Unlike earlier treatments of the subject, Stratigakos does not focus on the contributions of the working class to this process, but rather on those of bourgeois reformers. While few in absolute numbers, the new female professionals were able to create spaces that profoundly changed the German capital's social fabric. In Stratigakos's book, the all-female *Lyzeumklub* (Lyceum Club), the dormitory and study house *Viktoria-Studienhaus*, and the retirement home *Haus in der Sonne* (House in the Sun) stand as examples of a new spatial challenge to male preponderance. Along with these locations, the author rediscovers the protagonists of what would become a lasting form of spatial resistance: Emilie Winkelmann,



Germany's first female professional architect and designer of the *Viktoria-Studienhaus*, housing reformer Alice Salomon, who founded the *Soziale Frauenschule* (Social School for Women), *Lyzeumklub* president Hedwig Heyl who organized the famous 1912 exhibit *Die Frau in Haus und Beruf* (The Woman in the Home and at Work), and many others who are barely remembered in contemporary Berlin. Similarly, the buildings they designed have been virtually forgotten, although many of them were spared wartime destruction, including the *Lyzeumklub* building on Lützowplatz and the *Viktoria-Studienhaus* on Otto-Suhr-Allee.

Though these female pioneers were a tiny minority at the time – very few German women had the financial means, the middle-class background and the personal courage to defy the traditional roles – they developed an exceptionally consequential new lifestyle connected with their activities and the spaces they were able to create. Stratigakos shows in her powerful and well-researched narrative that the new model of a self-determined professional woman required new spaces and, in turn, spread through the creation of such spaces.

That many of the new liberties were short-lived is shown in the last chapter. The author points out that during the Weimar Republic women enjoyed more political rights than during the monarchy, but at the same time were frequently forced back into their roles of housewives and mothers as a consequence of the economic depression. This is exemplified in the intellectual development of reformer Hedwig Heyl who in the early 1900s fought for women's professional acceptance and only twenty years later glorified their return to the kitchen sink in light of rising unemployment rates.

While Stratigakos repeatedly points to the ambivalent situation of the bourgeois women activists caught between their own emancipatory goals and society's limiting conditions, she only marginally touches on their role within the larger political framework. Hedwig Heyl, for example, held other deeply conservative positions that are not mentioned in the book – for example, as the chairwoman of the *Frauenbund der Deutschen Kolonialgesellschaft* (Women's Association of the German Colonial Society), she actively promoted nationalist and racist policies such as the prevention of mixed marriages between Germans and Africans. The double-edged role of many of Stratigakos's protagonists as progressive pioneers for women's

liberation on the one hand and powerful actors within an oppressive society on the other could have received closer attention. Given the scope of the book and the breadth of Stratigakos's research, however, such flaws are minor. *A Women's Berlin* deserves to be read by anyone interested in the complex interaction between social change and the built environment.

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