

Şölen Köseoğlu

Faculty of Architecture and Design, Atatürk University, Erzurum

Women in the Modern Movement: Léonie Geisendorf and Architectural Practice in Mid-20th Century Europe

Abstract: The aim of this study is to introduce the works of architect Léonie Geisendorf (1914–2016). From the 1940s to the 2000s, she was one of Sweden’s most accomplished architects, gaining significant recognition in a male-dominated field. She is recognized as one of the most significant representatives of the International Style in Sweden. A recently opened exhibition at the Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design in Stockholm focuses on Léonie Geisendorf, aiming to highlight and introduce her architectural works, which also aligns with the objective of this study. In terms of methodology, the study combines exhibition analysis, interviews, and site visits. The contribution of this study lies in its focus on highlighting an exceptional woman architect in contrast to the prevailing male-centred narratives of architectural history. By introducing Léonie Geisendorf’s works, the study intends to emphasize the significance of the exhibition and the museum in bringing forward women architects who have been overlooked for decades.

Keywords: women in architecture; gender; 20th century architecture; exhibitions.

Introduction

The contributions of women to the field of architecture have long existed, yet they have been overlooked due to gender-biased perspectives. The historical visibility of women in the architectural profession is closely linked to the changes in their societal status. It was through the efforts of the first-wave feminist movement fighting for women’s right to vote, to participate in governance, to enter all professions, and to access the necessary education to do so that women were admitted to architecture schools. As a result of these efforts, the first female graduates in architecture received their diplomas in Finland in 1890, in France in 1898, in Germany in 1909, in the United States in 1915, in the United Kingdom in 1917, and in Canada in 1920.¹

The second-wave feminism, on the other hand, played a crucial role in making women in architecture more visible and triggered the writing of the first texts in the fields of architectural theory and history. Following the earliest texts from the 1970s (*From Tipi to Skyscraper: A History of Women in Architecture* by Doris Cole, 1973; *Architecture and Urban Planning* essay by Dolores Hayden and Gwendolyn Wright, 1976), the 1980s and

¹ Neslihan Türkün Dostoğlu and Özlem Erdoğan Erkarşlan, “Türkiye’de Kadın Mimarların Statüsü Üzerine Niceliksel Analiz,” in *Cinsiyet ve Mimarlık*, ed. Belgin Turan Özkaya (Matsa Pushing House, 2010), 22–26.

1990s saw a growing body of literature. Over time, various books were produced with the purpose of documenting the contributions of women who had been practicing architecture for nearly a century, cataloguing their biographies and significant works, and establishing a theoretical foundation for the field in relation to feminist theory.²

Initially rooted in the United States, these studies gradually expanded to the UK and Europe. From the 1990s onwards, literature in Europe began to focus on making visible the overlooked contributions of European women architects within the modern architecture movement. Among the figures highlighted in these works are Irish pioneer Eileen Gray (1878–1976), Finnish architect and designer Aino Aalto (1894–1949) and Italian-born Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi (1914–1992). In addition to this, studies have focused on women whose contributions to CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) were historically neglected. These include European architects and urban planners such as Hélène de Mandrot (1867–1948), Lotte Stam-Beese (1903–1988), Charlotte Perriand (1903–1999), Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky (1897–2000), Jacqueline Tyrwhitt (1905–1983), and Frieda Fluck (1897–1974).³ These studies not only documented the work of women in the fields of architecture and design with concrete evidence, but also critically addressed the exclusion, belittlement, disregard for their labour, and even harassment perpetrated by their male colleagues. One of the most striking examples of this can be found in Beatriz Colomina's writings on Eileen Gray and E.1027.⁴

The most significant study on the history of the first women architects in Sweden is Helena Werner's 2006 dissertation titled *Women Architects: On Building Pioneers and the Debates Surrounding Women's Professional Practice in Sweden* (*Kvinnliga arkitekter: Om byggpionjärer och debatterna kring kvinnlig yrkesutövning i Sverige*). In her dissertation, Werner examines the biographies, educational backgrounds, and professional careers of Sweden's earliest women architects between 1897 and 1936. According to her research, Margit Hall (1901–1937) became the first woman to study architecture at Chalmers in Gothenburg, and in Sweden, graduating in 1919, while Brita Snellman (1901–1978) was accepted as a special student at KTH (Royal Institute of Technology) in Stockholm in 1920.⁵ Although the number of female students

² Joan Rothschild and Victoria Rosner, "Feminisms and Design: Review Essay," in *Design and Feminism, Re-visioning Spaces, Places, and Everyday Things*, ed. Joan Rothschild (Rutgers University Press, 1999), 7–33.

³ Beatriz Colomina, "Battle Lines: E.1027," in *The Sex of Architecture*, ed. Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway and Leslie Kanes Weisman (Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 167–182; Susan R. Henderson, "A Revolution in the Women's Sphere: Grete Lihotzky and the Frankfurt Kitchen," in *Architecture and Feminism*, ed. Debra Coleman, Elizabeth Danze and Carol Henderson (Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 221–53; Cathrine Veikos, *Lina Bo Bardi: The Theory of Architectural Practice* (Routledge, 2013); Rixt Hoekstra, "The Role Played by Women Linked to the CIAM, The Case of Frieda Fluck, 1897–1974," in *Architecture and Feminisms, Ecologies, Economies, Technologies*, ed. Hélène Frichot, Catharina Gabrielsson, and Helen Runting, (Routledge, 2018), 30–37; José Esparza Chong Cuy et al., *Lina Bo Bardi: Habitat* (Prestel Publishing, 2020).

⁴ Colomina, "Battle Lines: E.1027"; Beatriz Colomina, "Eileen Gray and E.1027," in *Women in Architecture: Past, Present and Future*, ed. Ursula Schwitalla, (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2021), 35–41.

⁵ Helena Werner, "Kvinnliga Arkitekter: Om Byggpionjärer Och Debatterna Kring Kvinnlig Yrkesutövning i Sverige" [Women Architects: on Building Pioneers and the Debates around Women's Professional Practice in Sweden] (Ph.D. diss., University of Gothenburg, 2006).

and registered women architects steadily increased after this period, the examples of modern architecture from the early 1900s in Sweden and indeed across Scandinavia listed are exclusively the works of men. It is therefore evident that early modernism in Sweden was predominantly shaped by male architects.⁶

Modern-era exhibitions, such as the *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* (1932), excluded women architects, reinforcing their marginalization in architectural discourse. To counteract the longstanding discrimination faced by women, and only after the modern period, exhibitions that explore the relationship between gender and space, as well as those exclusively showcasing the work of women architects, have increasingly been organized. Notable examples include *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective* in 1977, *Sex & Space*, held at Shedhalle Zurich in 1996, and recently *AAXX100: AA Women in Architecture 1917–2017* in London; *Good News: Women in Architecture*, opened in 2021 at the MAXXI Museum in Rome.⁷

In this context, the Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design in Stockholm is hosting an exhibition on Léonie Geisendorf (1914–2016), “one of Sweden’s most significant architects”⁸ of the 20th century, from September 27, 2024 to October 5, 2025.

Léonie Geisendorf was born in 1914 in Warsaw, Poland as Leonja Marie Kaplan. She passed her Baccalaureate exams in 1932 and then started her architecture studies at ETH Zürich. In 1937 and 1938 she interned at Le Corbusier’s (1887–1965) office in Paris. In 1938, she graduated from ETH Zürich and moved to Stockholm, Sweden, with references from Le Corbusier. In 1940, she married her Swiss colleague at ETH, Charles-Édouard Geisendorf (1913–1985). The couple had three children. In Stockholm, she worked in various architectural offices for several years and pursued advanced architectural studies at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm. In 1946, her diploma project won an award, and in 1947, she won first prize in the architectural competition for a new municipal building in Stockholm in collaboration with Curt Laudon (1906–1964), Ralph Erskine (1914–2005) and Charles-Édouard Geisendorf. In 1949–50, Léonie and Charles-Édouard together founded their own architectural studio. In 1957, Charles-Édouard was offered a professorship at ETH, prompting his return to Zürich. However, Léonie chose to remain in Sweden, and during this time, Charles-Édouard opened the Zürich branch of their studio, where he carried out

⁶ Rana Noorzadeh, “The Place of Female Architecture as a Design Language: A Study into the Progression Of the Female Architect and The Variables of the Feminine Architecture in Sweden” (Bachelor’s thesis, Malmö University, 2022).

⁷ Marion von Osten, “Sex & Space: Space/Gender/Economy,” in *Altering Practices Feminist Politics and Poetics of Space*, ed. Doina Petrescu, (Routledge, 2007), 213–240; Elizabeth Darling and Lynne Walker, “Recording and Reflecting: On AAXX100AA Women in Architecture 1917–2017,” in *Women Architects and Politics, Intersections Between Gender, Power Structures and Architecture in the Long 20th Century*, ed. Mary Pepchinski and Christina Budde, (Transcript Verlag, 2022), 199–214; Duygu Bezazoglu, “Resetting Medium: Proactive Practices of Women in Architecture in the 21st Century” (Ph.D. diss., Middle East Technical University, 2022).

⁸ Campo Ruiz, “Experimenting with Prototypes: Architectural Research in Sweden After Le Corbusier’s Projects” (paper presented at the Le Corbusier, 50 Years Later International Congress, Valencia, November 18–20, 2015).

various projects. Léonie Geisendorf served as an advanced educator at KTH between 1959–63 and as a professor at KTH and Lund University in 1968–69. Throughout her career, she worked on a variety of building types, ranging from interior designs and residential projects to educational buildings and churches. She collaborated with other architects on numerous competition projects and won various awards. The most important source on Léonie to date is the publication prepared in connection with the *Upwind* exhibition held at ArkDes in 2014. The list below presents the design projects Léonie worked on throughout her career, as compiled from this publication:

- 1951 Interior design for the Swiss Tourist Office, Stockholm;
- 1950–1951 Villa in Ranängen, Stockholm;
- 1952 Church project in Malmö;
- 1953–1956 Terraced housing residential area, Stockholm;
- 1954–1961 Building for St. Göran Gymnasium, Stockholm;
- 1955–1957 Interior design for Nordisk Resebureau travel agency, Stockholm;
- 1957–1970 Residential area, Lake Geneva, Switzerland;
- 1957–1959 Interior design for Swissair, Stockholm;
- 1962–1966 Student residential building, Stockholm;
- 1963–1976 Project for a new catholic church, Stockholm;
- 1965–1966 Interior design of Rôtisserie Brunkeberg, Stockholm;
- 1965–1967 Competition entry ‘Corso’ for the area south of Sergels Torg, Stockholm by EGT group (Ralph Erskine, Léonie Geisendorf, Anders Tengbom (1911–2009));
- 1967 Feasibility study for a supermarket for NK department store, Stockholm;
- 1968–1970 Villa Delin, Stockholm;
- 1970–1973 Villa on Stockholm archipelago;
- 1971 Several assignments for the Swedish National Board of Public Building, e.g. prisons, municipal buildings, cultural centres and learning institutions;
- 1971 Project for a new urban development area in Stockholm by EGT group;
- 1971 Competition entry ‘Upwind’ for a new parliament building, Stockholm;
- 1974 Project for a new university library for the Stockholm University;
- 1979 Project for a new Museum of Medieval Stockholm;
- 1980 Competition entry for urban renewal at Södra Station, Stockholm in collaboration with Mischa Borowski (1950–2020) and Marek Krajewski (dates unknown);
- 1981 Project for a new building in Stockholm;
- 1987 Project for a new building by Londonviadukten, Stockholm, in collaboration with Björn Blomé (dates unknown) and Ann Westerman (dates unknown);
- 1990 Exhibition design ‘Léonie Geisendorf Arkitektur’ at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, in collaboration with Charlie Gullström (b. 1962);

- 1998 Exhibition design ‘Visions of Stockholm’ at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts;
- 2005–2007 Project for a small house on Stockholm archipelago⁹

During her career from 1938 to 2009 in Stockholm, some of her works were built, while others remained at the conceptual level. In her active years, she was recognized as one of the most influential architects in the field.¹⁰

The aim of this study is to present Léonie Geisendorf and her works through the lens of this exhibition. The methodology combines three distinct approaches: exhibition analysis, curator interviews, and field study.

Through this study, the goal is to enhance the recognition of Léonie Geisendorf, an architect who left a significant mark on her era but remains underrepresented in scholarly works. By drawing attention to her contributions, the study seeks to highlight issues of gender inequality in the field and underscore the achievements of women architects. Addressing the disparities in visibility and representation requires the collective effort of museums, journals, and all areas of architectural research.

Exhibiting Léonie Geisendorf

Located in the capital of Sweden, Stockholm, Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design (ArkDes) has a rich archive, capable of displaying nearly a century’s worth of models and drawings of many of Stockholm’s monumental buildings. The main exhibition area contains drawings and models of some of Stockholm’s and even Sweden’s most historically significant buildings. The exhibition includes Gunnar Asplund’s (1885–1940) Stockholm Public Library (1924–1928), David Helldén’s (1905–1990) Hötorget Buildings (Hötorgsskraporna) and Sergels Torg (1951–1967), as well as the city’s tallest building, the Kaknästornet TV and radio tower designed by Bengt Lindroos (1918–2010) and finished in 1967. Additionally, models and drawings from the 1930 Stockholm Exhibition, which was visited by millions, is housed here. The museum is currently curating a thematically focused exhibition. In this context, a selection of materials from the archive is on display in the Léonie Geisendorf exhibition, located directly across from the Stockholm Exhibition section. The museum has announced that as part of a new project, they will feature the archive of a different architect each year, and the first exhibition in this project is dedicated to Léonie Geisendorf.

The exhibition offers a broad range of information about the architect’s personal and professional life, bringing together various materials: photographs, a slide

⁹ Dan Hallemar, Tomas Lauri, Julia Svensson and Marianne Lundqvist, eds., “*Upwind: The Architecture of Léonie Geisendorf 12th April-31st August 2014 at the Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design*” (Stockholm, Arkitektur Förlag, 2014).

¹⁰ Frida Melin and William Wikström, “Léonie Geisendorf”, ArkDes the Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design: Stockholm Sweden, September 27, 2024–October 5, 2025.

show, an audio recording of an interview made for television, and, of course, drawings and models, which are among the highlights of the exhibition (Figures #1 and #2).

At the entrance of the exhibition, the first panel on the left greets the visitor with a smiling portrait of Léonie. On the right, a small panel represents the walls of her home/studio in one of Stockholm's most important areas. Notable figures on this panel include a male ballet dancer and Le Corbusier. Postcards from Paris, Venice, and Rome, along with a British Airways advertisement and postage stamps, remind one of Léonie's nomadic life.

On the first panel to the left, drawings and photographs from the Nordisk Resebureau, completed in 1956, are displayed. Among the most striking visuals are axonometric and perspective drawings for the three-story office, which included ticket offices and a cinema. The perspective drawing of the cinema and the dynamic triangular door composition are particularly notable. A 1:20 scale drawing of a wall surface, composed of two rectangles, is also replicated as a unit.

On the right side, a large panel describes the School for Domestic Education and Sewing, constructed between 1954 and 1960. It features facade drawings, material sketches, and a 1961 TV interview in which Léonie responds to architect Lennart Holm (1926–2009).

Near this section, a horizontal panel in the centre focuses on the same building and Léonie's personal information. The first model of the building is displayed, along with a photo of Léonie holding the model and smiling. Construction photographs, interior drawings, and detailed interior photos are also included.

This table also features photos of Léonie with King Gustav VI Adolf (1882–1973) during the opening of the building, which brought her recognition in the architecture world. Her Polish and Swiss passports, stamps from the studio she shared with Charles-Édouard Geisendorf, and materials related to Le Corbusier are presented. Although she did not work with him extensively, his architectural philosophy had a lasting influence. A 1925 French edition of *Vers Une Architecture* is displayed beside five photographs on a red background—four of which show Le Corbusier, and one shows Léonie working in his office. A letter from her friend and colleague Arnold Wasson-Tucker (1909–1995), sent from the USA, is also included.

Further ahead, a slideshow presents photographs from Léonie's travels. She never missed an architects' association meeting and she documented both traditional and modern architecture in countries such as India, France, and Tunisia, often including local people, women, and children.

Behind the slideshow there is a display case with 18 models from the St. Eugenia's Church project, her longest project, which spanned 13 years. The models range from the neighbourhood-scale block to detailed studies of the bell tower. Behind these are 1:20 interior models of prison cells she designed. To the right, a panel displays 20 sketch drawings, and a vertical panel features correspondence, drawings, and photographs related to the same project, including a 1971 letter to Parish Priest Peter Hornung (1920–2006).

Léonie's interest in this project began in 1963 during a period of demolitions in Stockholm. She proposed a modernist facade with rectangular elements and entrances connecting to Kungsträdgården park. Her design was approved in 1970 by Pope Paul VI (1897–1978), but public protests caused by the demolitions in Stockholm led to construction being suspended. Later the project was ultimately handed over to another architect.

An important aspect of this process was the professional solidarity Léonie received. Between 1965 and 1976, architects collected signatures, issued press statements, and wrote letters in support. These documents are also presented in the exhibition.

On the opposite side of the entrance, a panel presents the prison cell project from the 1970s. It features full-scale photographs, 1:1 models, showing her close involvement with furniture, fabrics, and especially window design. The emphasis on full-scale experimentation adds to the impact of the exhibition.

The exhibition presents a selection of Léonie's significant realized and unrealized projects. Despite its compact format, the material's variety and density invite prolonged engagement.

The exhibition aims at presenting an overview of Léonie Geisendorf's professional life while also introducing her as a person. It follows a chronological structure, from her early works to her later projects, focusing especially on large-scale and socially significant commissions. These include a major educational complex, a church in one of the city's central locations, and a prison—each emphasizing architecture's role in the public sphere.

Unlike ArkDes's 2014 exhibition *Upwind*, which included Léonie Geisendorf's car, some furniture she designed, and other personal belongings in an intimate, almost domestic setting (*a spatiality to be inhabited*), this exhibition puts forward a more public and popular image of her. Archival materials such as her correspondence and photographs with religious leaders, the Pope, and the King, as well as her interviews with the media, suggest that she was not only a designer but also a prominent figure in the intellectual and public life of her time.

The exhibition portrays Geisendorf as an independent and iconic figure, supported by artists and architects of her time, shown apart from her husband or other male collaborators. This is reinforced through images in which she appears elegant and authoritative, building a narrative that aligns her with the idea of a “diva” – not unlike Zaha Hadid (1950–2016).

Along with architectural drawings, there are also personal objects – postcards, passports, and photos – on display, which help present both her personal and professional identity. Through this exhibition series, ArkDes is clearly intended to address historical exclusions by placing a “diva” figure across from the many celebrated male architects in its collection. The exhibition's representational strategies reflect a conscious curatorial choice regarding gender and the politics of memory in contemporary museum practice.

The stardom system prioritizes men and glorifies individual success. The diva system may help making women more visible, but it similarly reduces success to a single figure. While it appears to support women, it risks reinforcing stereotypes and overshadowing collective production. So, it requires a critical distance.

Interview with the curators about the exhibition

As part of this research, an interview was conducted with the exhibition's curators, Frida Melin and William Wikström, at ArkDes on December 11, 2024, to obtain more detailed information about the exhibition.

Şölen Köseoğlu:

While touring the exhibition, the first question that came to my mind was: ArkDes' collection includes 150 years of architectural history, and you announced a new decision: each year, a changing exhibition will provide a deeper look at the life and work of a particular architect. The collection of Léonie Geisendorf is the first example in this series. Why did you choose Léonie for this selection?

Frida Melin responds to this question as follows:

The archive is truly vast, and there are many archival materials from a variety of architects. However, Léonie is a true icon. She was one of the most powerful and influential figures of her time; not only an architect but also a famous intellectual of her era, an avant-garde, with pioneering influence. Her architectural stance was very innovative; for example, she had a distinct preference for the use of raw concrete. Moreover, her archive is quite extensive. We have many archives from various architects, including female architects like Léonie, but almost no female architect has accumulated such an extensive archive. That's why we chose Léonie.¹¹

William Wikström adds:

We know that Léonie influenced the new generation of architects due to her teaching at KTH. She is highly respected at KTH, and even if she arrives late to the classes she teaches, she quickly identifies and addresses the most critical issues in the projects. For example, saying things like 'You're hitting your head over there.' This is why she commands great respect among her colleagues.¹²

Moving on to the next question:

In Turkey, in the 1940s and 1950s, many architects worked with their

¹¹ Frida Melin and William Wikström (the curators of Léonie Geisendorf exhibition), in interview with the author, December 2024.

¹² Melin and Wikström, interview.

spouses. In the projects they carried out in the studios they founded together as a couple, the media often focused on the male architect or attributed the success achieved by the women to the men, disregarding the efforts of the women. Was there a similar situation with Léonie and her husband?

Frida Melin and William Wikström respond to this question as follows:

After Léonie and her husband founded their studio, her husband returned to Zurich, which is why, in the media, it is usually only Léonie who is featured. Léonie becomes not just the designer of buildings, but also the spokesperson for their work, becoming the face of the projects. On the other hand, the projects produced at the Zurich branch are perceived as being managed by her husband, and Léonie does not speak of these projects as if she owns them. As a result, due to living in different cities, Léonie becomes the person representing the joint projects they authored.¹³

You mention that Léonie struggled as a woman within the male-dominated structure of the time, but you also present evidence in the exhibition showing that she received support from her colleagues. What about her identity as an immigrant? As someone who came to Sweden later, did Léonie find herself in a disadvantaged position compared to Swedish-born architects, at least in her early years?

Frida Melin's response is as follows:

When Léonie arrived in Sweden, the Swedish construction market was quite attractive at the time, and many architects were migrating to the country. Therefore, architects from abroad were a familiar and accepted presence. Léonie did not come alone; others, including her husband and other architects she met in Paris, came with her. Moreover, because Léonie worked alongside Le Corbusier, she received some reference letters, and with his recommendation, it was not difficult for her to find work in Sweden.¹⁴

Did Léonie preserve her relationship with Poland? In the exhibition, we saw her passports and travel photos. Does she visit Poland again or establish any other connections with her home country?

Frida Melin and William Wikström's response:

We know that when they were about to get married, she communicated

¹³ Melin and Wikström, interview.

¹⁴ Melin and Wikström, interview.

with her relatives in Poland, but afterward, her mother also moved to Sweden. Beyond that, we're not aware of any other connection.¹⁵

Has Léonie created works outside of Sweden? For example, does she have projects in other parts of Scandinavia or Poland?

William Wikström's response:

They have projects produced in Switzerland through her husband. Additionally, there is a villa project she designed in Spain; I will be presenting it soon.¹⁶

The exhibition does not provide a clear answer to this question: Why is the project for Saint Eugenia's Catholic Church given to another architect?

Frida Melin and William Wikström's response:

Actually, there were reactions from the public related to the demolitions that took place in Stockholm at that time. However, this is not the reason. The reason is that working with Léonie during that process was not easy, and they wanted to quickly complete the renovation project that had been ongoing for 13 years. Danish architect Jørgen Kjaergaard, who was already a familiar name, was able to carry out the construction of the temporary church smoothly, so this job was given to him. However, when this process concluded, Léonie wasn't informed properly and found out from others that the job had been given to another architect!¹⁷

Léonie can be evaluated solely as an architect, but she was also a wife and a mother. Focusing only on women's professional identities overlooks the greater responsibilities they often bear compared to men. Their success, achieved despite these additional duties, reflects a greater accomplishment than their male counterparts. What do we know about her marriage? Where did they meet? How many children did they have? Balancing a successful career with motherhood is challenging, especially over many years. You mentioned she worked from a room in her home for years, what was that home like?

Frida Melin and William Wikström's response:

Léonie and her husband met at university and got married after they moved to Stockholm. They settled together in an apartment in Östermalm, and this became the place where Léonie lived and worked until

¹⁵ Melin and Wikström, interview.

¹⁶ Melin and Wikström, interview.

¹⁷ Melin and Wikström, interview.

her final days (for over 70 years). Many architects also worked at the studio, and several nannies were hired for the children. However, working with Léonie was very difficult, so there were constant changes. Léonie's nanny ads are quite interesting because, for example, she was looking for a nanny who could speak several languages besides Swedish. The same applied to the studio when architects working with her wanted to go home at night, they would be met with comments like, 'Where are you going? The work isn't finished yet?' Léonie admits she had high standards, but she was not just difficult, she was impossible. However, she never strays from what she believes to be right, and this is what brings her success, despite the personal challenges. For example, when her son was 12, while Léonie was working and her son was playing with a friend, her son and his friend fell from a window of their home and died tragically. Despite this, Léonie continued living and working.¹⁸

When asked about the gender composition of the architectural teams they collaborated with in their home-based studio, curators referred to one female architect who was involved for a limited period and several male architects who worked with them at different times.

To my question, "What else is in Léonie's archive?" The curators offer me an opportunity to visit the archive. They explain that ArkDes has two different archives, one in the museum building and one outside of it, where Léonie's works are both stored. They mention that it is not possible to display everything in a limited exhibition, but they show a model, Léonie Geisendorf's competition entry for the new parliament building in Stockholms Ström from 1971, which they plan to permanently display in the general exhibition in the coming days. The model looks like it could have been from the 2000s; it's an idea far ahead of its time.

Traces of Léonie Geisendorf in Stockholm

In Stockholm, the following buildings bear the marks of the architect: St. Göran Gymnasium on Kungsholmen, the Riksrådsvägen Terrace Houses in Skarpnäck, and Villa Delin in Djursholm. Also, the Catholic Church for the Parish of St. Eugenia in Kungsträdgården, Engelbrektsgatan 25, and her home and studio in Humlegården. Situated on the island of Kungsholmen, St. Göran Gymnasium's imposing scale and distinct architectural language, contrasting sharply with the surrounding structures, immediately stand out. With no comparable structures nearby, it remains a striking example of a different architectural era (Figure #3).

Unlike typical educational facilities, Léonie Geisendorf's design defies convention by reaching skyward rather than spreading across the ground floor. This creates an incredibly pleasant social space at the entrance, with a sizeable gallery-like foyer.

¹⁸ Melin and Wikström, interview.

From the exterior, the use of bold colours on the façade draws attention, while inside, the vibrant palette transitions into exposed concrete, softened by the abundant natural light streaming through the large windows, lending the interior a sense of airiness and lightness (Figures #4 to #7).

Despite its monumental scale, every side of the structure is thoughtfully designed with its own rhythm and sense of movement. On the western façade, the concrete entrance canopy stands out as a sculptural feature, crafted from exposed concrete with an artistic finish, seamlessly blending functionality with bold architectural expression.

Upon arriving at Riksrådsvägen to visit the Terrace Houses, the harmonious integration of the homes with their natural surroundings immediately stood out. Nestled amidst trees, rocks, and the slope of the land, the terraced houses seem to climb the hill like a centipede, perfectly in tune with the environment. It is truly enjoyable to see such clearly defined lines, functional, and modernist units in an area still filled with traditional homes featuring slanted triangular roofs (Figure #8).

The U-shaped street, which gradually ascends with the slope, hosts four different typologies of houses placed on either side. These homes are deeply connected to nature, with spacious gardens at the front and a wooded natural area at the back, offering a sense of immersion in greenery from both directions.

Although the neighbourhood consists of row houses grouped in sets of – for example – four, six, or seven, it never feels crowded. On the contrary, the houses are thoughtfully positioned to avoid direct sightlines into one another, creating a sense of openness and privacy that enhances the overall atmosphere of the area. There are three main types of terrace houses, each approximately 110 square meters. In some, the living room is on the lower floor and the bedrooms are upstairs, while in others it is the opposite. The houses are spread across different levels, with one type occupying two different elevations. The façades feature a varied composition of rectangles designed using red brick, grey cladding slabs, rendering, and wood materials.

A small courtyard is designed in the centre of the houses, providing a space for families and children to socialize (Figure #9).

The small blue sign in the middle of the area provides the following information: “*The 114 terrace houses, comprising four different types of dwelling, were built in 1953-1956. They were designed by Charles-Edouard and Léonie Geisendorf, architects trained in Switzerland. They were assisted in adapting the houses to the terrain by landscape architect Nils Orento (1922–2010). The houses are partially prefabricated.*” This is a positive step in honouring the architects’ names and ensuring that their contribution is recognized and valued.

The next stop is Villa Delin, located in the historic area of Djursholm, Stockholm. As you arrive at the site, the land is filled with villas and mansions in various architectural styles, each built in traditional layouts, large and small. While searching for Villa Delin among these parcels, nothing prepares one for the expansive, pitch-black view of the Baltic Sea that unfolds before them. Mesmerized by the stillness

of the vast water, one turns towards the building to encounter a sculptural composition of raw concrete. The surrounding environment and context are so powerful that the building's extraordinary stance becomes even more pronounced and meaningful. This appears to be the structure with the most refined and powerful form among her designs. Its scale, modest and pure composition, and large windows revealing the interior create an atmosphere that is both intimate and distantly extraordinary (Figure #10).

The contrast between the building and its surroundings, as well as its orientation towards the view, recalls Pavillon Le Corbusier in Zürich. However, this time, the structure faces the Baltic Sea rather than Lake Zürich, and it is almost right on the shore, with only a 5-6 meters wide road separating the building from the sea. Kungsträdgården, one of the most important parks in central Stockholm, is a key intersection. In this significant park, located on the eastern side of the block, lies the Catholic Church for the Parish of St. Eugenia. While the building serves a different purpose from the others in the block, it blends into the continuity of the surrounding structures, with the exception of the golden cross. Had Léonie's proposal been realized, this block would have taken a markedly different form. Despite the missed historical opportunity, both built and unbuilt designs remain integral to the architectural history and collective memory (Figures #11 and #12).

Walking from Kungsträdgården to Humlegården, a noticeable shift in the urban fabric occurs as Engelbrektsgatan 25 is approached where Léonie first settled in Sweden and lived and worked for many years. Now it's in Östermalm, one of the city's most vibrant and exclusive neighbourhoods, whose streets are lined with luxury boutiques, crowded restaurants, and lively bars. Upon reaching Engelbrektsgatan 25, Léonie's home and studio come into view (Figure #13).

Conclusion

This study aimed to introduce Léonie Geisendorf through the exhibition held at ArkDes and to examine in detail the architect, who holds a place in the social memory with her significant works related to the International Style found in many parts of Stockholm. In addition to the exhibition, interviews with the curators and site visits were conducted to summarize not only the important aspects of Léonie Geisendorf's architecture but also how her personality was reconstructed as an architect and the curators' perspectives on the subject.

As a result of the research, it was understood that the exhibition tries to create a new narrative against the historical exclusion of women architects by presenting Léonie Geisendorf's professional and personal life together. The architect is shown as a figure who stands out in modern Swedish architecture and with projects related to social life through the idea of a "diva." None of the many residential projects in her career were exhibited; instead, public and social projects were highlighted.

In this context, the exhibition's representational strategies are very important in terms of promoting gender equality. At the same time, the diva figure also brings up the risks of individual heroization. In conclusion, this study emphasizes the importance of making Léonie Geisendorf's architectural practice visible and highlights the importance of exhibition practices aimed at increasing the visibility of women architects.



Figure #1: Léonie Geisendorf exhibition at the Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design;¹⁹

¹⁹ This and all other figures belong to the Şölen Köseoğlu's personal photo archive.



Figure #2: Léonie Geisendorf exhibition at the Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design;²⁰



Figure #3: St. Göran Gymnasium;

²⁰ This and all other figures belong to the Şölen Köseoğlu's personal photo archive.



Figures #4 and #5: Interiors of St. Göran Gymnasium;



Figures #6 and #7: The west entrance and the north façade of St. Göran Gymnasium;



Figure #8: Images of terrace houses with different plan layouts;



Figure #9: Images of terrace houses with different plan layouts;



Figure #10: Villa Delin in Djursholm;



Figure #11: Catholic church for the Parish of St Eugenia today;

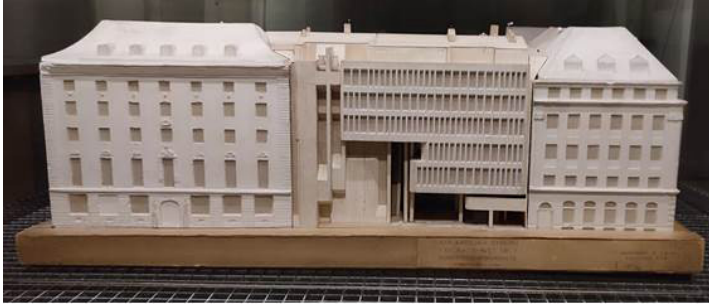


Figure #12: Léonie's design for the Catholic Church of the Parish of St. Eugenia, featured in the exhibition model;



Figure #13: Bondeska Huset at Engelbrektsgatan.

References

- Bezazoğlu, Duygu. "Resetting Medium: Proactive Practices of Women in Architecture in the 21st Century". PhD diss., Middle East Technical University, 2022.
- Colomina, Beatriz. "Battle Lines: E.1027." In *The Sex of Architecture*, edited by Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway and Leslie Kanes Weisman, 167–182. Harry N. Abrams, 1996.
- Colomina, Beatriz. "Eileen Gray and E.1027." In *Women in Architecture: Past, Present and Future*, edited by Ursula Schwitalla, 35–41. Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2021.
- Darling, Elizabeth and Lynne Walker. "Recording and Reflecting: On AAXX100AA Women in Architecture 1917–2017." In *Women Architects and Politics, Intersections Between Gender, Power Structures and Architecture in the Long 20th Century*, edited by Mary Pepchinski and Christina Budde, 199–214. Transcript Verlag, 2022.

- Esparza Chong Cuy, José, Julieta Gonzalez, Adriano Pedrosa, and Thomas Toled. *Lina Bo Bardi: Habitat*. Prestel Publishing, 2020.
- Hallemar, Dan, Tomas Lauri, Julia Svensson, and Marianne Lundqvist, eds. “Upwind: The Architecture of Léonie Geisendorf 12th April-31st August 2014 at the Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design” (catalogue). Stockholm: Arkitektur Förlag, 2014. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:808314/FULLTEXT02.pdf>.
- Henderson, Susan R. “A Revolution in the Women’s Sphere: Grete Lihotzky and the Frankfurt Kitchen.” In *Architecture and Feminism*, edited by Debra Coleman, Elizabeth Danze and Carol Henderson, 221–53. Princeton Architectural Press, 1996.
- Hoekstra, Rixt. “The Role Played by Women Linked to the CIAM, The Case of Frieda Fluck, 1897–1974.” In *Architecture and Feminisms, Ecologies, Economies, Technologies*, edited by Hélène Frichot, Catharina Gabrielsson and Helen Runting, 30–37. Routledge, 2018.
- Melin, Frida and William Wikström. “Léonie Geisendorf”. Didactic panel to accompany the shown at Léonie Geisendorf Exhibition, ArkDes the Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design: Stockholm Sweden, September 27, 2024–October 5, 2025. Visited on December 11, 2024.
- Melin, Frida and William Wikström. Interview by author. Personal interview. Stockholm, Sweden, December 11, 2024.
- Noorzadeh, Rana. “The Place of Female Architecture as a Design Language: A Study into the Progression of the Female Architect and the Variables of the Feminine Architecture in Sweden” Bachelor’s thesis, Malmö University, 2022.
- Osten, Marion von. “Sex & Space: Space/Gender/Economy.” In *Altering Practices Feminist Politics and Poetics of Space*, edited by Doina Petrescu, 213–240. Routledge, 2007.
- Rothschild, Joan and Victoria Rosner. “Feminisms and Design: Review Essay.” In *Design and Feminism, Re-visioning Spaces, Places, and Everyday Things*, edited by Joan Rothschild, 7–33. Rutgers University Press, 1999.
- Ruiz, Campo. “Experimenting with Prototypes: Architectural Research in Sweden After Le Corbusier’s Projects.” Paper presented at the *Le Corbusier, 50 Years Later International Congress*, Valencia, November 18–20, 2015. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4995/LC2015.2015.893>.
- Türkün Dostoğlu, Neslihan and Özlem Erdoğan Erkarıslan. “Türkiye’de Kadın Mimarların Statüsü Üzerine Niceliksel Analiz.” In *Cinsiyet ve Mimarlık*, edited by Belgin Turan Özkaya, 22 –26. Matsa Plushing House, 2010.
- Veikos, Cathrine. *Lina Bo Bardi: The Theory of Architectural Practice*. Routledge, 2013.
- Werner, Helena. “Kvinnliga Arkitekter: Om Byggpionjärer Och Debatterna Kring Kvinnlig Yrkesutövning i Sverige” [Female Architects: on Building Pioneers and Debates around Women’s Professional Practice in Sweden] PhD diss., University of Gothenburg, 2006.

Article received: April 5, 2025
Article accepted: June 21, 2025
Original scholarly paper