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ADAPTIVE CITIES THROUGH THE POST PANDEMIC LENS

Ripensare tempi e sfide della città flessibile nella storia urbana
Times and Challenges in Urban History

X Congresso AISU / 10th AISU Congress

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a cura di

Rosa Tamborrino
Cristina Cuneo
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ARIANNA SCAIOLI

EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH ARCHITECTURE: THE HUMANISTIC APPROACH OF YASMEEN LARI

EMANCIPARE LE DONNE ATTRAVERSO L'ARCHITETTURA: L'APPROCCIO UMANISTICO DI YASMEEN LARI

Il contributo propone una riflessione rispetto alle attività e alle architetture che Yasmeen Lari, la prima architetta Pakistana, ha portato avanti - instancabilmente - nel corso della sua carriera, culminando e concretizzandosi in un'architettura umanitaria e socialmente responsabile. Il focus sarà una rilettura critica delle sue architetture attraverso una prospettiva di genere focalizzandosi sul ruolo delle donne in questo processo.

Parole chiave

Architettura, emancipazione femminile, progetto olistico, giustizia sociale e ambientale

Keywords

Architecture, women empowerment, holistic project, social and environmental justice

The construction of a historiographic narrative – through and starting from – a gender perspective has led to a shift in the framework to adequately place women architects who, thanks to their work, advocacy and resistance, have made a significant contribution in the field of space, architecture and urban design.

This historiographic work shows how women have been significantly ‘hidden from history’, shading their involvement in practice and academia under a male architect’s effigy, highlighting women architects’ underrepresentation in the construction of the built environment. Nevertheless, this narrative should be conceived as a reflective practice that does not include only significant events and great works but is also a story built around small events – small changes – that, challenging the status quo, modify the historical path. We have gone from considering the history of architecture as the history of great voices – great masters – to a living history with a more significant fragmentation, which carries an epistemological richness, given by the notion of building a shared history of many voices, which chorally contribute to the development of a place.

Therefore, the contribution examines and reflects upon the activities and architectures that Yasmeen Lari, the first woman architect in Pakistan, has brought forward – tirelessly – throughout her career, culminating and concretizing in humanitarian and socially responsible architecture. The focus will be a critical re-reading of her architectures and activities through a gender lens, focusing on the role of women in this process.

After receiving her architectural degree from Oxford Brookes University in 1963, she set up Lari Associates in 1964, facing the fragile conditions of urban and rural areas from a design perspective. What is interesting to recall from her first architectures is that, even though her main clients were industries and the upper class, she was already questioning this 'predatory' system, focusing on the needs and aspirations of vulnerable communities. "Slums are not a Lost Case" published in 1975, "Toward a Revitalization of Traditional Habitats" in 1978, "A Time to Conserve Karachi's Environmental and Cultural Heritage" in 1996, and many projects like Angoori Bagh Housing, Lahore, 1973-1977 - with a specific focus on women - The Lines Area, Resettlement Project, Karachi, 1981, and the participation as a consultant for Karachi Development Plan 1974-1985, show an attitude towards the project that will be made explicit in the second part of her career, with her humanitarian architecture. She decided to fund Heritage Foundation of Pakistan in 1980, together with her husband, the historian Suhail Zaheer Lari, focusing on the preservation and valorisation of Pakistan Heritage sites and empowering communities, especially women, through architecture. This ethos lays the ground of the "Barefoot Social Architecture", a transversal design approach that intersects notions of social and environmental justice and promotes the empowerment of the most vulnerable communities – focusing primarily on women – through collaborative and co-creative actions.

Lari brought forward a reflection on the modalities of pursuing architecture in a more democratic, humanistic and caring way (Lari, 2000). She observed, understood and reinterpreted the needs of the places and communities, which were highly vulnerable following earthquakes and floods in 2005, translating these issues into a holistic design process encompassing tenets of social, environmental and gender justice. It demonstrates to be multiscalar and multi-thematic where architectural design is linked to broader themes such as women empowerment through the promotion of a local economy, the promotion of learning activities of construction techniques and craft workshops. Since 2010 with UNESCO, she has promoted the activities described in the Heritage Foundation of Pakistan Revival of Women's livelihood report in Swat. With the Women centred community-based disaster risk reduction management program, implemented as part of Heritage Foundation of Pakistan's pilot program in 7 villages in Pakistan with IOM, more than 40,000 homes have been built since 2013. In 2021-2022 she promoted a series of workshops on the assembly of housing prototypes Zero Carbon Initiatives for Women Empowerment, and together with the British Council, INTBAU Pakistan and INTBAU UK, the event Empoweristan Pakistan's Climate-Smart, Women-Centered Empowerment will be organised, promoting women empowerment showing the construction of two prototypes.

These aspects show Lari's intentions to transform spaces and architectures while simultaneously improving social, economic and environmental conditions. It is, in fact, a *modus operandi* that reveals the intention to implement a cultural revolution that is permanent and transmissible from generation to generation to preserve its future.