

Susan F. King

Only girl architect lonely. Wanted—to meet all the women architects in Chicago to form a club.

So read Elisabeth Martini's 1921 advertisement in a local newspaper. At that time, she was the only woman architect licensed in private practice in Illinois.¹ Martini was not the first woman to practice architecture in the area, and her want ad underscores an overlooked chapter of Chicago architectural history: women architects practicing and organizing there. Indeed, Martini's want ad led to the organization of the Chicago Women's Drafting Club, which later became the Women's Architectural Club of Chicago (WACC) and then in turn formed the antecedent of Chicago Women in Architecture (CWA), founded in the 1970s and one of the longest-lasting associations of practicing women architects in the nation today.

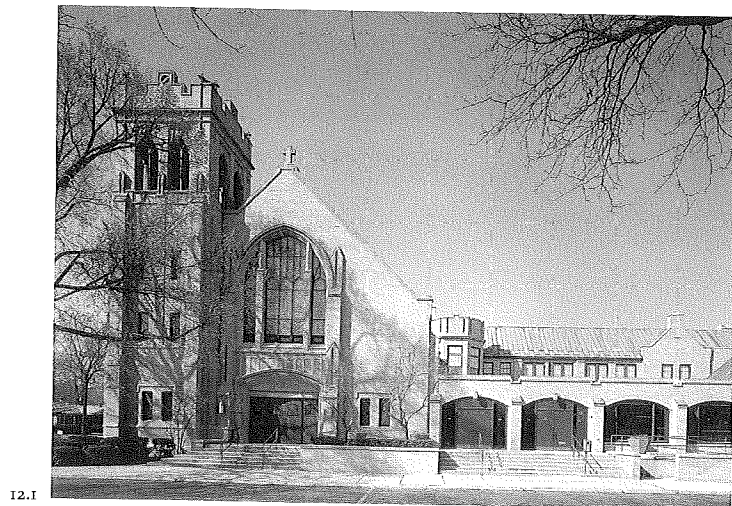
It is possible to piece together Martini's life and work as an architect (figs. 12.1, 12.2)² primarily through the organization she formed. What we know of her now has survived mainly in the form of written correspondence with the network of friends that she met through her club and its "occasional" publication, the *Architrave* (fig. 12.3). Martini received her architectural training at the Pratt Institute of Design in New York in 1908³ and arrived in Chicago in 1909 to seek a position in an architect's office. Rejected by ninety firms because of her gender,⁴ she turned to business school and quickly landed a secretarial job in an architect's office. From this position she worked her way into the drafting room. When Martini sat for her three-day licensing exam in 1913 she was the only woman of the eighty-six applicants, and she became one of the twenty-eight successful candidates.⁵ In May 1914 with license in hand, she opened her own office at 64 West Randolph Street in Chicago,⁶ the first woman to become a sole proprietor of an architectural firm in the city. Much of her work consisted of residential projects. The professional path she created for herself allowed her to be independent of employment by men, a path that would be followed by many other women architects.

Martini's ability to sustain a productive architectural practice despite her avowed loneliness is emblematic of the cyclical pattern undergone by women in America of alternating progress and backlash.⁷ The history of Chicago women architects and their efforts to organize is important for the history of American women architects because it acts as an example of both the opportunities and limitations available to professional women during different historical periods. The transformation of Chicago women architects from isolated individuals to organized groups, presently with a powerful professional and political presence in the city of Chicago,⁸ shows that considerable ground can be covered in four generations. Yet the broader historical picture also reminds us how easily that ground can be lost when economic and social conditions reinforce the unequal economic and political power of women within and beyond the architectural

profession. The history of the ebb and flow of the fortunes of women architects as a publicly active and visible force in Chicago architecture is revealed here through two parallel processes: first by their presence in public exhibitions, and second by the formation of women's architectural organizations.

The 1893 Columbian Exposition

Changes in the education of architects during the latter part of the nineteenth century spurred women's entry into the architectural profession. Thirty years prior to Martini's admission to the Pratt Institute, formal training became an added requirement to the traditional apprenticeship system for architects. As a result, women architects began to appear more frequently in the profession. One example is Sophia Hayden, the architect for the Women's Building at the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago.⁹ In 1886, she was the first woman to be admitted to the architecture program at MIT (fig. 12.4), and in 1890 she was the first woman to receive its bachelor of architecture, with honors. In 1891, at the urging of some of her friends in Chicago,¹⁰ Hayden entered the competition to design the Women's Building for the upcoming Columbian Exposition, a celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America by Columbus to be held in Chicago in 1893. According to Jeanne Madeline Weimann, author of *The Fair Women*, "On March 25, 1891, Sophia Hayden received a telegram from Daniel



12.1



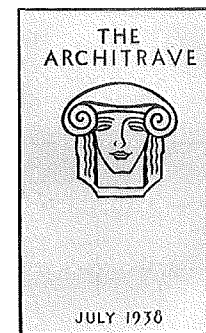
12.2

12.1 Exterior view of Saint Luke's Lutheran Church, Park Ridge, Elisabeth A. Martini, architect of record. This was her largest commission. It included both the Church and a three-story educational building. Courtesy of Anthony May Photography.

12.2 Interior view of Saint Luke's Lutheran Church, Park Ridge, Elisabeth A. Martini, architect of record. Courtesy of Anthony May Photography.

12.3 Cover, *Architrave* (1938), the "occasional" publication of the Women's Architectural Club of Chicago. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago, 720-5 W872a, vol. 2-3, 1938-42.

12.4 Sophia Hayden, from class photograph at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Courtesy of the MIT Museum.



12.3



12.4

Burnham telling her that she had won first place in the competition and that she should come to Chicago for a consultation at the expense of the Fair authorities."¹¹

Everything about women's involvement in the Columbian Exposition was controversial, including the creation of the Board of Lady Managers and their ensuing decision to hold a competition to select a woman architect to design the Women's Building. The Board of Lady Managers was a women's organization, but not in the sense of Martini's later club. To start with, the members were appointed by men. The idea for the Board of Lady Managers was the result of both the women's club movement that had swept the country during the nineteenth century and the political effects during this period of the heightened activity of the suffragists. Susan B. Anthony, a suffragist leader, had lobbied in Congress for women's representation at the Columbian Exposition and the creation of a Board of Lady Managers, and ultimately the Women's Building was the result of her struggle. However, the Women's Building and the Board of Lady Managers were not what she intended. Anthony had not called for the segregation of women from men in a separate building of their own but for women to serve on the fair's board along *with men*.¹²

Even if Anthony had wanted to serve on the Board of Lady Managers she would not have been selected; her opinions were too controversial.¹³ The board was charged with responsibility for the Women's Building, and the women appointed to the board were wealthy and socially prominent. While they were not considered divisive the way Anthony was, they were powerful enough to reject the male architect previously appointed by Daniel Burnham to design the Women's Building, and to instead conduct a national competition to find a woman architect to do the job. Originally Burnham had chosen Richard Morris Hunt of New York to design the Women's Building. Bertha Palmer, wife of the affluent Potter Palmer, was the elected president of the Board of Lady Managers; considered the queen of Chicago's high society, it was she who objected to Hunt's appointment and requested the competition. Palmer felt that a competent, reputable, qualified woman architect existed and would be discovered through the competition.¹⁴

Louise Bethune, the first female member of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and considered America's first professional woman architect, was outraged at the very idea of the competition.¹⁵ She had entered the field through the apprenticeship route. It had been her intent to study at Cornell, but just prior to her application in 1876, she was offered a draftsman position with the Buffalo firm of Richard A. Waite.¹⁶ Bethune took the position with Waite in lieu of the academic path typically followed by women wishing to enter the profession of architecture. As a partner in her own firm, also in Buffalo, since 1881, she could have been awarded the contract for the Women's Building based upon her already established reputation. This would have been consistent with the

