

From: Malashenko, Elizaveta I.
Sent: 7/31/2013 6:04:21 PM
To: Doll, Laura (/O=PG&E/OU=CORPORATE/CN=RECIPIENTS/CN=LRDD)
Cc:
Bcc:
Subject: Re: My friend Natalie

Thanks! I also want to have those “eyes that invite no nonsense”.

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From: Doll, Laura [mailto:LRDD@pge.com]
Sent: Wednesday, July 31, 2013 6:00 PM
To: Malashenko, Elizaveta I.
Subject: My friend Natalie

While I hadn't seen her in 10 years, Larry and I knew Natalie well when she was teaching in Austin. The word pioneer gets used too often, I think, but it surely applies to Natalie. I heard her tell the “green” clothing story below a few times, and it still makes me laugh out loud, and cringe. There has been progress, obviously, and then sometimes not so much.

Laura

Natalie de Blois, pioneering architect at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

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SKIDMORE, OWINGS & MERRILL PHOTO

Natalie de Blois, left, was an associate partner at Chicago architecture firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill in the 1960s.

By Blair Kamin, Tribune critic

6:29 pm, July 30, 2013

Natalie de Blois' pioneering path through the male-dominated world of architecture was laden with sexist barriers.

Despite her status as an associate partner at the powerhouse Chicago firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill in the 1960s, Mrs. de Blois invariably was left behind when meetings broke up.

"Natalie used to tell stories about how they would break for lunch and then the male partners would take the clients to an all-male club and she couldn't attend. She'd have to go out and have a sandwich," Chicago architect Carol Ross Barney recalled Tuesday.

Mrs. de Blois, 92, who helped design the Equitable Building at 401 N. Michigan Ave. and played a leading role in the creation of such modernist icons as the former Pepsi-Cola headquarters on New York's Park Avenue, died Monday, July 22, in Chicago, where she lived in Hyde Park.

The cause of death was cancer, her son Nicholas said.

In his 1973 autobiography, Nathaniel Owings, one of SOM's founders, stated explicitly that Mrs. de Blois deserved credit for projects that typically went to senior male partners.

"Her mind and hands," Owings wrote, "worked marvels in design — and only

she and God would ever know just how many great solutions, with the imprimatur of one of the male heroes of SOM, owed much more to her than was attributed by either SOM or the client."

He described her this way: "Long, lean, quizzical, she seemed fit to handle all comers. Handsome, her dark, straight eyes invited no nonsense."

Born in Paterson, N.J., in 1921, Mrs. de Blois studied architecture at Columbia University and after graduating in 1944 was quickly hired by a New York firm that paid her \$25 a week. But she lost that job, she recalled in a 2004 interview with the late architectural historian Detlef Mertins, after she rebuffed the affections of one of the firm's architects and he told the boss "that he just couldn't work with me there."

She was promptly let go and sent one floor downstairs to the offices of the then-fledgling firm of SOM, she told Mertins in an article that appeared in the SOM Journal.

"Best thing that ever happened to us," Richard Tomlinson, the managing partner of SOM's Chicago office, said Tuesday.

Rising to the level of senior designer, Mrs. de Blois worked with SOM design partner Gordon Bunshaft on the 1960 Pepsi building, which was praised by critics for its gemlike, seemingly levitating exterior walls of gray-green glass and aluminum. The building was declared a New York City landmark in 1995.

During her stint at SOM's New York office, Mrs. de Blois also helped shape such noteworthy modernist buildings as New York's Lever House and the Connecticut General Life Insurance headquarters outside Hartford. And she had to deal with requests like one she said Bunshaft made to her while they were preparing for a meeting about New York's Kennedy International Airport.

"Gordon looked at me and he said, 'You can't come to the meeting unless you go home first and change your clothes. I don't like green,'" she recalled. "So I went home and changed my clothes."

In the early 1960s, Mrs. De Blois, who was divorced, moved to Chicago so her children could be closer to their father and stepmother.

She wound up moving to a graystone in the 500 block of West Belden Avenue and joining SOM's Chicago office. There she worked under partner Bruce Graham — who would go on to design the Sears (now Willis) Tower and the John Hancock Center — on the structurally expressive Equitable Building. She was promoted to associate partner in 1964.

In the early 1970s, Mrs. de Blois was a founding member of Chicago Women in

Architecture. The nonprofit group, dedicated to advancing the status of women in architecture, still exists. Its members drew inspiration from Mrs. de Blois as she simultaneously raised four children and forged a career in architecture.

"At least I had someone as a role model," Barney said. "There weren't any others at that point."

After leaving SOM in 1974, Mrs. de Blois worked at a Houston architectural firm and taught architecture at the University of Texas. At the time of her death, she lived in the Mies van der Rohe-designed Promontory Apartments in Hyde Park. She also lived in the south of France.

She is survived by three other sons, Fran, Robert and Patrick, and a sister, Elizabeth Parris.

In her recent years, Mrs. de Blois swam regularly in Lake Michigan off Promontory Point. Other swimmers held a memorial service for her Saturday at Promontory Point, Nicholas de Blois said.

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