



DAPHNE BUGBEE JONES

by H. Rafael Chacón

I met Daphne Bugbee Jones at a dinner party in Missoula's Millenium Building seven years before her death in 2013. From the minute we met, I knew she was a grand dame. There was something about the lady's bright red lipstick, impeccable dress, and large abstract jewelry, as well as her lively eyes, clear diction, and gracious nature that spoke to me of elegance, inquisitiveness, and chutzpah.

The image was reinforced over the years, especially as we began a series of interviews in her retirement home. Those conversations revealed a robust life and an



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expansive vision of art and architecture, even as our meetings often left me feeling that a great life had been compressed into modest circumstances. Bugbee Jones had been a naval officer in World War II, trained architect, state legislator, and delegate to Montana's Constitutional Convention; she had also been a wife, mother, and a committed bon vivant who left her mark on her adopted home. Her life was characterized by audacity and personal achievement, but it was also representative of the struggles professional women faced in post-war America, particularly in the inland northwest.

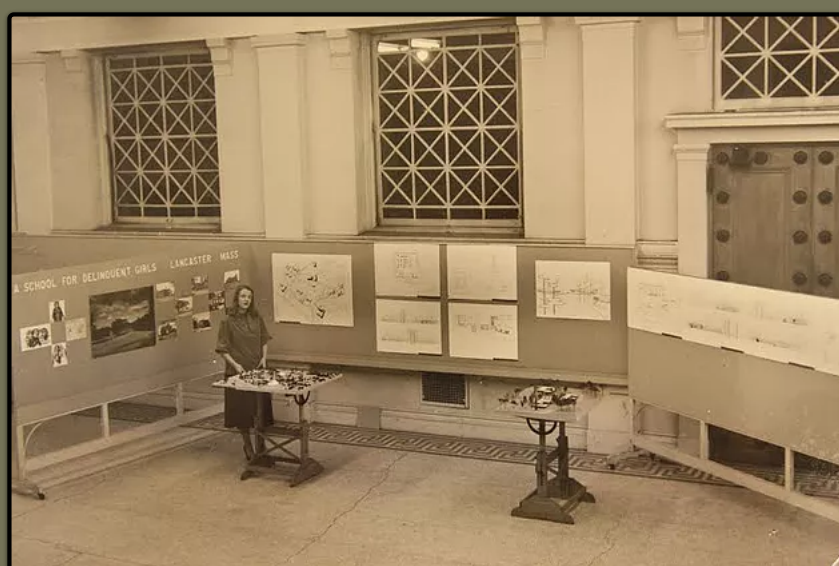
The grand dame had begun to fade, but she spoke vividly of her adventures. She had begun writing her memoirs as a member of the "greatest generation," and her exploits as a communications officer in the Navy's WAVES program during the war had received some public acclaim. At the time of her death, her political and social activities as a legislator, lobbyist, environmentalist, and community organizer were widely published.

As a pioneering modernist architect, however, Daphne was less well-known. She was not a prolific architect, but the homes she designed in western Montana are fine examples of modernism in the mid-20th century, buildings that partook in greater international trends. Daphne distinguished herself as an architect in spite of facing the formidable challenges, persistent skepticism, and pervasive chauvinism of the field, as well as the constant demands of domesticity.



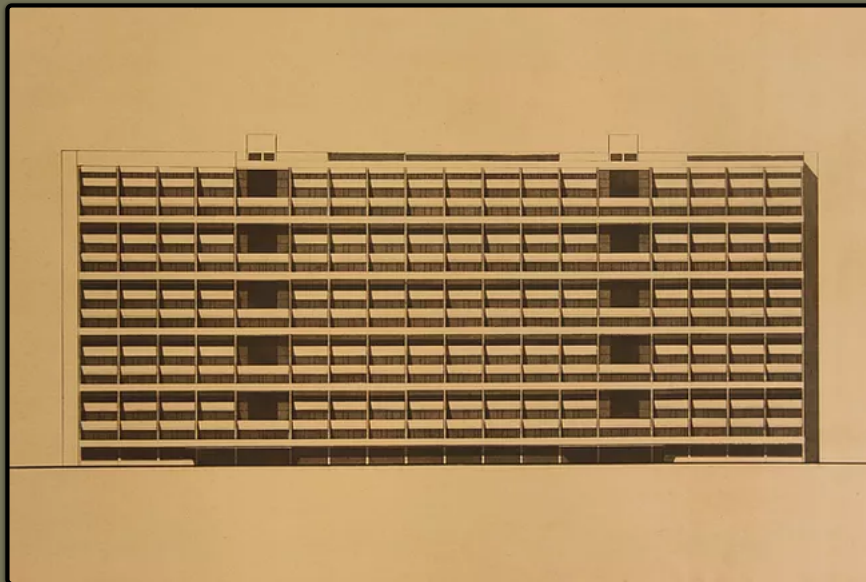
Her aesthetic development began while growing up a military "brat" in San Francisco. Daphne Eaches was born in 1921 to a Navy career family. She described being deeply sensitive to her surroundings: the miserable experience of pushing her doll carriage in a dust storm up to the "railroad flat" across from Golden Gate Park where her family lived, for example, and the awareness of the inadequacy of narrow apartment buildings with their garages and stoops right along the sidewalk and all of the windows facing the street or back alleys. These childhood memories of how architecture not only provided shelter but also created aesthetic experiences ultimately led to a life dedicated to designing spaces that advanced modernist principles.

Daphne lit up when talking about the war years, but she especially loved conversations about returning to civilian life. She had spent the war years near San Francisco as an enlisted officer decoding secret and confidential messages. After decommissioning, she returned to college and in 1951 applied to Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, where Walter Gropius, the exiled founder of the German Bauhaus, was teaching architecture. The Bauhaus was arguably the most revolutionary school of art and design in the early 20th century and Gropius, its erstwhile director, was the leading proponent of modern architecture in America.



According to Jones, the Harvard classroom was packed with returning GI's; it was "tough and circus-like, but also exhilarating." The conversations about the new International Style of architecture were heady, philosophical, and practical. Edward C. Barnes, I.M. Pei, and Paul Rudolph were among the most notable graduates of the program in that post-war period. The Radcliffe co-ed found herself training to literally build up America and give form to a new world.

At Harvard, Frank Lloyd Wright's arts and crafts sensibilities, Cubist-inspired design, and Le Corbusier's rationalist urban plans merged in the curriculum. But it was Gropius's modernist architecture and minimalist aesthetics, seen first in America in his 1922 entry for the Chicago Tribune Tower competition, that loomed largest in Daphne's education. Gropius literally brought these ideas to the U.S. in 1937 just before Nazi henchmen closed down the Berlin Bauhaus. Daphne respected Gropius's moral courage and personal leadership, and also embraced his utopian social vision. "I was especially impressed by his wide concern to meet the needs of all levels of society—even the poor and needy. His empathy was palpable," she wrote.



Daphne demonstrated her own empathy for the dispossessed and the marginalized in her thesis project. "A morning paper announced that the State of Massachusetts was allocating 1.5 million dollars to build low-income houses. Entranced with the news, I went to see Dr. Gropius. I remember saying, 'I have never hit a nail or held a hammer in my hand. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the students could build one of these houses?' Long silence. I realized tears were coming down his cheeks. 'Harvard would never let us do it,' he mumbled." Yet she succeeded designing a Home for Delinquent Girls among other socially-minded buildings as her thesis project with Gropius's full support.

In our interviews, Daphne took particular pleasure in showing me the drawings from her thesis and photographs of her successful defense. She loved the irony of being seven months pregnant at the hearing. Her gender was no insignificant detail at the time. Gropius was duly proud of his first female American student. While the Bauhaus had been established on socially-progressive principles of co-education, this was conservative and patriarchal America and Daphne was in the minority at Harvard. Like millions of other American women bound to relinquish the important responsibilities and jobs they had taken on during the war, Daphne was subjected to narrow-minded, gender-based, discrimination and expected to yield her place to the thousands of returning and "more deserving" male GI's.



While at Harvard, Daphne courted and married philosophy professor Henry G. Bugbee Jr. Henry eventually accepted a job as chairman of the Philosophy Department at the University of Montana and he, his two small children, and Daphne moved to Missoula. Daphne adapted well to the role of mother and faculty spouse, while Bugbee distinguished himself as a national figure in environmental philosophy. Their marriage did not survive, but the rich conversations about ethics, wilderness, and modern society that took place in the home she designed for them in the upper Rattlesnake area no doubt impacted both of their professional journeys. Daphne created hundreds of designs for architectural projects and was drawing homes until a year or two before her death. She was always keen to show me some architectural problem she was trying to solve in her drawings. In Missoula, she built seven homes for "poor professors" at the university and designed a handful of others. What is striking about these homes beyond her mastery of the modernist formal repertoire, is that they were all located in the urban-wilderness interphase area surrounding the city. They were intended to embrace their setting through the interplay of mass with air and light and the congruence of materials in a natural setting. She was bold in her use of cantilevers, steep raking rooflines, overhanging porches, and floor-to-ceiling windows, but these often dramatic elements were never forced and always felt right at home in the mountainous terrain of western Montana.

Today Missoula's neighborhoods abound with copycats as most American homes, including the tract housing built in the second half of the 20th century, incorporate some basic modernist elements. Daphne is gone now, the trees and shrubs have grown, and deer graze the immaculate lawns of the houses she designed. Yet, somehow, her spirit persists in these spaces. As the beauty of nature and the built environment come together, her vision continues to inspire.



