

UNSUNG HEROINES 2023

St. Ann & the Holy Trinity Church and Pro-Cathedral



Margaret Schutte-Lihotzky (1897-2000), Architect, Pioneer of Public Housing

You may not know the name Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, but she helped create your kitchen. As Austria's first female architect, she set out a century ago to bring modern design into the home. In doing so she was driven by a passion for social justice that reached far beyond the domestic sphere—and she risked her career and her life for it.

Born into a middle-class Viennese family on January 23, 1897, Margarete Lihotzky became one of the first female students at the University of Applied Arts during World War I. (One story has it that she gained admission through the intercession of the painter Gustav Klimt, a family acquaintance.) One of her professors, Oskar Strnad, advised her to go visit a working-class neighborhood. What she saw of living conditions there impelled her to become an architect. After graduating in 1919, she went to work for Vienna's city housing settlement commission. In a period of postwar hardship and labor strife compounded by a dire housing shortage, she was tasked with planning new public housing blocks and designing easy-to-build, economical kitchens for their occupants. Espousing a modernist ethos of simplicity and practicality in service of a social mission, Lihotzky declared that a worker "benefits more from his kitchen sink than from the angel on his roof."

In 1926 Lihotzky moved to Frankfurt and began working for the city building department to design 10,000 units of public housing. Here she designed what came to be known as the Frankfurt Kitchen: a series of modular, mass-produced kitchens modeled on the galley kitchens in ships and train dining cars. To maximize efficiency and workflow for users, Lihotzky drew on time-and-motion studies and interviewed housewives. The kitchens featured gas stoves, built-in cabinets (painted blue-green to repel flies), removable garbage drawers, and aluminum storage bins; materials were selected to promote hygiene, such as oaken flour containers to ward off mealworms. The kitchens became so influential that a sample installation is now in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art:



While in Frankfurt, Lihotzky met and married a fellow architect, Wilhelm Schütte. She also became politically active, turning toward communism and joining the Austrian Communist Party on returning to Vienna. As the Great Depression set in, the couple were invited to the USSR to help plan new Soviet cities. That lasted until 1937, when Wilhelm ran afoul of Stalin's regime and they departed for the West, ending up in Istanbul on the brink of World War II.

In 1940 she returned to Nazi-ruled Vienna as a courier for the antifascist resistance; she was arrested, imprisoned, and came close to being sentenced to death. She spent the rest of the war imprisoned in Germany and was finally liberated by U.S. troops in 1945.

Returning to Vienna as the Cold War deepened in 1947, Lihotzky found herself shunned because of her Communist associations. Virtually barred from public commissions, she went to work in East Germany and Cuba. Not until Lihotzky was well into her 80s did she finally win recognition for her groundbreaking kitchen designs, including a prize from the Republic of Austria. Lihotzky was nonplussed by her newfound fame, even

going so far as to tell interviewers, "I am not a kitchen." And she remained staunchly committed to activism. Not long before her death in 2000 at the age of 102, Lihotzky sued Jörg Haider, leader of Austria's far-right Freedom Party, for downplaying Nazi atrocities. She remained a radical to the end.

Submitted by Ben Spier

Sources: "A Communist Designed Your Kitchen," Marcel Bois, *Jacobin*. January 18, 2020. MoMa.org, Grete Lihotzky, Frankfurt Kitchen from Ginnheim-Hohenblick Housing Estate. "Grete Lihotzky's Bedsitter," Alice Rawsthorn, Maharam.com.