

Woman Architect: Experience Counts

By *Ruthe Stein*

FANI AND GARY Hansen applied as a team to design the proposed \$15 million sports arena in San Jose. The job, however, called for only one architect.

Given the difficulty women have had invading the traditionally male field of architecture, one might assume that the Hansen who got the job was husband Gary.

Wrong. It went to Fani Danadjieva Hansen, a Bulgarian-born architect who sees her appointment over the other applicants, including her husband, as proof that professionals are judged on their qualifications — not their sex.

“One of the partners at Frank L. Hope & Associates (the architectural firm building the arena) was against hiring a woman. But I was the most experienced,” she said matter-of-factly.

Not bashful about tooting

her own horn, the attractive 32-year-old designer said her unusually strong work record helped in getting this plum assignment.

She was granted a visa by Bulgaria in 1963 to study urban design in Austria. Her

Credibility for women architects

visa was extended when she went to Paris to work with a firm involved in developing the French West Indies.

“The office had so much work. There was plenty of opportunity, which is unusual for a beginner,” she recalled.

(Through all of her travels, Fani has retained her Bulgarian nationality and is currently living in the United States on an immigration visa.)

She also spent one year in Seward, Alaska, designing

and supervising the construction of a school. There were inadequate buildings to accommodate the booming population, and the school was designed to double as a community center.

It was in Alaska that Fani met her husband, a British-born architect who had worked there for eight years. The two worked together on the school and on several housing projects and private residences in Alaska.

Hansen is now with Building Systems Development in the City doing a research study for the Veterans Administration Hospital. He and Fani have designed their own home in Tiburon and hope to work together on other projects.

In Europe it is not uncommon for a woman to become an architect, and Mrs. Hansen has a hard time adjusting to the idea she is doing something out of the ordinary. When she tells people she is an architect, “their

immediate response is ‘Really?’”

Because there is no tradition of women as architects in this country, Mrs. Hansen believes they must “establish their credibility as women professionals” from the onset.

This was the case when she worked on the sports arena, which, to her knowledge, is the only one in the United States to be designed by a woman. (The design was completed in 1970, but the funds to build the arena were not approved until the recent bond election in San Jose.)

Those first weeks on the job were further complicated by the fact that she was pregnant. “The firm told me they would try me to see how I worked. I think they were surprised. I was very strong and kept going at the same speed throughout my pregnancy.”

However, when it came time to present the project to San Jose civic leaders, the

architectural firm suggested that Mrs. Hansen, by then nine months pregnant, should not be there.

“It would have been extremely unusual. My state was not too beautiful,” she said, laughing off the incident.

Since she was not at the presentation, no mention was made in the local papers that a woman had designed the arena and few San Jose voters were aware of this fact later when they voted the money to build it.

Mrs. Hansen researched the project by visiting other

From roller derbies to symphonies

sports arenas. She determined there were three major considerations:

- Organizing the flow of traffic.

The arena is designed so

that each aisle leads directly through an exit to the concourse.

Everything is color-coded, so that a person holding a red ticket, for example, will park in the red parking lot, enter through the red door and ride the red escalator to his seat in the red section.

- Maintaining a clear viewing line from every seat.

The seating pattern has been arranged so that it focuses toward the activity floor. The roof slopes the same way as the seating.

- Evolving “a simple and economical space” to enclose the structural shell.

The arena will be surrounded by an earth bank and landscaped in such a way as to diminish the impact of the building.

Just as the exterior is designed so it does not “overwhelm the environment,” the interior will not dominate the events it houses.

“Sports are the important



FANI DANADJIEVA HANSEN
“Sports are the important thing”

thing,” Mrs. Hansen emphasized.

Still, despite its deliberately low profile, the San Jose sports arena will be a startlingly contemporary building that has been described as “a giant water wheel turned on edge.”

On its practical side, it will seat as many as 17,500 people and accommodate everything from roller derbies to boxing matches to symphonies.

Mrs. Hansen is now designing a community hospital in Texas for Anshen and Allen, the architectural firm with which she is currently associated. A sports arena in Iran will also bear the Hansen signature.

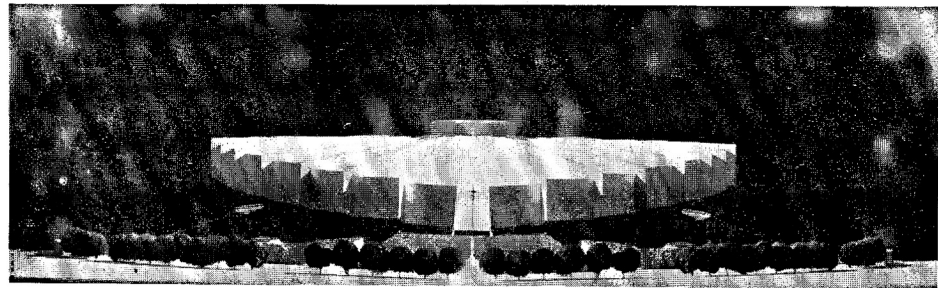
The only disadvantage of her exciting work, says Fani Hansen, is that she is not able to spend as much time as she would like with her

2-year-old daughter, Mila. Mrs. Hansen considers herself “very fortunate” that her own mother is now in this country to take care of Mila.

Now that the San Jose arena is finally being built, with completion set for 1975, she has been hired to work as a consultant. “I want to see that the main concept is not changed,” she said, adding that this often happens when “a project changes hands.”

The details of her work have not yet been worked out, but Mrs. Hansen hopes she will be supervising the actual construction in addition to translating her design into working drawings.

Although she has been away from the project for two years, Mrs. Hansen has stayed emotionally involved. “I feel like it is my child — my brain child.”



The San Jose sports arena has been designed so it does not overwhelm the environment