

A Pioneering Woman: Helen Binkerd Young

by Sara Johnson, Preservation Associate

Over the years, architecture has been regarded as a historically and inherently male profession, an unfortunate view that is still pervasive today. Prominent female architects and architecture critics have long commented on the absence of women in the profession and worked to end the general under acknowledgement of the designs of female architects. While women have practiced architecture in the U.S. since the 1880s, the greatest advances women in the profession have come in the past thirty years. The women who chose to pursue architectural education from 1870s through the mid-1900s took a pioneering path, confronting societal and institutional obstacles along the way.

Helen Binkerd Young (1877-1959) was one of the early female architects, a 1900 graduate of the Cornell program. Her name is not widely known, but her story is a valuable addition to the history of architecture in Ithaca and to the history of American women in architecture. At the time of her graduation, Helen was one of about forty women to complete an American university's architecture program.



Binkerd Young was born in Dayton, Ohio in 1877, but by the 1890s her family lived in Brooklyn. She attended Brooklyn's Pratt Institute High School from 1892-95 and graduated from the Pratt Art Department in 1896. Helen entered the architecture program at Cornell University in 1897, the only woman in the class. As a student at Cornell, Helen was the class poet, won a design prize and was an active member of the Alpha Phi Sorority. She was the eleventh woman to complete Cornell's architecture program.

After graduating from Cornell, Helen and her friend Ethlyn Kerr moved to Ben Avon, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Pittsburgh. Her husband-to-be, fellow 1900 architecture graduate George Young, Jr., also lived and practiced architecture in Pittsburgh at the time. It is likely that Helen and George designed buildings together in the area during their years there.

Helen and George moved back to Ithaca by 1910 and George took a position teaching in the architecture school at Cornell. Helen wasn't able to teach architecture at Cornell, but she was asked by Martha Van Rensselaer to join the new Home Economics department as an instructor and contributing writer of extension bulletins for farmers' wives.

Although Helen couldn't directly teach architecture in the Home Economics department, she found many ways to share her design knowledge. She adapted her architectural skills to create coursework that emphasized the physical layout and design of homes and their interiors. In addition to her teaching duties, Helen continued to write popular bulletins for the Cornell extension program that reached out to rural women, providing practical guidelines for everything from arranging household furnishings or planning kitchens to the overall design of farmhouses.

During her years teaching at Cornell she also found time for an architecture practice, but there are few records of her work. According to her obituary she "designed many of the early residences on Cayuga Heights." In 1918, Helen and George designed their own house on Overlook Road, known as "Hidden Home." It was featured in *American Architect* magazine in 1927, showing photographs of the house and landscape as well as the

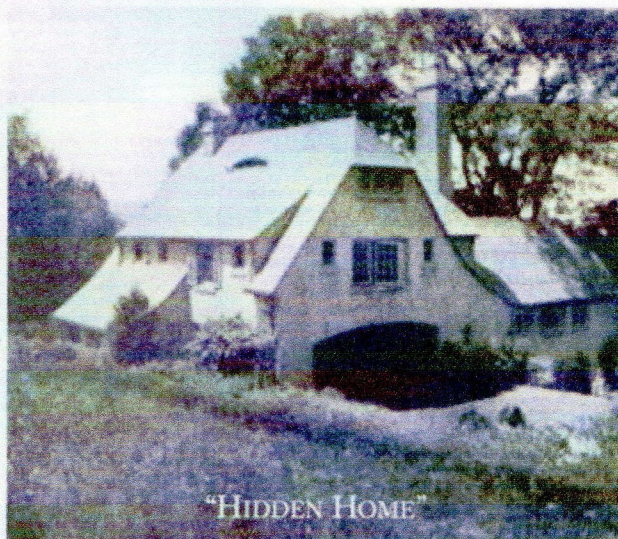
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Youngs' drawings for the house. Helen and George were noted as co-designers in the article.

In Helen's many letters to Martha Van Rensselaer and Flora Rose, she comes across as self-deprecating and generous, enthusiastic, intense, thoughtful and a little impulsive. During the summer of 1913 she wrote, "I guess my worst trouble is going to be that my enthusiasm exhausts me. I trust you two dears will help me keep within bounds or I'll go to pieces."

Her work, both as an architect and teacher, was where she appears to have found the most pleasure. In another letter she explained that her need to be creative and focused on work was not dependent on the monetary compensation or accolades she might receive:

I don't see how I can be paid \$800 a year on the little part I will play in the Department. George would blow me up bodily if he could hear me say that because I am being eternally lectured for giving everything for nothing. But somehow that is the way I feel about it. I couldn't possibly keep any idea to myself just for pay if anybody else needed or wanted it. Since I have come here a good many things have cleared and crystallized in my mind, and I feel now more sure than ever that next year I am going to cut out everything but my home and my work and try to keep well and give my best strength to each.



Although she became a full professor in 1920, Helen took a leave of absence the following year and retired in 1922. After her departure from Cornell she remained in Ithaca until 1946. It is likely that during those years she continued to design buildings. In 1926, George Young wrote, "Mrs. Young and I have recently been asked to design a house in New York. I feel quite certain that I, personally, don't want to touch it at all. It is just possible that Mrs. Young might be sufficiently interested to work up some sketches." Societal changes, including the 19th Amendment in 1920, may have prompted Helen to be more vocal about her role as an architect. In the 1930 census, Helen listed "architect" as her profession. This was a change from 1910, when she was recorded as having no occupation.

Although Helen Binkerd Young may not have asked for acknowledgment of her architectural designs, they are worthy of being recognized. While her work in the Home Economics department has been referenced in scholarly journals in recent years, her architectural work remains hidden, likely under the name of George Young and other male colleagues. Historic Ithaca would like to discover and document more of her designs, in Ithaca and elsewhere. To share your information about Helen Binkerd Young, please contact Sara Johnson at sara@historicitythaca.org.