

## A woman architect: She builds a well-planned house

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### A woman architect

# She builds a well-planned house

By Christine Winter

**BERTHA** Yerex Whitman is an architect, but she doesn't go around designing narrow linen closets and kitchens you have to criss-cross 122 times [she counted once] to bake a pie.

"Anyone who does housework knows that men waste space when they design homes," she said, pointing to her own kitchen as an example.

After she redesigned it, she could reduce those 122 steps to 12. "Men just don't think of the kinds of conveniences that would come naturally to a woman," she said.

Yet when she was going to school [University of Michigan College of Architecture and Design, class of '20], she didn't feel men were exactly going out of their way to encourage women to enter the field.

"The Dean of the college

told me that since it was a state-supported, co-educational university, he couldn't keep me out. But he also said, 'We don't want you.'"

SHE registered anyway and became the first woman to graduate from the College of Architecture there, then went on to a career that has spanned nearly 50 years. [She was licensed in Illinois in 1926 and is still in good standing.]

Many of the homes she has designed—mostly on a freelance basis while she worked for the state to support her two children—are in the north suburbs, such as Evanston and Glencoe.

One of them won for her a "Better Homes Contest" special award for its unique, convenient arrangement of rooms and stairways. There's no tromping thru the private areas of a house to get to the "public" rooms when Bertha Whitman is the designer.

Altho she prefers to remain coy about her age—"just say I was born before 1900"—she has no time for being an old lady.

Her house is a showcase for her hobbies, with artifacts she has picked up on her five trips around the world.

Her trips have been for pleasure, but she made them with a businessman's eye for detail and a born collector's penchant for saving things. Thick scrapbooks hold every hotel receipt and playbill she accumulated, and she has already written one book, "A Tyro Takes a Trip" [Branden Press, \$4.95], and has another in the works.

"ALL THOSE boring travel books prompted me to write an account of my trip," she says. "A good guidebook helps you avoid missing something. I have a friend who knitted all the way around the coast of Africa,

and she was amazed, when she saw my notes, at what she had missed."

She also keeps a detailed account of her family history on the Yerex side, and has so far traced it back thru the 1700s. She hopes to go back to 1400 in Holland.

BERTHA'S house is full of cabinets which she designed [and built], needlework of all kinds, her own paintings, and a collection of gift and antique plates and cups.

"I'm not Shakespeare or Frank Lloyd Wright," she says, "but I enjoy what I do, and I enjoy showing men that we women are just as good as they are in whatever we do."

Set among her souvenirs from Africa and South America is a large trophy dated 1963. It was awarded by Arthur Murray dance studios.

"Well," she said, "I don't like to just sit around."



Tribune Photo by Michael Budrys

For nearly half a century, Bertha Whitman has been planning houses.

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