

# Natalie de Blois

## AND THE CONNECTICUT GENERAL LIFE INSURANCE BUILDING

INTERVIEW BY BETTY J. BLUM

IT IS NOT SURPRISING, despite the fact that architecture was a male-dominated profession, that Natalie de Blois, born in 1921, set her sights on becoming an architect early on. Growing up in Ridgefield, New Jersey, in a family of three generations of engineers, she was surrounded by the talk and tools of the trade (figs. 1 and 8). De Blois was headed for MIT but was diverted by the Depression to Columbia University, where she received her architecture degree in 1943. While at Columbia she worked part-time making drawings for Frederick Kiesler. After a brief stint in the office of Morris Ketchum, she began her fifty-year career in architecture in 1944 at the New York office of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. It was in that office, under the wing of Gordon Bunshaft, that de Blois blossomed. She worked closely with Bunshaft on a number of major projects, including Lever House, the Istanbul Hilton, Pepsi-Cola, Union Carbide, and Lincoln Center, serving as senior designer on several of them. She also, as one of the few women in architecture at that time, suffered the slights and indifference to which women were often subjected. After 17 years in the New York office, for both personal and professional reasons, de Blois accepted a job with SOM in Chicago, where she stayed until 1974. In 1980 she began teaching at the University of Texas in Austin. De Blois also became increasingly active in the women's movement during the 1970s, which led her to help younger women break into the profession.

De Blois's recollections and perceptions shed light not only on the early history and personalities of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, but also on what it was like to be a woman in a man's profession at a critical and fluid time in architecture. In the following interview, excerpted from an extensive oral history conducted in 2002, de Blois discusses her experiences working on the design of the campus of Connecticut General Life Insurance Company in Bloomfield, Connecticut, now owned by CIGNA, and also gives her thoughts on its imperiled status (figs. 2 and 3). The first part of the campus, including the classic glass-and-steel headquarters building, known as the Frazar B. Wilde Building, was completed by SOM in 1957. A second part, centered around a headquarters

**NATALIE DE BLOIS, NÉE EN 1921, A ÉTÉ L'UNE DES PREMIÈRES FEMMES ARCHITECTES AUX ÉTATS-UNIS. DIPLÔMÉE DE L'ÉCOLE D'ARCHITECTURE DE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY EN 1943, ELLE ENTRA L'ANNÉE SUIVANTE DANS L'AGENCE NEW-YORKAISE SKIDMORE, OWINGS & MERRILL OÙ ELLE RESTA PENDANT DIX-SEPT ANS AVANT D'ACCEPTER UN POSTE DANS LE BUREAU DE CHICAGO. SES SOUVENIRS ÉCLAIRENT NON SEULEMENT L'HISTOIRE DE L'AGENCE À SES DÉBUTS ET LES PERSONNALITÉS DE SES TROIS FONDATEURS, MAIS AUSSI SON EXPÉRIENCE QUOTIDIENNE LORS DE LA CONSTRUCTION DU CONNECTICUT GENERAL LIFE INSURANCE BUILDING.**



Fig. 1. Portrait of **Natalie de Blois**

building for the Emhart Corporation, was built in 1963. The campus was put on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's "Eleven Most Endangered Historic Places" list in 2001. In 2003 the Emhart Building was demolished as part of CIGNA's general redevelopment plan to turn the site into a golf course, hotel, new office space, upscale housing, and parking lots.

Ryerson and Burnham Archives, Courtesy Art Institute of Chicago

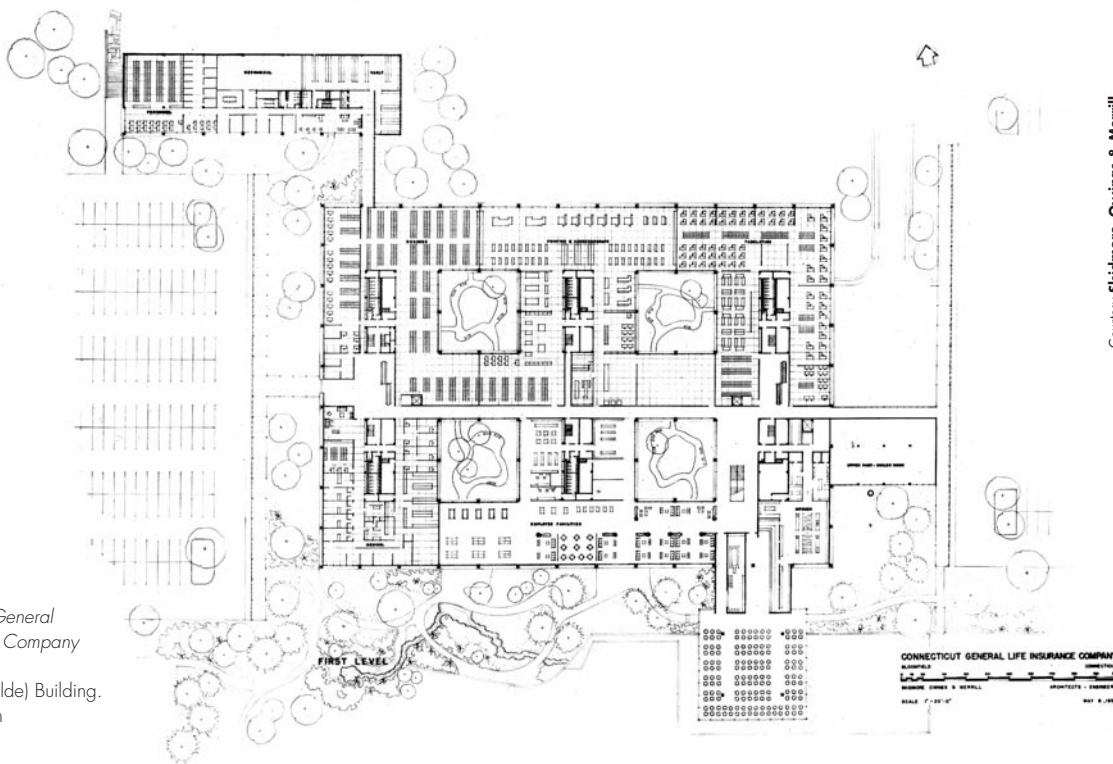


Fig. 3. Connecticut General Life Insurance Company Headquarters (Frazar B. Wilde) Building. First level plan

BETTY J. BLUM: You began to work on Connecticut General at a time when many firms that had been located in city centers expanded and went to the suburbs. I understand that there were many years that went into the planning of this building.

NATALIE DE BLOIS: The office had worked on the building for maybe six months, while I was still in Germany working on another project. Roger Radford worked on programming and analysis of square footage, and came up with six different schemes. They could build a high-rise building, and all the in-between choices.

BJB: This design was for a rather large suburban tract.

NDB: The whole thing is six hundred acres (fig. 4 and 5). That includes the Emhart Building as well as the other sites—so I'm not quite sure how much the one site was. But Roger had done all those studies, so when I came home, the client had decided to build a three-story

building. And that was basically the only decision. They must have selected a module, just in order to do the studies. When Gordon came home from Europe he put me on the project and Roger was assigned to some other project. I remember that our office had grown, it was really a big office and had hired a lot of people. There was a great big drafting room just for the people working on the production drawings for Connecticut General. The design area was sort of separate—we weren't working in the same room with the production people. There were probably fifteen or twenty of us in that design room. So, I started working on Connecticut General.

BJB: How did that all take shape?

NDB: We spent a lot of time in the beginning discussing materials and how it was going to be built. The client was very exacting and wanted things to be built so that they'd last for a long time. All the material selection and the design was discussed at great length with Al Labie, the job captain, and the specification people. And then, of course, we started developing the dimensions and the courtyard scheme. The cores, the circulation, and office space are based on a six- and twelve-foot module, and the fact that nobody was going to be back farther than thirty feet from the window wall.

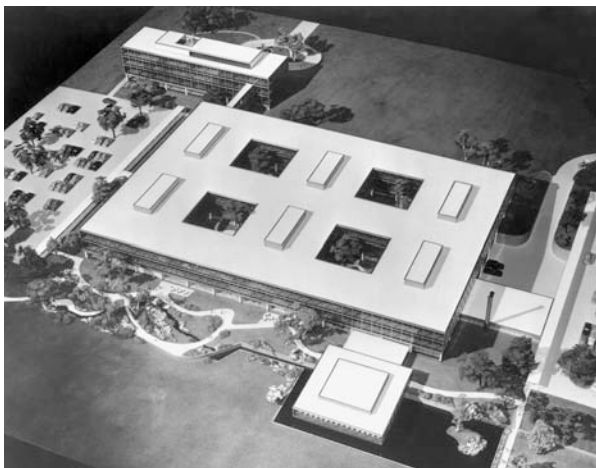
BJB: Why was that important?

NDB: For daylight, and just for work comfort—it was so that nobody had to be in the dark (fig. 6).

BJB: And there was always artificial lighting.

NDB: Yes, that's right. You're familiar with the buildings in Europe—office buildings were all much narrower and had much smaller footprints. You know why they're much narrower and smaller? Because of codes and health in those countries. No one can work any more than so far

Fig. 2. Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (Gordon Bunshaft, partner in charge of design); Natalie de Blois, (senior designer), Connecticut General Life Insurance Company Headquarters (Frazar B. Wilde) Building, Bloomfield, Connecticut, 1954–1957



Photograph of model. Courtesy Skidmore, Owings & Merrill



Fig. 4. Connecticut General Life Insurance Company Headquarters (Frazar B. Wilde) Building. View from south with artificial lake



Fig. 6. Connecticut General Life Insurance Company Headquarters (Frazar B. Wilde) Building. Interior office landscape

from a window, depending on the window height. Nowadays, there's a lot of work that goes on in the dark: conference rooms and computer centers and storage rooms and things like that. As I said, in Europe, the buildings are much narrower. They aren't allowed to build deep buildings—like so many of the high-rises in New York. So we worked on all the systems that were involved in Connecticut General: lighting systems, the air-distribution system, the partition systems. We worked on the development of the cores. The exterior design was never presented to the client. We talked about the plan, and about the workstations and their relationships. I was

asked to work on the requirements for the women's facilities in the cores and throughout the building. There were many meetings in Hartford, at their old headquarters.

BJB: At their building in downtown Hartford?

NDB: Yes. Working with their staff people and with Frazar Wilde.

BJB: Was this still in the planning stage, or after the project was underway?

NDB: This was the beginning of 1953 and 1954, the planning stage. It was at some point after we had discussed the layouts and relationships with departments, and we had discussed the business that there were going to be no offices in the big open workspace, that we were going to build an office building adjacent to the building. The officers or people who had to have offices would be in that building, and the top floor of that building was to be designated for the top management and directors with a big conference room. After all this had been discussed, we had a great big model made. I guess Ted Conrad made it. We presented the design of the building to the client. It was the first time they'd seen what it would look like. They knew what determined what it was going to look like, but they hadn't seen the building.

BJB: How was it received?

NDB: Gordon said, "This is the way it's going to be." And they just all fell right in line, because it responded to their program and I guess they liked the looks.

BJB: I understand that Connecticut General was a building that was designed with women employees of the insurance company in mind. Someone called it light manufacturing. The women were manufacturing insurance policies. What were the special amenities for women?

NDB: There was a women's committee, which I worked with—because I was a woman—and we worked on how the toilets and the coatrooms were going to be arranged, and things like that. And then of course, we had all kinds

Fig. 5. Connecticut General Life Insurance Company Headquarters (Frazar B. Wilde) Building. Corner of executive wing from northwest, with main building in background.



of facilities on the first floor, billiard tables and ping-pong tables. We had a library where they could go and we had shopping facilities, so that if people were stuck out there and had to get food or get their clothes cleaned, they could (figs. 7 and 9). So we discussed all these things. And these facilities were built into the project. There was a medical department.

BJB: Was it thought that there wouldn't be enough workers because the company was out in the country so this made the job more appealing?

NDB: Yes, because of transportation. And they didn't think about building a light rail going out to the site. Building in the suburbs was a big gamble.

Fig. 7. Connecticut General Life Insurance Company Headquarters (Frazar B. Wilde) Building. South terrace and pool adjoining ground floor employees' lounges



BJB: I understand the building was so successful that finally there was a waiting list of people who wanted to work there.

NDB: It was also around that point in the design that Frazar Wilde decided he wanted somebody else to come in and do the furniture.

BJB: Whom did he have in mind?

NDB: Florence Knoll was hired to work on the furniture. She proceeded to do programming requirements for individual workstations.

BJB: Was she called in at the request of the client or of Gordon?

NDB: She was called in at the request of the client. I'm not sure whether Gordon had been given the chance to approve the selection of Knoll. I was in Hartford when Shu Knoll was first brought in and made her first presentation, which had to do with where the pencils were kept, and how many pencils everybody needed, and what kind of other equipment they needed on their desks. But the department layouts and the scheme for the building and the dimensions of the building were set at that time. There was a recent article in *Metropolis*—the architectural publication in New York—about Shu Knoll

that said that she had a big influence in convincing the client to use an open plan. Well, I'm sure the open plan was set even before she ever came on the project.

BJB: So the space was really planned, she just filled it.

NDB: Yes. She worked on the workstations and their design.

BJB: I understand that she wanted a full-scale mockup of, say, a section of the office.

NDB: We did a full-scale mockup just to study the window wall, the partition system, lighting, and furniture systems. At that time, there was no office furniture that looked right in that space. The furniture that you could buy was all big, heavy, with rounded corners. So it was important to bring in somebody who could design compatible furniture and see that it was built, for the modern building we were designing.

BJB: I understand the preference of the board of Connecticut General was not for modern at all, it was much more conservative—it was for Georgian and colonial.

NDB: I'm sure that's right, but those conservative men on the board had private offices. I'm talking about the large open office areas where the women worked around the four courtyards. Those who wanted their Georgian furniture got what they wanted. Shu Knoll had to cope with that problem.

BJB: In their private offices?

NDB: Yes, but the board of directors' space, which was the top floor of the office building was furnished in an informal way. There was no board table, it was designed as a kind of a living room. I remember laying out the kitchen and the dining space, and detailing the window wall, which was set back. I didn't have anything to do with the selection of the furniture or anything like that. I know that all that furniture was modern.

BJB: Everything that's been published shows a modern interior.

NDB: Modern, yes.

BJB: So for a building that was so well received, for a building that the client liked so well and the architects felt was a successful project, how did it get on the endangered list fifty years later?

NDB: Well, it's because it's fifty years old and it no longer suits the owner. Cigna Insurance Company doesn't work the same way as the old Connecticut General did.

Fig. 8. Natalie de Blois in the 1950s



Photo by William A. Niemiec  
Courtesy of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill



Fig. 9. Connecticut General Life Insurance Company Headquarters (Frazar B. Wilde) Building. One of four courtyards with enclosed garden designed by Isamu Noguchi



Courtesy of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

Fig. 10. Aerial view of Connecticut General Life Insurance Company campus, with Frazar B. Wilde Building (1954–1957) in foreground and Emhart Building (1963) in background

BJB: What are some of the differences?

NDB: The whole workflow is different. The electrical systems are outdated. And they claim there is wasted space, but I don't think it's wasted space. It has to do with the efficiency of its arrangement.

BJB: In your opinion, can it be adapted to better serve today's needs?

NDB: It could, as an office building. But it would be very expensive and they don't want to spend that kind of money. And they probably don't even need all that space. They need a different kind of space. And of course, they have changed the use of the building. The public spaces no longer exist. The billiard room and spaces like that have been turned back into offices. And they just don't suit their uses now. And they probably could've changed over a period of time, but they haven't done that. The upkeep over the years has really been exceptional. It isn't falling apart, it's just that it's out of date. And they're not in the business of light manufacturing anymore. It's a different group of people, a different company.

BJB: Cigna now owns the campus and it is still an insurance company, isn't it?

NDB: Yes, but it's a different kind of insurance. Basically, Cigna is a health insurance company and it's a very specialized type of business.

BJB: How do you feel about the prospect of that building being demolished?

NDB: It does bother me, because it's a beautiful building. I like it, but I have no control over it. I think it's very noble of those who are trying to save it, and it's because of their efforts that it looks like maybe there's a chance. And I commend them on that. But I couldn't argue with the current owners. I definitely wouldn't want to argue with them wanting to take it down and putting something else up. I think, to take a big area like that, it's beautiful countryside, and turn it into a suburban mixed-use development, is a shame. But it is very typical of what's going on all over America. The town of Bloomfield wants to do it, too, because it thinks it will give them more tax money.

BJB: Let's hope the preservationists, who are now organized into the Save Connecticut General group,

make their voices known and begin to influence some people who can help achieve a better solution. NDB: It's become a federal problem, because they would like to make it a historic site. And that's difficult to do if the owner objects. I'm not up on exactly how they could do it. But, I remember way back in the beginning when we went up to Bloomfield and we talked to the fire department and the different city people, and how happy they were then.

BJB: When it was first being planned?

NDB: Yes, we showed the city officials how the building was to be located on the site, where the exits were going to be, and what safety measures were planned. You always go into a city in the beginning of a project, to find out what their requirements are and how the officials interpret codes, so you don't go ahead and design the whole building and then find out that that's not the way the city wants to handle it, in terms of fire escapes and the number of people in spaces and things like that. The city officials wanted details on loading docks, service areas, boiler room, smokestack, assembly rooms, bowling alleys—all the programmed spaces. The job took a long time. And it finally was finished and built, and I used to go up to the site with Gordon to look at and review the mock-up and the building itself. It was a project that was out of New York City that I could work on, because I was living in Connecticut. And Gordon used to drive up and pick me up in Cos Cob, where I was living, and then we'd drive up to Connecticut General (figs. 10 and 11).

BJB: Well, I suppose Connecticut General, for the time being, is an unfinished chapter. We'll see how successful the preservationists are in saving it.

*This interview is excerpted from Oral History of Natalie de Blois, Interviewed by Betty J. Blum. It was compiled under the auspices of Chicago Architects Oral History Project, The Ernest R. Graham Study Center for Architectural Drawings, Department of Architecture, The Art Institute of Chicago, copyright © 2004. Used with permission of The Art Institute of Chicago and the kind cooperation of Betty J. Blum. The full text may be found on the Internet at: [www.artic.edu/aic/collections/dept\\_architecture/deblois.pdf](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/dept_architecture/deblois.pdf). Thanks to Roger Duffy and Michael Kirchmann at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and to Stephen Dauphiné, A.I.A., for assistance in obtaining photographs.*

Fig. 11. Connecticut General Life Insurance Company Headquarters (Frazar B. Wilde) Building. View of executive wing from northwest, 2001



Photo by Stephen B. Dauphiné © 2004