



DR. LISA LANDRUM

## UNSTACKING THE DECK

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FACULTY ESSAY

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### CARDS ON THE TABLE: FOR CHANGE, CHANCE & CHOICE

Cards anyone?

Playing card games was a popular pastime when I was growing up. Like many, I played cards for fun with family and friends: Crazy Eights, Go Fish, Spoons, Speed, Slap Jack, Concentration, even War.

Cards travel light. They fit easily in a pocket and readily toss in a bag. Long before cell phones, playing cards were handy social media devices, connecting you with others wherever you go via impromptu games – learned on the fly. Providing endless entertainment, card games also foster memory and math skills, good-spirited competition, and valuable lessons on accepting the luck of a draw, on losing gracefully, and on tactics for turning the tables – reversing presumed outcomes through sustained strategic play. Such **change** involves **chance** but relies more on **choice** – timely decisions, careful consideration of dynamic situations, and a willingness to take risks.

My earliest memories of “high-stake” card games entail turning the tables on my older brother. A weekend tradition in my family was playing cards after breakfast to see who would do dishes (by hand!). Driven to evade this household chore, I learned to play and win at tactical games of Rummy, Euchre, Poker, Hearts, and Cribbage. In the process, I also became fascinated with cards themselves: their intricate designs; the symbolism of the four suits; the seemingly endless variety of games within a limited deck of 52 (54 with jokers); the shiftiness of number and value; the surprising powers of particular cards in certain combinations and contexts; and the arbitrary role of “trump” – where any card can suddenly gain disruptive distinction.

*"We began to spread out the cards on the table, face up, and to give them their proper value in games, or their true meaning in the reading of fortunes... in a journey that had not ended nor was to end."*

- Italo Calvino, *Castle of Crossed Destinies*, 1977, 6.



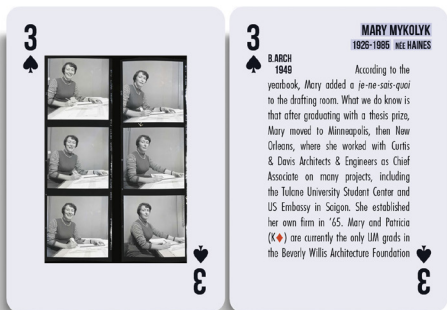
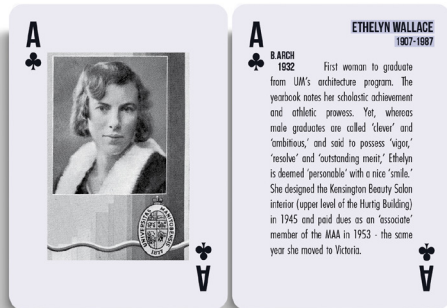
I also learned the enduring *social* value of casual card playing. With multiple players of mixed ages and abilities (often multigenerational) sitting close together for extended durations around a table – or any surface (even a lap) – card games model inclusive socialization and playful propinquity. Differences and similarities are negotiated amid a shared playing field. There are short-term gains and losses, ups and downs, to be sure. Yet, cards are primarily a pretext for spending quality time together, talking, telling stories, laughing, occasionally crying, forging shared memories for future recollection, and instilling an ethos of fair play.

Cards can also be designed as interactive pedagogical tools. The format facilitates fun and easy access to information and encourages creative association and invention. Architectural educator Marco Frascari used tarot cards – and Calvino's story about their silent tales – to teach subtle truths, complexities and magic of architecture.<sup>1</sup> Such cards engage verbal and visual storytelling, open imaginative futures, mine narrative histories, awaken metaphoric capacities, and activate the interplay of chance and choice.

All this (and more) is in play in my choice to design "Unstacking the Deck" as a game of change in the story of gender bias in architecture.

TOP TO BOTTOM:  
( 1 ) Cover art on the playing cards, incorporating the painting "Breath of Life" (2020) by Ojibwe artist Jackie Traverse  
( 2 ) Sequence of images from the Winnipeg Design Festival launch and exhibition of "Unstacking the Deck"





## UNSTACKING THE DECK - A GAME OF CHANGE

"Unstacking the Deck," a euphemism for breaking biases, consists of a double deck of playing cards (and mini research booklet) featuring early women architects who studied and worked in Manitoba: from the first woman who graduated from the University of Manitoba with a Bachelor of Architecture in 1932, to women who forged careers in Manitoba in the 1960-70s.

One deck features images of women, the other micro-histories with matching number and suit. Players can invent games to match women with their story, play any regular card game, or use them as mnemonic and heuristic devices. Prompted by a question received from a student in 2011 about the lack of women included in architectural history, I developed this deck gradually over several years and with more focus last year with the support of a UMan Creative Works Grant and research collaboration with students and art historian Marieke Gruwel at the Winnipeg Architecture Foundation.<sup>2</sup> "Unstacking the Deck" was dealt out in April 2022 as the closing event of the Winnipeg Design Festival.

While the serious work of "unstacking" has neither ended nor is to end (to echo Calvino), as a design project, "Unstacking the Deck" needed limits. The UMan Bachelor of Architecture program, founded in 1913 and dissolved around 1970, provided definitive framing for the set.

All 44 women who graduated from the B.Arch program in its 60-year history are represented in "Unstacking the Deck." Twenty times more men (nearly 900) earned B.Arch degrees over the same time. The cards are further organized by suit: Clubs and Spades feature the first women earning B.Arch, M.Arch and Community Planning degrees. Diamonds highlight women in Interior Decoration and Interior Design. Hearts honour women who studied elsewhere but whose careers intersected Manitoba in significant ways, plus a trio of women whose early UMan studies launched accomplished and still active careers in architecture, landscape and urbanism.

Hearts also open onto topics where further action is needed toward intersectional justice: beyond binaries (Jack ♥), beyond borders (King ♥), and toward Indigenous sovereignty (Queen ♥). Each of these Hearts celebrate past and present student-led initiatives toward equity and inclusion.

**Clubs + Spades** - feature the first women graduates from the University of Manitoba's B.Arch, M.Arch and Community Planning programs

**Hearts** - honour women who studied elsewhere but intersected Manitoba in significant ways, plus a trio of women whose early UMan studies launched accomplished and still active careers in architecture, landscape and urbanism

**Diamonds** - highlight women in Interior Decoration and Interior Design, from the program's founding Chair to its most celebrated alumna

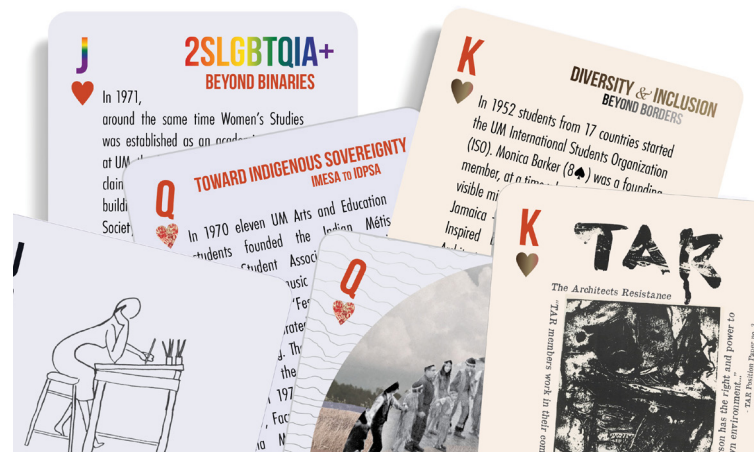
## MULTIGENERATIONAL PLAY

Meaningful change is a multigenerational project. "Unstacking the Deck" aims to mobilize knowledge of initiatives and challenges among past and present students, fostering dialogue and action on difficult topics in creative and accessible ways. A sense of shared purpose and exchange across generations was felt at the launch of "Unstacking the Deck" on April 28, 2022. As current students and graduates from the last six decades assembled in the room, in a pseudo-Castle of Crossed Destinies, we spread out the cards on the tables and walls, face up, to grant value and share stories in an unending journey of choice, chance and change.

## TOP TO BOTTOM:

( 1 ) Topical cards on issues of diversity requiring further action: beyond binaries (Jack ♥), beyond borders (King ♥), and toward Indigenous sovereignty (Queen ♥). Jokers add to these provocations a mix of comic relief, mythopoetic force, and critical allusion.

( 2 ) Screen shots from Lisa Landrum's online presentation-demonstration of "Unstacking the Deck," as part of the University of Manitoba's Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Community of Practice series, June 7, 2022.



## References:

( 1 ) Marco Francari, *Eleven Exercises in the Art of Architectural Drawing* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 121. Also, Paul Emmons, "Marco Francari, 1945-2013," *Journal of Architectural Education* 67.2 (2013): 172-173.

( 2 ) For more on the back-story, see the UManToday story (May 2, 2022), <https://news.umanitoba.ca/unstacking-the-deck-a-game-of-change/>, and Lisa Landrum, "Unstacking the Deck" a presentation at the 1x1 symposium of the International Archive of Women in Architecture (IAWA), Blacksburg, VA (Mar. 26, 2022), <https://tinyurl.com/unstacking>. See also WAF's 2022 "Manitoba Women in Design Database" <https://www.winnipegarchitecture.ca/digital-exhibits/manitoba-women-in-design-database/>.

"Unstacking the Deck" is available for purchase from Lisa Landrum, and the Winnipeg Architecture Foundation.

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