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Researching Female Public Toilets: Gendered Spaces, Disciplinary Limits

By Barbara Penner¹

Abstract

I have always been drawn to study intimate yet public spaces--most notably Victorian ladies' public lavatories and American honeymoon suites. Such research raises larger questions concerning the legitimacy of certain objects of inquiry and of feminist and interdisciplinary work in general. This paper aims to go behind the curtain of academic research and to think about the challenges one faces "back-stage" when investigating spaces or objects connected intimately to sexuality and the gendered body.

Keywords: Public Toilets, Interdisciplinarity, Sexuality

Since 1996, I have been exploring the subject of public toilets for women ("Female Urinals"; "World of Unmentionable Suffering").² Though my research has moved on to consider other intimate yet public spaces--namely, American honeymoon suites--I still occasionally find myself returning to lavatories. This revisiting is driven by the sense that, despite publishing historical information about them, I've never engaged with many of the questions which have been raised by my research and writing--larger questions to do with the legitimacy of certain objects of inquiry and of how they expose one's own disciplinary limits. What follows, then, is an exorcism of some questions which have persistently dogged my research. Its intent is to go behind the curtain of academic research to think about the challenges one faces "back-stage" when investigating spaces or objects connected to sexuality and the gendered body in an interdisciplinary mode.

One danger of writing a piece like this one is that it opens one up to the charge of anecdotalism. However, as Irit Rogoff has argued, one of the most urgent tasks facing academics is to consider who is allowed to speak about what or, perhaps in this context, what one is allowed to speak about. These are important questions on a political level and it is only by engaging them that we might, in Rogoff's words, "break down the barriers of permissible and territorialized knowledge rather than

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² I would like to thank Jane Rendell and the Masters students at The Bartlett School of Architecture for provocative seminar discussions on architectural historiography and visual culture which have influenced this paper. I am also grateful to Malcolm Miles and Laura Cull for opportunities to speak at University of Plymouth and the Centre for Cultural Studies, Goldsmith's College, respectively. Thanks to my anonymous reviewer who provided me with much to think about and to Valerie Begley and Olga Gershenson for their feedback and support. And I would like to acknowledge the Science Museum in London which granted permission to reproduce the images here.

simply redraw them along another formalized set of lines” (Rogoff 23). I would further defend this discussion on the grounds that, too often within academia, the process of research is treated as a mechanical act, while the process of mobilizing facts into argument is seen to be an intellectual one. This division is misguided, not least because it ignores how the institutions and disciplines that control knowledge give a particular shape to enquiries from the start.

*London, Winter, 2002: I meet Dr. Timothy Boon, Head of Collections Development at the Science Museum, whom I first encountered at a conference at the Women’s Library.³ In order to contextualize the long and sometimes fierce nineteenth century campaign to provide public conveniences for women, I’ve been trying to learn more about how and where British women relieved themselves before lavatories became a feature of the late Victorian streetscape.⁴ Such information is hard to come by. Even diaries and literature, where the strictures of decency are sometimes relaxed, give little away. In the first break I’ve had in some time, Tim tells me that the Science Museum has a reasonable collection of female urinals dating from the eighteenth century. I am immediately interested because urinals and *bourdalous* were most likely to have been used by women publicly, unlike a chamber pot which is used domestically or privately, say, in a carriage.⁵ Tim generously offers to show the museum’s collection to me.*

At the Science Museum, an endless sprawling institution in South Kensington, I am grateful Tim leads the way. I never would have discovered these urinals myself. There are three on exhibit, located in a display case entitled “Technology in Everyday Life, 1750-1820.” This case fascinates me. It more closely resembles a cabinet of curiosities than a modern museum exhibit, grouping objects together so broadly--by material, for instance--that the connection between them is initially hard to discern. In a section entitled, “Working and Uses of Glass,” Tim draws my attention to two female urinals nestled up against a sight-test kit, spectacles, an oil lamp, and a souvenir box from Bath.

³ The conference, entitled “Cleanliness, Dirt and Women’s Roles,” was held at the Women’s Library in London, November, 2002.

⁴ For more on these political debates, see Penner “World.”

⁵ The notion that such items were intended for public use is bound up in the oft-repeated tale of how they came to be named. Specifically, the *bourdalou* took its name from a Jesuit priest, Père Bourdalou, whose sermons were reportedly so brilliant but long-winded that women used these vessels to relieve themselves *while he spoke* so as not to miss a word. For one version of the tale, see Lambton (52-3).



**Figure 1. (A95362) Glass, bottle shaped female urinal, 1701-1730.
Courtesy of Science Museum, London.**

Intrigued by the contrast of the delicate glass urinals to another more utilitarian leather one nearby, I wonder about their use: if urinals were meant to be used publicly and discretely, why did their makers opt for the transparency of glass instead of the opacity of leather or ceramic ware? Moreover, their funnel-like openings suggest that they needed to be pressed against the body to be used, an operation which would surely require some privacy.



Figure 2. (A625639) Leather bourdalou or boat-shaped female urinal, Europe, 1701-1730. Courtesy of Science Museum, London.

Perplexed, I contact the Curator of Community Health, Stewart Emmons, to get any available information about these items. I receive the following information via e-mail

The details we have on the objects you were interested in, as follows:

A95362

Glass, bottle shaped female urinal, 1701-1730
Length 276 mm; width 98 mm; height 146 mm

A641103

Glass female urinal, in the form of an erect penis and testicles, possibly 18th century
Length 310 mm; width 115 mm; height 150 mm

[...]

A625639

Leather *bourdalou* or boat-shaped female urinal, Europe, 1701-1730
Length 239 mm; width 81 mm; height 94 mm

Stewart tells me that this is more or less what he knows about these objects, but that there are over forty more in storage. He offers to send me the complete catalogue listings for them. Right away, I hit REPLY and accept the offer. Almost as an afterthought, I include the following remark:

In the list you sent, I was kind of surprised by this one:

A641103

Glass female urinal, in the form of an erect penis and testicles, possibly 18th century, Length 310 mm; width 115 mm; height 150 mm.

I gather I saw this one in the display, but I cannot remember it. I wonder if it was functional or a sort of erotic toy. How bizarre.



Figure 3. (A641103) Glass female urinal, in the form of an erect penis and testicles, possibly 18th century. Courtesy of Science Museum, London.

Moments after I hit SEND, I receive an e-mail in my inbox. It is from the Science Museum's Postmaster informing me that my e-mail has been quarantined. I realize that the quarantine was triggered by the keywords "erect penis and testicles" (or was

it “erotic toy” or even “urinal”?) I am simultaneously stunned, amused, and outraged. I write the Postmaster informing him/her/it that I am a Lecturer in Architectural History at University College London and that my research is legitimate. I then remove all potentially objectionable words from my e-mail and send it again. When I do not hear from Stewart, I realize my e-mail has been blocked. I print out a copy of my e-mail and send it to the Science Museum by post.

While the above account is innocuous enough, I mention it because I have frequently come up against forms of institutional quarantining in my research, both of public toilets and of my other specialization, honeymoon suites. I feel I am constantly rubbing against the limits of what institutions define as a respectable interest. For instance, at the British Library, where I conduct the bulk of my work, I am frequently required to sit in a designated section of the Rare Books reading room. This section, consisting of a small cluster of desks located under the watchful eye of the Music Librarian, is where one must sit to look at books from the Cupboard collection. While Cupboard books cover a seemingly eclectic range of subjects--anything from pornography to sexual advice manuals to books about kitsch--the common denominator is that they all deal with polite society's underbelly: the sexual, urinating and defecating body, and objects which offend good taste.⁶

The first time I ordered a book from the Cupboard collection, I did not know what this meant: I assumed the term “cupboard” was being used metaphorically. To my surprise, when I went to collect my book, the supervisor did indeed retrieve it from a locked cupboard, which stood slightly apart from the other shelves. In contrast to a normal book, my Cupboard book was also issued with a bright pink slip on which were printed the rules that governed its use. One rule stuck out: under no circumstance should a Cupboard book be left unattended. If I had to leave the reading room for any reason, I should turn the book over to the custodianship of the Library staff. Cupboard books were clearly regarded as both contaminated and contaminating of individual readers, the sacred environment of the British Library, and the disinterested spirit of academic enquiry itself.

Shepherded over to the designated reading section, clutching my Cupboard book with its pink slip, I felt profoundly self-conscious. I was aware of the surveillance of the Music Librarians, though I soon realized they were far less concerned with protecting public morals than with protecting the music manuscripts being read at the same tables. I also found myself suspiciously eyeing my fellow readers: though I trusted my own motives for wanting to see these books, could I trust that the others were motivated by such “legitimate” concerns as my own? My worst fears were confirmed one day when an elderly man spent all afternoon looking at a full run of a pornographic magazine. He ignored the Music Librarian's request that he return the magazines thirty minutes before the issue desk closed--another Cupboard rule--and kept right on flipping through their pages, until the moment Security evicted him and respectability was restored.

On one level, the monitoring by the British Library of its collection is exactly what one would expect. Post-Foucault, academics have a sophisticated framework for

⁶ For the specific book in question, see Dorfler (1973).

discussing how institutions police the boundaries of knowledge/power. The incident with the man above, however, dramatizes how slippery the system is. Something which appears respectable (just) can quickly mutate into something less so. My objects of study, for instance, refuse to be either strictly polite or functional: they lead me down paths I never intend and, in truth, would often rather not go. The glass urinal (A641103) is a case in point: from asking how and where women relieved themselves, I am led to an erotic toy (Figure 3). The spectre of sex hangs over my enquiry. It reveals the precariousness of the assumption, still held by many designers and academics, that the body is made up of needs which can be separated, defined and “met” by design or engineering. This illusion--of the docile zoned body, and of the “separation of space and sexuality” (Wigley 389)--is necessary to sustain both the functionalist ethos of design and the disinterested spirit of academic research. If only my subjects would cooperate....

Sometime 1998: Having presented an early draft of my paper on toilets in several different venues, I find one question is constantly raised: “How did women manage it?” The first time I’m asked this question, I am puzzled. It transpires that the questioner wants to hear more about the precise mechanics of the act. How did nineteenth century women, with their layers of heavy skirts and corsets, actually manage to urinate/defecate in public at all?

The query seems simple enough but, in trying to answer it, I hit a wall. Up until now, my research has proceeded along fairly conventional lines. My subject--the fight to build a public lavatory for working-class women in Camden Town, c. 1900--is well-documented from sources as varied as minutes from local government meetings, newspaper reports, and an essay by George Bernard Shaw (who comes out strongly in favor of female public lavatories in order to needle his conservative fellow Vestrymen). I also had one lucky find: I managed to locate plans and photographs of Victorian public lavatories in Vol. I of Plumbing and Sanitation (1898) by George Davis and Frederick Dye, the successors to George Jennings’s engineering firm. Discovering this documentation towards the end of my research comes as a relief, as it makes my inquiry feel like proper architectural history, answering the oft-repeated challenge, “Where is the architecture in your work?” More crucially, perhaps, it supplies the illustrations for my future article.

But the question, “How did women manage it?” reveals the limitations of the information I’ve collected thus far. The women in the story--the potential users of the toilet--are only ever glimpsed in sideways glances, through the rhetoric of the male councillors, medical health officers, sanitary engineers, journalists, and Shaw himself. We know that some women’s organizations, particularly the Ladies’ Sanitary Association, campaigned vigorously for the provision of public toilets for women, and some of their letters and pamphlets survive. But, no doubt because of the strictures of decency, all of these sources describe and quantify the difficulties facing women moving through the city in abstract terms (functionalism, again: the issue is always couched in terms of public health, sanitation, and hygiene). None of these sources give a sense of the quality of women’s experience--how did they manage it?

I realize that somewhere out there (probably in the British Library) is a diary or a literary source which will tell me all that I want to know. But I cannot afford to wait. Instead, I decide to visit the Victoria and Albert Museum's costume department, reasoning that if one difficulty facing women is their clothing, then I should look at their clothing more closely. I ask the Costume Curator if I can see some samples of Victorian ladies' underwear. When I arrive, the garments--silk stockings, cotton pantaloons, and combinations--are laid out carefully on a table. An assistant to the curator stands guard and handles the fragile items which visitors are not permitted to touch. The solution to the riddle, "How did they manage it?," becomes immediately apparent: all of the garments laid out are open at the crotch so that women can relieve themselves easily, without having to pull down their drawers. The curatorial assistant, suspicious at first, gets caught up in the spirit of the investigation: she produces some metal skirt grips and speculates that women would have used them to hold up their skirts to prevent them from being soiled.

I come away from this meeting with some sense of accomplishment. Through this slightly absurd bit of sleuthing and through the encounter with the undergarments (so suggestive of the body), I feel as if I've gotten close to the abstract entity flitting around at the edges of my story. My hope is not to recuperate this female subject exactly as much as it is to embody her: to give her some tangible--as opposed to textual--presence. But I realize some time later that there's a good chance I've underestimated the force that the female body has been exerting in my story all along.

What finally alerts me to the body's presence is the reaction of feminist theorists to my project who, though not hostile, are consistently more sceptical about my topic than anyone else. Driving such scepticism, I suspect, is the concern that analysing a ladies' public lavatory, unintentionally or not, threatens to trivialize, perhaps even essentialize, feminist work. As a space, it is just too close to the female body, too obviously tied to biology. It threatens to reassert a chain of connections which feminists have worked hard for decades to destabilize. Specifically, in the case of feminist architectural historians, it appears to re-align the feminine with building, the feminine with plumbing, the feminine with the abject.

If we survey feminism's engagement with space and architecture over the last thirty years, as Jane Rendell, Iain Borden, and I did in Gender Space Architecture, we see that decisive shifts have occurred since the 1970s. The first wave of feminism to hit architecture sought primarily to explore professional issues: to consider the under-representation of female architects; to consider if and how women design differently from men; to restore women's design heritage to architectural history; and to produce a critique of the "man-made" environment. The general emphasis was on female difference, biological or social or symbolic, and on understanding how this difference affected architectural practice and history.

Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, other disciplines, most notably cultural studies, film theory, art history, anthropology, and cultural geography, began to engage with issues of space and subjectivity. These disciplines were less concerned

with questions of production (at least creative production), than with questions of representation, experience, and use. How do ordinary buildings shape identity? And how are they shaped in turn by factors like sex, age, race, or class? Such questions effectively transformed everyday spaces and buildings, from shopping malls to suburbia, into legitimate subjects of academic inquiry, both spatializing difference and politicizing space: no longer a neutral container between buildings, space began to be conceptualized, in the well-known words of geographer Gillian Rose, as an “arena” where power relations are “(re)created and contested” (17).

More or less parallel to this extra-disciplinary scrutiny, feminist architectural studies turned critically inwards. This was in part a response to the realization that, in Mark Wigley’s words: “The active production of gender distinctions can be found at every level of architectural discourse: in its rituals of legitimation, hiring practices, classification systems, lecture techniques, publicity images, canon formation, division of labor, bibliographies, design conventions, legal codes, salary structures, publishing practices, language, professional ethics, editing protocols, project credits, etc.” (Wigley 329). Wigley’s suggestion--that architecture is institutionally gendered--indicates a radical shift, for, if we accept that gender is a constitutive component of architectural discourse, then feminism suddenly moves from its periphery to its heart.

When I first encountered the work of Beatriz Colomina in her edited collection, Sexuality and Space, like so many others, I found it liberating because it implicitly claimed a centrality for feminism. Rather than arguing that gender is simply embedded in architecture and its representations, Colomina’s essay, “The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism,” made the case that gender (and other forms of difference) is actively produced and reproduced by architecture. Even more significantly, she made her argument with reference to two “masters” of modern architecture, Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier, thus demonstrating that gender analysis could go mainstream and positively contribute to discussions around the architectural “canon” (73-128). In this respect, I do not think that the importance of Colomina’s work cannot be overstated, in part because she overturned one fear of feminist academics--that studying feminist issues automatically results in one being ghettoized in “women’s studies”--and helped to secure a new prominence for feminist architectural inquiries. Yet there have been some other side-effects as well: one of the more curious is the development over the last ten years of a mini-industry of feminist studies of Le Corbusier and, to a lesser extent, of Adolf Loos.

It should be stressed that these studies do not simply reassert elements of the Corbusian myth, but seek to question or deconstruct them using the tools from the poststructuralist toolkit. Furthermore, a compelling argument can be made that feminism is precisely at its most effective when it is not limited in terms of its subject matter: that is, when feminism informs the processes and methods of an enquiry instead of (over)determining objects of study to begin with. Yet the sheer amount of feminist work on Le Corbusier still gives one pause if only because, in the aggregate, it seems to so powerfully testify to the hold the modernist canon still exerts over the discipline. That this testimonial is coming from feminists is ironic, not least because, as feminists in the 1970s and 1980s from all disciplines well knew, the canon is one of the most powerful weapons of patriarchy, its exclusions and inclusions ultimately legitimating what constitutes knowledge. But serious questioning of the architectural

canon has become fairly muted in recent years, and one wonders: has Le Corbusier become the feminist Trojan Horse?

To some extent, the situation facing feminist architectural writers is symptomatic of a broader problem facing architecture and, I suspect, other disciplines as well. Poststructuralist inquiries and methods, having been embraced at one level of writing (in works classified as “theory”), still sit uneasily within traditional modes of history and, in architecture, with the preferred form of publication: the survey. In a recent review of four new architectural surveys, Kevin D. Murphy succinctly sums up the dilemma: “No historian today could seriously claim comprehensiveness for his or her overview of a movement or period . . . Instead, writers are burdened with an obligation to problematize (often the task of the introductions) their own selections and methodological procedures.” His conclusion is that, methodological and reflexive exertions dispensed with, what follows is mostly business as usual: “The canon remains virtually intact, at least for the modern period, and the familiar methodological approaches continue to dominate” (400-2).

Though there have been exceptions to this rule, such as Ghirardo (1996) and Upton (1998), I would agree with Murphy’s analysis: What seems less clear is how to explain it. Does this represent a retrenchment of the architectural discipline, a shoring up of boundaries weakened by years of interdisciplinary and feminist questioning? Or does it simply reveal how little impact such questioning has had on mainstream architectural writing, at least on its preferred objects of study, in the first place?

If we think about academics from other disciplines (and cultural geography springs most immediately to mind) they are almost exclusively drawn to study everyday spaces and places rather than Architecture. And everyday spaces have never been the true subject of architectural history, a discipline which has traditionally only interested itself in a very small proportion of the built environment; that is, buildings by named architects. As Karen Burns notes, “[M]ost of our activities as architectural professionals are directed towards what is recognisably marked as architecture (and only a small percentage of that work is published, registered in discourse)” (77). And, despite the moment of “theoretical vertigo” in the 1980s and 1990s, buildings by named architects remain the proper subject of the majority of architectural enquiries (Mäkelä 9). As Rem Koolhaas deadpans: “God is dead, the author is dead, history is dead, only the architect is left standing...” (416).

Australia, July 2000. After I give a paper on the subject of bridal chambers in American hotels in the mid-1850s, one kindly architectural historian approaches me. “I enjoyed your talk,” he says, “but can I give you some advice? You really need to get a hold of some plans.” It is neither the first nor the last time I will hear this comment and I begin to dread it. It suggests that I have been misdirecting my energies or, perhaps, haven’t looked in the right places. But, once again, I have been drawn to a space that is difficult to study by conventional means, a building that is anonymous and architecturally undocumented, even though there is an abundance of other forms of documentation--descriptions in travelogues, newspapers, diaries, billheads, advertisements, and engravings--that testifies to its use, reception, and representation in popular culture.

*These sources I have thoroughly documented. That the lack of a plan undermines the authority of my history says volumes about how architectural history polices its disciplinary limits. The very same documents and objects that architects are taught to produce are the same ones that they are taught to privilege as historians:⁷ plans, elevations, sections drawings, axometric views, briefs, competition entries, models, and, of course, buildings themselves. These are the accepted architectural “facts.” And these facts require decoding with the same skills architects are taught in studio and rely upon in practice: a technical and stylistic mastery (and I use this word deliberately); a working knowledge of the design process; and, perhaps most important of all, the ability to “read” two-dimensional images spatially. This last is especially important--the architectural historians’ version of *einfühlen*⁸--as it allows them to effectively step into any given building in their mind’s eye: to move through its rooms; to re-create an architect’s creative process; and to reconstruct his and occasionally her aesthetic intentions--the originative “concept” that gave birth to the design (Burns 79).*

*Lest we forget: aesthetic intentions remain all important in Architecture. For Nikolaus Pevsner it was the thing that separated Lincoln Cathedral (architecture) from a bicycle shed (building). (One might just as easily substitute public lavatory or honeymoon resorts...). Reyner Banham noted that Pevsner’s famous formulation effectively isolated a *modo architectorum* from the “numerous other modes of designing buildings” and it is this focus on the *modo architectorum* that allows architectural history to differentiate and, to some extent, defend itself from other spatial disciplines, not just in terms of subject matter but methodologically, too (293). Its rigidity creates exiles: those, like me, who study other spaces or social-spatial practices and who use non-traditional forms of documentation or modes of knowing space find themselves, in disciplinary terms, “homeless.” (At the very same conference in Australia, an anonymous peer reviewer urged in the strongest possible terms that my paper be rejected on the grounds that it was not architectural history at all, but “sociology”).⁹*

*Yet, even in the few years since the publication of Gender Space Architecture, there has been a notable rise in these sorts of studies by academics within architecture, although the fact that they do not deal with the *modo architectorum* means they are not necessarily identified as such. For instance, recent books by my fellow historians/theorists/designers at the Bartlett School of Architecture exploring the social production of space are, by a publishing sleight-of-hand, reshuffled into categories as*

⁷ Most architectural historians are trained architects. See Anderson 284.

⁸ *Einfühlen* was a term coined by J.G. Herder in the eighteenth century to describe the ability to enter and inhabit other-time.

⁹ This process actively continues. For instance, in a recent review in the Society of Architectural Historians’ official journal, Leland M. Roth concludes that a new anthology devoted to American architecture that includes popular culture sources is, “oriented more towards social history than design history...” (397).

diverse as Society, Politics & Philosophy, History, Art, Architecture & Photography, Sports, Hobbies & Games, Science & Nature, and, yes, Sociology (Borden; Hill; Rendell). Such classifications characterize much of the work that I am now interested in--interdisciplinary work that engages with objects and spaces through themes like travel, consumption, sexuality and the body, using critical theory, and gender analysis. On the back cover of books on these subjects, it is not uncommon to find a range of categories strung along, one after the other--Women's Studies/ Urban Studies/ Planning or History/ Cultural Studies/ Gender Studies, etc.

The endless use of //, otherwise known as the solidus or slash, slant or virgule, is the particular mark of these emerging interdisciplinary spatial analyses. The main grammatical function of the solidus is to recognize connections and/or alternatives and, as such, seems to leave the question of the relationship between the disciplines and space open-ended. It does not ignore the existence of different disciplines but, with its potential to expand ad infinitum, underscores the inability of any to completely possess the space in question.

To recognize that spaces are fluid and excessive and can be dealt with by more than one discipline (Women's Studies/ Urban Studies) is not to call for the complete dissolution of disciplines as is often assumed. But it does serve to remind us that the greatest strength of interdisciplinary work is its non-territoriality, in the sense that no discipline is granted exclusive authority over a body of work or objects of study. In fact, it is this very non-territoriality that raises anxieties about interdisciplinary work in the first place: some worry that extra-disciplinary engagements with particular artefacts or spaces inevitably miss the point because the academic has a de-skilled eye; or, conversely, others suggest that the alliance of disciplines may "fortify an authoritarian epistemology" by adding to the appearance of completeness (Deutsche 195-6).¹⁰

To counter both concerns, it seems crucial that interdisciplinary spatial works emphasize "position" and "self-reflexivity" to the same degree that much recent postmodern feminist work has done; that is, to acknowledge the specificity of one's vantage point or training. Jane Rendell (2003) observes that being conscious about one's "position" requires an author to release objectivity and control vis-à-vis the object and text: "The very act of negotiating our 'position' in relation to an object or a subject (a text, a thing, a person, a place) involves getting lost as well as finding our bearings" (231). Writing reflexively--whether through story-telling or "confessional constructions" as Rendell does, or through anecdote as I do here--necessarily draws attention to the partiality of one's view, as opposed to its "completeness." It also increases the likelihood that the authority of one's own interpretation will be challenged. Indeed, in an intelligent discussion of this essay, one anonymous reviewer wondered if I'd missed the "real meaning" of my anecdotes (though

¹⁰ The move towards the interdisciplinary is often resisted by many who see it not only as threatening disciplinary boundaries but also the special skills that define each one; such fears often surface in discussing new disciplines that stress interdisciplinary modes of working. See, for instance, the "Visual Culture Questionnaire." See also Irit Rogoff's response, 18-21.

acknowledged that a singular reading might not be possible) and offered what were, in some places, convincing refinements or counter-interpretations to my own.¹¹

In the spirit of “getting lost,” however, I am going to resist my own urge--and the urging of others--to now offer a neat conclusion about interdisciplinary spatial work (“to sew things up”) or to pin down one definitive meaning for this essay. I choose this open-endedness because to do otherwise would undermine the largely unconventional manner in which it was researched and written, and because I agree with James Clifford’s argument that it’s sometimes “worth risking some confusion” to make explicit the different registers (“analytic, poetic, subjective, objective, descriptive, meditative, evocative, etc.”) at which academics work. Indeed, Clifford sums up my own attitude perfectly when, in defence of his own meandering essay about Susan Hiller in *Routes*, he states: “We [academics] operate on many levels, waking and dreaming, as we make our way through a topic; but then we foreshorten the whole process in the service of a consistent, conclusive, voice or genre. I wanted to resist that a bit” (qtd. in Coles 71).

Nonetheless, I am conscious that the anecdotal or memoir method of writing has its pitfalls, many of which have been precisely identified by Janet Wolff. Wolff is generally supportive of the move towards self-reflexivity (what she nicely terms “autobiographical interruption”) in works of ethnography, anthropology, and cultural criticism, acknowledging the capacity of these techniques to unsettle entrenched cultural representations, power relations, and claims to scientific objectivity. Wolff is even more positive about feminist scholars who “get personal”: that is, who reflect “on the connection between the personal and academic in general, and on their relationship to their own scholarship” through memoirs, biographical passages, and other self-reflective writings--and her own work moves in this direction. But Wolff also recognizes that some such works fall short and cautions academics to treat self-reflexivity only as a “minimal requirement”: in itself, she warns, it does not simply erase power relations and is not always illuminating. Instead, she claims, to be relevant, the personal must also somehow be “*typical* or indicative of a moment” (“Memoirs” 47, 49-51).¹²

In what is in all other respects a clear-sighted analysis, it is disappointing that Wolff is not more specific here about her notion of typicality, which seems somewhat unresolved. (Although elsewhere Wolff specifies that it is the reader or “other social and cultural historians” who determine typicality, she does not indicate the criteria for judging it) (“The Female Stranger” 16-17).¹³ But Wolff also suggests another, less

¹¹ The personal episode I’ve narrated which has been most often challenged is my experience in the British Library with the man looking at pornographic magazines. The challengers feel that I do not sufficiently explore my own ambivalence (one person used the word “anger”) about the situation nor do I explore the fact that, in this case, it is me, not just the institution, who imposes a “legitimate” way of looking. While these criticisms have merit, in the interests of the stream-of-consciousness mode in which the episode was written, I declined to rework it. However, the dilemma this raises--to edit or not to edit?--seems worth mentioning, for while it’s important that readers supply their own interpretations, to what extent should these be allowed to reshape the original memoir episode?

¹² Thanks to Iain Biggs for directing my attention to this book.

elusive, criterion for evaluating the significance of memoir practice. Her preference is for work which reflects a “clearly political choice, about the decision to identify and select certain texts and situations as worth studying, and about the willingness to state the basis of one’s commitment to them” (“Memoirs” 49). I have interpreted this to mean that, in addition to being explicit about one’s allegiance (my own is to feminism), one must be clear about what motivates a study, what guides the selection of particular episodes, and why one is committed to writing about them. What is it that the author hopes the reader or the larger academic community might take away from it?

These questions are reasonable ones as is the expectation that a piece of scholarship should ultimately validate the inclusion of personal experience. And, by way of an answer, I would reiterate that, even if this anecdotal ramble has covered a lot of ground, it has always been motivated by a particular agenda: to make visible my experience as a feminist academic researching gendered spaces; to write about the various limits I’ve met en route (be they personal, disciplinary, or institutional); and to explore the ramifications of interdisciplinarity for such studies. To use personal experience in academia is not unique: on the contrary, it has been an important and growing trend within socio-cultural scholarship since the 1980s. However, when writers, especially in the context of feminism, talk about “personal experience” today, they tend to refer to their own biographies--their background, memories, and formative experiences such as when or how they came to “cultural recognition”-- (Rogoff 23-4), and how these intersect with, and inform their academic work and careers and vice versa. I would certainly concur with Wolff that this development has been a productive one, but my wish is that more of these personal accounts also considered how encounters with one’s discipline (in the form of one’s colleagues or its representative bodies) or the academic institutions that control (re)sources we rely upon can themselves be formative.

I don’t mean to suggest that such accounts are never written.¹⁴ Nor do I claim that these types of encounters are somehow *more* important than subjectivity, for one’s personal position plays into any situation. (As my anonymous reviewer remarked, the fact that I am a woman has no doubt made it easier for me to research female public lavatories than it would be for a man--both in terms of justifying the legitimacy of my study and my own interest--hence shaping my encounters more, perhaps, than I have recognized here.) Furthermore, it is indisputable that my desire for more personal accounts of disciplinary encounters has to do, at least in part, with my position as a feminist architectural historian engaged with a specific and, some might say specialized, body of material. As a result, not all of the concerns I have raised in this paper translate directly to the experience of other academics.

¹³ Wolff goes on to complicate her own statement by noting that the “selectivity involved in recall may seem to be a drawback” (presumably to the cultural and social historians who are meant to judge an episode’s typicality) but that, as Salman Rushdie points out, an episode’s partiality arguably gives it greater symbolic resonance.

¹⁴ Two writers I’ve cited here who use such incidents, for instance, are Rendell and Rogoff. See Rendell, “Between Two,” 221-3; and Rogoff 14-26.

Yet I believe that my collection of anecdotes and disciplinary observations can inform an interdisciplinary discussion of gender and space (and might even be “indicative”) in several ways. First, regardless of one’s disciplinary starting point, when researching “everyday” spaces, from public laundries to domestic interiors that have associations with the women’s labor or use, traditional forms of research do not suffice. One must seek out other sources of evidence or modes of research which do not necessarily correspond to the established methodology of one’s discipline, or one must interpret accepted evidence differently--i.e., read official sources “against the grain” to find evidence of female occupation or experience. And these maneuvers affect the disciplinary status of one’s work: for instance, my work is often rejected as architectural history not just because of my choice of subjects but because I don’t use recognized types of evidence to research them.

Why should academics be attentive to their disciplinary status? In my case, why should I be concerned by having my work branded as sociology, for instance, or as cultural studies? Being reclassified in this way has not prevented me from getting a full-time teaching job in a school of architecture (though toilets receive only one mention for every 30 of Frank Lloyd Wright); nor has it prevented me from having my work published in sources like this one. Indeed, there is always a temptation for academics who have complicated relationships with their own disciplines to turn their back on them and to embrace the liberatory possibilities of interdisciplinarity instead. Yet, even if I feel my work “fits” into interdisciplinary studies, there is still a danger in denying the fact that a disciplinary rejection of sorts has taken place for this rejection has consequences. For one thing, it means I am less likely to address that specialized readership of designers/architects/planners who might some day incorporate my insights into practice. For another, it leaves unchallenged the underlying current of sexism in methodological discussions about what constitutes the architectural discipline and an appropriate subject of research in the first place.

For these reasons, it is essential that, if it is to be meaningful, the interdisciplinary project must ask “questions of a discipline’s protocols: what values organise a discipline, give it coherence, form its methodologies and constitute its range of objects?” (Burns 75). This questioning should be done not with the aim of dismantling the disciplines--to be *interdisciplinary* is not the same as being *anti-disciplinary*--but to openly examine the boundaries that enclose each one. In short, interdisciplinary encounters or collaborations, while bringing new vantage points, questions and values to the study of an object or space, should never leave their constitutive disciplines unchallenged. To do so threatens to create a situation where interdisciplinary studies become, as Hal Foster warns, “entropic not transgressive”: that is, a default repository for a discipline’s cast-offs, where studies of marginal or everyday objects or spaces can be safely deposited without contaminating disciplinary purity (162).

One last reason to be vigilant about disciplinary boundaries is that they can also effect interdisciplinary studies which, when probed, tend to reveal limits and exclusions of their own. For instance, my colleagues and I are frequently dismayed that so few academics outside architecture, even those who move comfortably between art, film or literature, engage with Architecture--that is, named buildings--possibly frightened off by the profession’s claim to be the official guardian of

architectural knowledge. One important exception has been Giuliana Bruno's Atlas of Emotions, and I would like to end with a consideration of this book which, more than any other I can think of, exemplifies many of the strategies discussed here. First, Bruno answers the challenge to academics to "work with intimate emotions and feelings, as well as critical distance," largely because of her contention that the experience and perception of the arts is haptic, subjective, and emotional. Thus, for Bruno, a history of culture and its artefacts *always* involves a mapping of affects. While she supports her thesis with an impressive range of objects of study--art, landscapes, maps, precinematic technologies, wallpaper, travelogues, and spatial practices (cultural travel and cinema viewing)--most significant for me is that, prompted by her interest in the "spatiovisual arts," Bruno also takes on Architecture from the works of Bernard Tschumi to those of Le Corbusier.

Attentive readers might point out that I have gotten myself in a muddle--was not Le Corbusier a sticking point earlier? Yet Bruno's work is exceptional because she is one of the only feminist writers today working in an interdisciplinary mode outside of architecture to tackle Architecture proper. In this, Bruno is not motivated by a desire to beat the architectural historian/theorists at their own game, but rather by the belief that Architecture deserves a place in any serious analysis of cultural and spatial representation. And, as with the best interdisciplinary work, she asks new and productive questions of these objects of study, generated by her own specialization, film theory. For instance, she asks us to think about cinema architecturally and architecture cinematically. She even writes about her own place of work, a Le Corbusier building at Harvard, and how the structure of her writing has absorbed the building's spatial qualities. As it unfolds, Bruno's journey--like ours as readers--is at once academic and emotional, theoretical and autobiographical, textual and architectural. Its richness speaks volumes about the rewards that can be gained by wandering outside of disciplinary limits and holds out the possibility that, even out of its "place," architecture can find a home.

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