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Book Review: Feminist Practices, Interdisciplinary Approaches to Women in Architecture

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Feminist Practices, Interdisciplinary Approaches to Women in Architecture, 2011, Brown Lori (Ed), Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 378 Hardcover, U.S. \$120, 9781409421177.

Reviewed by Magotsi Motanya¹

In *Feminist Practices, interdisciplinary approaches to women in architecture* edited by Lori Brown, the author raises various questions that seek to broadly define architecture and what relationships can be made between feminist methodologies and various approaches towards architectural design. Coalescing together material from various exhibitions she seeks to provide a forum for women to showcase the different ways in which practice is pursued today, hence the book contributors are only women designers. Secondly, the book is to raise awareness to the diverse ways feminist practice impacts the world around us and expands the ways we see and understand spatial and build relationships. The book presents feminist practice as interdisciplinary, reflective, emancipatory, emergent and process driven, critical, subversive and radical, challenging and upsetting the status quo and hence potentially destabilizing to it.

The first three chapters comprise of the introduction by the editor followed by two articles which expound further on feminist practices. Jane Rendell in the article, '*Critical spatial practices: setting out a feminist approach to some modes and what matters in architecture*', extends the key qualities of 'critical theory' to include the work of feminist and others whose thinking is self-critical and desirous of social change, who seek to transform rather than describe. She views the critical, political and ethical possibilities of inter-disciplinarity as being a site of exchange between theory and practice that is a key stimulus to the work of many feminists. Defining critical spatial spaces as those everyday activities that seek to resist the dominant social order of global corporate capitalism, Rendell uses the spatial instead of the architectural in order to emphasize the interdisciplinary perspective that accommodates various forms of emergent criticality as well as uses 'critical practice' instead of praxis as a reflective and emancipatory activity. Rendell identifies five themes that characterize the feminist approach to critical spatial practice. These are collectivity, interiority, alterity, performativity and materiality.

In *inventing feminist practices: women and building in Fin-de-Siecle* Berlin, Despina Stratigakos presents the genesis of the creation of a protective dignified space for the female body in the years leading to World War One. She contrasts the concerns and methods of women who pioneered feminist interventions in the built environment at the turn of the century with those of practitioners today. The German pioneers pursued dignified spaces for women beginning with a women's hospital and the studienhhaus for female college students and the professional single ladies retirement apartments. Underpinning their designs was the paying of attention to the dignity of the female body, which was construed not as an issue of cloistering but rather as one of freedom, in which women decided what they wanted to be visible or not and comfort. This ethical architecture emerged from dialogue that explored the clients' best nature and needs which explored inclusive design that gave voice to alternative lifestyles and socially and economically marginalized groups. Stratigakos argues that feminist practices today need the economic commitment of individuals and groups, whatever their gender identification, that are unwilling to live with the status quo the same way the early German pioneers did. The

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commitment of both the early female architects as well as German feminists at the turn of the century exemplifies the need not only of advocacy but of women being involved in changing the social and spatial spaces they occupy to the benefit of fellow women through action and collaboration.

After the first three chapters the rest of the book is organized around four themes namely feminist practices in design, pedagogy, research and feminist practices in communities all of which are covered through fifteen chapters by various authors mainly from America and Europe with a sprinkling from Asia. By employing drawing, modeling and installation methods, the designers, in 'Feminist practices in design', explore the specific relationship between the body and its engagement in its immediate context.

'*Breathing Spaces, whispering walls, feminist spatial practice*', by Cynthia Hammand focuses on what is often considered a transient aspect of a building, the ventilation system creating a series of sound oscillations, challenging our understanding of how air flows in and out of the building. Challenging the Victorian relationship between women and the health of the home, Hammand brings this idea out into the public realm and engages the ventilation system of the Toronto Stock Exchange. '*Breathing spaces*', highlights the aspects of the installation that are not typically materially or visually significant to ones interaction with a building, making it visible and present. This experiential exhibition highlights one aspect of women in society, drawing a parallel between the ubiquity and central role of air in a building and that of women in ensuring that society functions well in the private lives and yet their near absence in the public space. It highlights the need to sensitize society to the life-sustaining contribution of women in society. Without them life would cease to be vibrant just as without the ventilations system, the building would both be able to sustain its inhabitants.

In Julieanna Preston, '*Blazing Inter alia, Tropes of a feminist creative practice*', and Kyna Leski's 'Sister' each designer uses drawing as an exploratory means for discovery. While geometric based inquiries create formal relationships the use of collage and juxtaposing of different material image, scales, photographs and text allow a viewer to interpret drawings a new each time they are viewed. Preston's technique of text, image and sketching enables the viewer to enter into her projects from multiple places and scales. This project challenges the way one reads and understand a site and the body's relationship to it. Leski pursues her speculative domestic realm through her 'dream house' where ideas of primacy associated with the space occupied by women and their children is hardly recognizable having been transformed into the primary forms of her dream house. In the dream house we no longer understand public and private, shade and shadow in the same way.

Lois Weintzel's '*Interior-scapes*' makes use of perspectival and orthographic drawing investigations from the 18th Century furniture maker Gillows and Company to reexamine the omnipresent wing chair. Drawing from inherently gendered disciplinary representational conventions from architecture, interior design, and apparel construction, the architectural interior space is overturned and used to interrogate the relationship between the two. Creating an object altogether different and yet recognizable, her methodology questions genders impact on the use of such an object, who makes the object, and how it is made and what roles materials have in the coding of furniture.

Lillian Chee's '*Materializing the Tiger in the Archive: Creative and Architectural History*', concludes this theme by contesting the idea of the architectural model and the aura around its perfect form through a series of ingenious model billiard tables. Acknowledging the historical significance models have had in the practice of Architecture, her project's material

choices subvert the model itself producing a different reading of the models something, 'other' be it deficient, grotesque, and not particularly reverential of the more normative conventions of architectural model making. Her series is both a sharp and thoughtful critique of an architectural device most architects take for granted, provoking the viewer to see the model in new and different ways.

The next theme on feminist practices in pedagogy, three projects that engage design build paradigms to pursue pedagogic investigations are presented. These require students to both design a project and then build it at full scale all within the timeframe of a semester. Challenging the normative model of the teacher-student relationship these projects encourage students to have far much more ownership, autonomy and possession of the class process and design results as well as the working relationship of reciprocity and collaboration with the teacher. The professors strategy established an intellectual focus and design parameters for the various investigations making it performative where it becomes a means to serve as a catalyst that calls everyone to become more engaged and more active participants in learning. Thus the students' participation and influence was vital for the final designed results and completed construction.

Ronit Eisenbach presents 'placing places', a collaboratively taught class with two choreographers that developed feminist pedagogical approaches of dialogue, experimentation, play and performance to test the boundaries between architecture, choreography and the literal space they occupy. The interdisciplinarity of the work required students to reassess the process of design and the body's direct engagement and effect on this process, design became the result of how one moves through space and what one encounters through this movement.

In Margarita McGraw 'Ghost Fishing' she investigates every day and overlooked spaces, provoking her students to find potential in what is typically overlooked. Inspiring her students to recognize the responsibility we all have for spaces we share, she uses mapping techniques, cultural memory myth, and public space, to capture incorporeal aspects of a site and allowing these to inform and be revealed through the design process. Through the series of installations and performances she highlights those sites whose value is no longer clearly perceivable but once was historically significant to cultural and political identity.

Megahn Walsh's Axismundi Brazil Studio is an ongoing collaboration between architecture students and the outlying community of Plataforma Brazil. Through the design and building of a series of small scale infrastructural project including drainage systems, public stairs, ramps and handrails, the studio works towards improving the impoverished rural area slowly. These incremental enhancements together with community feedback and partnership are having a profound effect on the village and the residents quality of life, while providing long term year to year commitment.

The research presented in the feminist practices in research design exemplifies the author's description of feminism as relational and in constantly shifting state of flux. Here the feminist methodologies and approaches influence these projects in various ways, providing a voice for women and under-represented constituencies when historical, cultural and legislative endeavors deny or impede these groups to be heard or seen.

Ozlem Erdogan Erkarlan's, '*Gender roles at the Intersection of Public and Private Sphere: Transformation from Detached house to Apartment in Izmir, Turkey*', engages feminist critique of space, social and political theory to research the impact gender roles have played in the evolution and development of housing blocks in Izmir, Turkey. She traces the transformation of Turkish housing from one of traditional dwelling where women were sequestered to one of the modern post-war detached house to where women were freely visible and considered integral to

the health of the family and the state. Her research re-writes this era in Turkish history giving preeminence to women's ways of occupying and constructing domesticity.

In *'Courtyards'*, Megahn Arya on the other hand researches and documents Courtyards within traditional Indian domestic spaces tracing the climatic, societal, economic and political influences on courtyards structures, their size, and location within the Indian house. While these aspects vary by region and have evolved the essence of the courtyard has remained relatively unchanged over the ages while its evolution has reflected the dynamic relationship between public and private realm and the gradual transformation of these spaces within the Indian familial, cultural and spatial practices.

'Politicizing the Female Body', by Lori Brown explores the issues of the American Constitution's First Amendment and public space through the examination of the space of abortion clinics. Through the use of drawing and mapping techniques, Lori illustrates how highly restrictive state legislation makes abortion access next to impossible for many lower income women in states with few abortion providers. As different states independently control and govern degrees of access, legislation creates both sites of access and denial. This manipulation of political and spatial relationships directly impacts women's mobility and access to spaces of abortion. This research provides a prospect for architecture and its techniques to engage a much larger and contested spatial terrain with grave implications for marginalized and poor women.

Kim Steele's, *'Home Grown'* research investigates the complex relationship between Industrial agriculture and environmental and social justice issues. Using both drawing and mapping techniques to both illustrate and explore, She presents a series of case studies to critique and present vast networks of contamination caused by Industrial pollution. While the environment has been a concern of feminism as seen by eco-feminist movement, one struggles to clearly understand how this research specifically contributes to the feminist environmental agenda. It would have added much flavor to the research had the author provided implication of the degradation on women and marginalized groups.

The Projects in Feminist practices in Communities section involve and are dependent on communities that the designers work with. Working with under-represented constituencies from each project's initiation, each designer positions herself as a collaborator with her community partner. Ingeniously incorporating feminist methodologies in the design practices, each project contests power structures and crafts alternative models for practice.

Janet McGaws *'Urban Threads'* installation project asks what it means for a woman to mark out a private territory in a public space, these architectural installations created a series of 'rooms' for both the women and the city and a 'passage' connecting them. Working with the assent and collaboration of several homeless women in Melbourne Australia, the project provides both a literal and political voice, empowering the women to claim public space beyond ways they usually would through a series of installations that they themselves construct.

Liza Fior and Katherine Clarke *'Preparations for the afterlife: Barking Town Square Muf Architecture/art'*, initiated a series of workshops with residents on Barking East London, to better understand the communities hopes and fears of public space and thus being able to reconceptualize what the civic space on their local town would become. Through the creation of staged events Muf translated the residents desires through the creation of construction fences with collaged images created from community involvement. Muf was able to articulate that *'consultation can also be an exchange... Project by project we designed contemporary accommodation for voices and knowledge which were big enough for difference.'* Meta Brunzema's Park Avenue mile market project includes designing strategies and procedures of

how local small business can be created and sustained for the market mile project in East Harlem, New York. Design impacted all facets of the project from initial discussions with the developer, the physical image and branding of the project to tax implications and responsibilities for running a small cottage business.

The text while addressing some of the key issues in Architecture however adopts an elitist approach and deals with those aspects of women concerns in architecture from a purely hypothetical and academic point of view. One would have liked to see more contribution with respect to the role gendered architecture has to contribute to the factory place, the workplace and the home, How the increased professionalization of women is contributing to changes in architectural practice, how women architects are contributing to the feminist agenda beyond aesthetic demonstration of how architecture interacts with the arts. Other than a few contributions from Asia and noticeable by its silence and absence is the contribution and issues of feminism in the developing world, where gender roles are still very much stereotypical and the paternal power structures still have a stranglehold on society. Does the absence of this voice indicate that there are no women architects concerned with the gendered role of women in developing society or was it a continuation of the western hegemony on knowledge production and dissemination even in the feminist sphere?

The book is highly technical and not an easy read for the ordinary person on the street; the use of plain language would have made it more accessible. However it is a good attempt in bringing issues of gender and feminism in an arena that has long been dominated by patriarchy. Despite its limitations, scholars interested gender studies will find it a useful contribution to the understanding of feminism and architecture.

REFERENCE

Brown Lori, (Ed) 2011, *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Women in Architecture*, Ashgate Publishing Ltd