

Making Trouble to Stay With: Architecture and Feminist Pedagogies

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Architecture is, at its most basic, about imagining desirable futures. Yet, despite growing awareness of the lasting and extensive effects that design decisions have in the world, many people remain inadequately represented (or entirely unrepresented) by the profession, which lacks diversity. The faction of those who hold the power to design is still, by and large, comprised of a relatively homogenous group of middle-class white men who dominate not only the profession but also architectural education, even though there is now—in most places—near gender parity among students. How, then, might we—as educators committed to forms and practices of architecture that are inclusive, progressive, egalitarian, socially and environmentally just, and so on—implement and promote feminist pedagogies? Together, this set of short responses by young as well as established figures in the field, begins to sketch the outlines of an approach to architectural education rooted in feminist politics. Our goal is to offer possible tools at our disposal, from revisionist architectural history to site-specific, community-based spatial projects to gender-centered design studios.

If the architectural profession is to play an incisive role in current and future world making, we believe that the discipline must fundamentally change. How “architectural” knowledge is produced and reproduced in the academy, first and foremost through teaching, matters a great deal in this regard, and calls for urgent and radical reconfiguration. Engaging adequately with entangled, promiscuous and inevitably messy realities requires forms of knowing and doing that place emphasis on collaboration and cross-disciplinary exchange, on interdependency as well as contingency. Yet architecture, a notoriously conservative discipline with roots in the long nineteenth century, all too often clings to traditional notions of individual mastery, genius, and autonomy, while also maintaining deeply hierarchical and patriarchal structures.

Feminist thinkers such as Donna Haraway and bell hooks have, by contrast, championed diverse practices that hold the potential to “trouble” such prevailing models, while furthermore providing fruitful alternatives to normative forms of knowledge production.¹ For example, Haraway stresses that all knowledge is situated as opposed to objective or universal, encouraging the persistent acknowledgement of positionality with regard to any given problem or claim. She furthermore advocates experimental forms of research and expression – including what she calls “speculative fabulation” – that are grounded in the world, while, at the same time, recognizing their potential to make worlds otherwise. Meanwhile, hooks highlights the emancipatory potential of education, espousing pedagogical practices that transgress the limits of the classroom. With particular sensitivity to gender, race, and class, she aims to transform the dominant power relations that are socially reproduced through knowledge. Extending from this, our contribution springs from the question: How might we—as educators committed to forms and practices of architecture that are progressive, egalitarian, socially and environmentally just, and so on—implement and promote feminist pedagogies?

The following, collected inputs—framed by way of three loose and interrelated questions—are based upon conversations held during a roundtable panel on pedagogy at the “Architecture and Feminisms” conference hosted by the KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm in November 2016. Along with our fellow “educator-kin” and a lively audience, we discussed not only ways that feminist pedagogical strategies might contribute to meaningful “troublemaking” in the architectural discipline, but also how we might build the alliances and networks necessary to keeping that trouble productively alive. Our aim, in other words, was to further an “ecology of practices”² and practitioners in architectural education that might transform the discipline in responsive and sustainable fashion.

¹ See: Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016); bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (New York: Routledge, 2010); *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003); *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

² Isabelle Stengers, “Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices”, *Cultural Studies Review*, no. 11 (2005), 183–96.

What forms might feminist pedagogy take in architecture and who are its potential protagonists (imaginary or real)?

Andrea Merrett

Although not immediately concerned with pedagogy, the feminist architects who wrote the first histories of women in the profession provided the material to expand the canon taught to architecture students.³ They were part of a first generation of architects and scholars who challenged the disciplinary boundaries of architectural history to include not only female architects, but also other histories not previously told.⁴ The work of recuperating these histories is ongoing and has yet to radically alter what and how history is taught, at least here in North America.⁵

This raises, for me, the question: what is the role of the architectural historian in a professional school? Beyond developing students' skills in research, the synthesis and analysis of texts and artifacts, and the presentation of their ideas, the historian can help students understand the context of architectural production. This includes the histories of professionalization, office practices, and construction laws. Furthermore, I believe that historians can be instrumental in countering the insularity of the architecture school around the design studio by connecting architecture to the larger social, political, and cultural forces that shape it.

Feminist scholars in the 1970s, after all, were never just interested in who the female architects were, but also the social and professional norms that excluded most women from practice, and the other ways women have contributed to the built environment. A more recent generation of scholars have extended these earlier feminist analyses to gender and spatial relations, representational strategies, text and language, and race and sexuality.⁶ Mining this work for content and methodologies goes beyond uncritically adding women to the canon to expand students' exposure not just to the history of construction, but the construction of history, and their place in it.

Harriet Harriss

Epigraph: "A mistress is not a female mister.... nor a starlet a female star. In fact, a starlet is not a star at all." – Sol Saporta.⁷

That there are fewer women architects than men cannot be blamed on practice alone: schools of architecture share a burden of responsibility too. However, the gender gap between men and women within roles of academic leadership is even more acute. In the UK for example, the male to female ratio for heads of school is 1:40. Women heads can be counted on one hand.

³ See, for example, Doris Cole, *From Tipi to Skyscraper: a History of Women in Architecture* (Boston: i press inc., 1973); Susana Torre, ed., *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1977).

⁴ For example, Dolores Hayden, *Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981).

⁵ Meltem Ö. Gürel and Kathryn H. Anthony, "The Canon and the Void: Gender, Race, and Architectural History Texts," *Journal of Architectural Education* 59, no. 3 (February 2006).

⁶ For example, Diana Agrest et al., eds., *The Sex of Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996); Kathryn H. Anthony, *Designing for Diversity: Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in the Architectural Profession* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Beatriz Colomina, ed., *Sexuality and Space* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992).

⁷ Sol Saporta, cited in Paul J. Hopper, ed., *Studies in Descriptive and Historical Linguistics: Festschrift for Winfred P. Lehmann* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 1977), 214.

Subsequently, it's the "masters" and not the "mistresses" of architecture whose pedagogies pervade. Unless staffing teams are inclusively peopled, inclusive pedagogies fall flat. Feminist pedagogies are not only needed to provide a set of principles and practices for educational equality, but also to build a space in which women can inhabit educational institutions to begin with.

For a mistress pedagogue in a position of influence, explicitly promoting feminist pedagogies can often be discredited as "subjective," "personal" and "politicizing" (i.e. actions considered "un-academic"), fueling the fear that such "activism" will worsen already poor chances of promotion and increase isolation.⁸ Yet feminist pedagogy emphasizes collective over individual action, to protect rather than expose its own. It demands that the false dichotomies that divide us are deconstructed - from student v tutor to end-user v architect – disrupting the debilitating and exhausted power relations that have served to perpetuate partitions based on gender identity, ethnicity, class, age, ability and sexuality (figs. 1 & 2).

Feminist pedagogy tackles the problem of inequality in all its forms and across architecture writ large: from how a male tutor might relate to a female student, to how the profession allows manual laborers to be treated on site. Whilst gender-sensitive pedagogies invite us to acknowledge diversity and difference⁹, feminist pedagogies emphasize our interconnectedness: the need to share and redistribute and to work for collective good and not just individual goals. As the world outside the classroom is fast becoming increasingly inequitable, feminist pedagogy provides a working prototype for students; it helps them report, resist or reconfigure, but never to resign to the present reality. In the face of the fear-fueled crisis that previous patriarchal pedagogies have helped foster, feminist pedagogy is not the backswing of a fist but the leveling force needed to defibrillate the unfolding disaster.

⁸ The ACSA statistics (2015) identify 1:4 women/men educator ratios in the USA, 1:5 at Dean level. See <http://www.acsa-arch.org/resources/data-resources/women>. In contrast, UK stats are closer to 1:3 women/men. See: David Gloster, RIBA Education Statistics, 2013-14, <https://www.architecture.com/Files/RIBAProfessionalServices/Education/2015/EducationStatistics2013-2014.pdf>. Statistics exist identifying whether the women are likely to be in leadership roles or not.

⁹ Sherry Ahrentzen and Kathryn H. Anthony, "Sex, Stars, and Studios: A look at Gendered Educational Practices in Architecture," *Journal of Architectural Education* 47, no. 1 (1993), 11-29. Ahrentzen preferred gender-sensitive to gender indifferent.

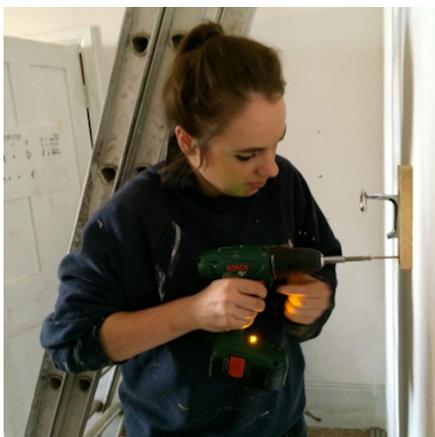


Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 MA architecture students working on a live project on Fish Island in Hackney, London 2014. The brief tasked students with inserting 'meanwhile' spaces into a disused building scheduled for redevelopment, giving the spaces a useful community purpose in the interim. Photographs by Harriet Harriss.

Which practical strategies have you employed to set an explicitly feminist agenda in your design studio teaching and how have students responded to such efforts?

Iradj Moeini

Our studio started with a series of discussions on feminism that helped students familiarise with the topic in an Iranian academic context, in which feminist views are virtually unknown. A consensus developed during these sessions that feminism is part of a broader set of ideas oriented toward unraveling historically developed forms of discrimination and exclusion.

The discussions were also focused on issues of abuse – something a typical student in Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, knows little about – and how women are affected differently, and often more severely, by it in many societies. This helped shift the common perception of fugitive abused women as being oblique, or even criminal, to one wherein they are understood to have suffered tough, discriminatory circumstances which need to be addressed with support and, if necessary, shelter.

Our studio project evolved in conjunction with readings and discussions on feminist art, women's movements, gender and public space, feminine design, and psychoanalysis. It also included case studies of houses for abused women both in Iran and abroad, through which students explored the vulnerable situation of these women, how they feel about their various environments, and ways in which they can be better protected and cared for through architecture. Some of the design themes and strategies that students came up with were: domesticity, glamour, merging into/emerging from nature, complexity-simplicity symbiosis, greenness, symbolic connotations, soft materiality, and craftiness.

Most contentious was the issue of site selection. Diverging from mainstream practice in our school, students focused carefully on not only access, views, and adjacent land uses, but also the factors that might positively affect abused women's quality of life, both in terms of giving them a sense of security and facilitating their reintegration into society. Although students' opinions were often divided, a consensus developed that such issues have a significant gendered dimension.

In the end, a site was selected next to a women-only park called 'Mothers' Paradise'. This involved another series of debates as to whether or not the association between motherhood—or, to use Sara Ahmed's words, the condition of being 'happy housewives'—and paradise is something that should be challenged.¹⁰

By the time students reached the design stage, they had developed their individual ideas of how to address the specific issues of their users,

¹⁰ Sarah Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 50–53.

not only by sheltering them from further abuse, but also by designing gender-conscious spaces.

Rachel Sara

¹¹ See <http://www.hands-on-bristol.co.uk>.

¹² bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge 2003); and Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1989).

¹³ For the first year of a two year, RIBA Part II accredited Master of Architecture course at the University of the West of England, UK.

¹⁴ Live Projects Network: <http://liveprojectsnetwork.org/about/>.

¹⁵ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (London: Routledge, 1994), 207.

I write this as a part of the hands-on-bristol collective,¹¹ which acts as a platform to bring together community members, architects, architecture students, and academics, to work together in order to generate positive changes within our city, Bristol, United Kingdom. I also write this as an academic with a particular concern for the promotion of diversity – both in terms of *who* is involved in education and the profession as well as *what* is valued as architecture. This emphasis on diversity is underpinned by a radical feminist and transformative pedagogy, inspired, in particular, by bell hooks and Paulo Freire.¹²

Our collective has set up an ongoing practice of studio projects¹³ that take students beyond the confines of the university, with its traditional focus on design as an individual sovereign act, and into diverse, local communities with the aim of building design projects that are collaborative, negotiated, connected, inclusive, and empathetic.

We understand these efforts as representing a type of live community architecture. Whereas typical live projects are often assumed to comprise “the negotiation of a brief, timescale, budget and product between an educational organization and an external collaborator for their mutual benefit,” and to be “structured to ensure that students gain learning that is relevant to their educational development,”¹⁴ we conceive of live community architecture as a form of spatial agency which involves collaboration between a community and architects that results to their mutual benefit and, ideally, a positive and sustained impact on both. A feminist agenda shifts the focus towards inclusive co-creation and participatory practices. The primary objective is civic spatial agency, in which knowledge is generated collectively throughout the process (rather than focused on the students’ individual learning).

Students have responded to such projects in mixed ways. Some feel constrained by “consulting,” and hang on to their presumed positions of expertise where possible. Others engage in ways that seek out the voices of silenced others to challenge questions of difference and engage in inclusive co-creation. The most powerful work reconceives the relationship between all involved as something akin to a learning community, in which design is understood as a practice of freedom that brings forth new consciousness about the conditions that shape (a) community’s place(s) in the world.¹⁵ It furthermore catalyzes community action beyond the confines of an academic project, so that projects become largely self-sufficient and live on into the future (figs. 3 & 4).



Fig. 3 Ebenezer Gate, Bristol, a project to create a community pocket park. Photograph by Marcus Way.



Fig. 4 Wayfarers: portable recycled architecture to reclaim the street for performance. Photograph by Thomas Sale.

Which conceptual frameworks, from critical theory to activism, can be mobilized in order to articulate and extend feminist pedagogy?

Lila Athanasiadou

Within the context of architectural education, pedagogical practices tend to follow prescriptive models grounded in either inductive or deductive reasoning. The former, envious of methodologies used in hard sciences, reproduces 1:1, all-encompassing representations, reducing social complexity to a problem-solution dialectic while transforming empirical observations into axiomatic truths. The latter, fixated on styles, specific representational techniques, and idealizations of specific architectural theories, fetishizes the image of the architecture rather than the practices it affords. Both models encourage students to adopt preexisting positions rather than to forge their own, and make for a teaching practice that is based on the transference rather than the transduction of knowledge. A feminist rethinking of pedagogy, by contrast, radically reorients attention from the form of the project to the entire, process-based assemblage of educator, student, and content.

Felix Guattari's "meta-modeling" offers a conceptual framework based on abductive reasoning, which shifts the focus from locating and reusing existing models to developing a sensibility toward their emergence. His scheme traces the formation of the subject through the relationality between patterns (models) and the crystallization of subjectivity as it transverses these relations.¹⁶ By abstracting the methodological movements of meta-modeling, the creative process shifts its subject matter from the things-in-themselves (understood as products) to the resonances between them and the contingencies of their formation. This design process forms in two asymmetrical registers: the foreground, as the product of the process; and the background, which encompasses non-goal oriented activities, thought-based and tangible experimentation, as well as intuition. The background process encourages an abductive reasoning based on the "hypothetical inference" preceded by a material observation that both describes something and interferes with it.¹⁷

By adopting a problematic approach rather than an axiomatic one, meta-modeling as a pedagogical practice problematizes all models and preconceptions. It becomes a way of unlearning standards and conventions, questioning the means of approaching a problem as well as the problem itself.¹⁸ Instead of aiming to provide clear answers to clearly defined questions, it shifts the question until the answer becomes a process of how to answer a question of that nature. This operation transforms it into an action on an action, a design of the process of designing, rather than the design of mere products.

¹⁶ Félix Guattari, *Schizoanalytic Cartographies* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012).

¹⁷ Lorenzo Magnani, "Chapter 6: Abduction, Affordances, and Cognitive Niches" in *Abductive Cognition: The Epistemological and Eco-Cognitive Dimensions of Hypothetical Reasoning* (Berlin Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 2009), 318.

¹⁸ In the first chapter of the *Queer Art of Failure*, Jack (Judith) Halberstam envisions a similar "open" pedagogy that is "not fixed on a telos", "without fixed logics and epistemes", but instead playful, experimental, abductive rather than deductive or inductive, and problem-making rather than problem-solving. Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art Of Failure*, 1st ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 16-17.

Jane Rendell

In 2003, I introduced the term “critical spatial practice” to define modes of self-reflective artistic and architectural practice which seek to question and to transform the social conditions of the sites into which they intervene, and test the limits of their own disciplinary procedures.¹⁹ At the heart of the project is a focus on the “inter” and the “trans” as places and processes that operate between and across art and architecture, theory and practice, public and private.²⁰ My pedagogical approach relates closely to my practice-led research: they inform one another. The feminist aspect is palpable in the attention paid to positionality and subjectivity, and the unerring return of site-specificity, situation and situated-ness in the work.²¹

Through writing about critical spatial practice, I came to understand criticism as a form of critical spatial practice, one I named “site-writing”.²² Site-writing is the pedagogical challenge I set myself annually (for around 16 years now). Each year, I offer a group of students the invitation to produce a piece of experimental writing, one that responds to, but also intervenes into, a site, conceptually and formally. Most recently, site-writing has transformed into site-reading, where texts on the “reading list” get configured and read aloud on site, participants set writing workshops for each other, and I get to go wherever I am taken!²³

- ¹⁹ Jane Rendell, “A Place Between Art, Architecture and Critical Theory,” in *Proceedings to Place and Location* (Tallinn, Estonia: 2003), 221-33 and Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London: IB Tauris, 2006), 1-2, 4, 6, 9, 12, 66 and 191. This term was in to response to Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* [1980] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) and Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* [1974] (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). Most recently, see Jane Rendell, “Critical Spatial Practice as Parrhesia,” special issue of *MaHKUscript, Journal of Fine Art Research* 1, no. 2 (2016).
- ²⁰ Inspired by Julia Kristeva, “Institutional Interdisciplinarity in Theory and Practice: An Interview,” in *The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity, De-, Dis-, Ex-, v.2*, ed. Alex Coles and Alexia Defert (London: Blackdog Press, 1999); Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, “Intellectuals and Power,” in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (New York, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 205-17; and Judith Butler, “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue,” in *The Political: Readings in Continental Philosophy*, ed. David Ingram (London: Basil Blackwell, 2002).
- ²¹ For example, Claire Doherty, ed. *Situation* (Cambridge: MIT Press with Whitechapel Gallery, 2009); Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3, (Autumn 1988), 575-99; Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985); D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics and Performance* (London: Sage Publications, 2004).
- ²² See Jane Rendell, “Architecture-Writing,” in *Critical Architecture*, ed. Jane Rendell, special issue of *The Journal of Architecture* 10, no. 3 (June 2005), 255-64; Jane Rendell, “Site-Writing,” in *Transmission: Speaking and Listening, vol. 4*, ed. Sharon Kivland, Jaspar Joseph-Lester and Emma Cocker (Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University, 2005), 169-76; and Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (London: IB Tauris, 2010). These followed my interest in “artwriting”. See David Carrier, *Artwriting* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987).
- ²³ Jane Rendell with Adriana Keramida, Povilas Marozas, Mrinal Rammohan, “Site-Writing,” in *Engaged Urbanism: Cities and Methodologies*, ed. Ben Campkin and Gers Duijzing (London: IB Tauris, 2016), 35-44.

Epilogue

As conveners of the pedagogy-themed roundtable session forming the basis for this piece, we arrived to the conversation hungry to learn from others about their insights and experiences with building feminist-oriented architectural teaching, including the strategies and references employed as well as the challenges, or even failures, encountered in the process. We were particularly motivated by our efforts to address the pronounced gender inequity at ETH Zurich, our current institutional home.²⁴ Here, among other things, we are working to introduce an interdepartmental seminar in which feminism, in addition to being our subject matter, is taken up as a method and orientation through which to critically explore architecture in its various aspects, scales, and modes of operation – from design through to technology and construction, history and theory, urbanism and landscape.

In closing, we wish to emphasize that all of these discussions take place in the context of the intensifying financialization of higher education, as reflected in the growing proportion of and competition for private funding, the expectation of wildly accelerated academic production, and the rising influence of the administrative sector. This trend has significant implications for gender-related concerns. Increasingly resembling an extractive economy, the academy measures output (i.e., academic products) in ever more quantified terms. While argued to be somehow objective, metric-based evaluation has been shown, again and again – according to numerous studies on the workplace, including the academic workplace, specifically – to mask, and thereby to perpetuate, gender biases. Again, feminist scholarship has proven especially useful for negotiating these emergent conditions. A recent manifesto on “slow scholarship,” for instance, offers models for a “feminist ethics of care that challenges the accelerated time and elitism of the neoliberal university,” including its “isolating effects and embodied work conditions.”²⁵

Together, this set of short responses to questions about feminist pedagogy in architecture – by young as well as established figures in the field – begins to sketch the outlines of an approach to architectural education rooted in feminist politics as well as to offer possible tools at our disposal for achieving it, from revisionist architectural history to site-specific, community-based spatial projects to gender-centered design studios. In the end, we believe that feminism helps us to critically assess the various structures, superstructures, and everyday practices that shape architecture today, especially in this moment of extreme financialization. Perhaps more importantly, at the level of content, form, and method alike, feminism provides crucial insights into how we might help our students to develop the skills demanded to not only question the inequitable and oppressive powers at play, but also to imagine and produce architecture otherwise.

²⁴ Since 2015, the Parity Group in the Department of Architecture at ETH Zurich, a grassroots initiative established by academic staff and students with which both of us are actively involved, has been confronting the lack of diversity, gender-wise and otherwise, at our institution. To this end, the group has organized two multi-day symposia, titled “Parity Talks”, one each in 2016 and 2017. During these events, we have chaired roundtable discussions about issues of gender in relation to architectural pedagogy as well as practical strategies for implementing gender-sensitive academic policies. See: <http://www.aaa.arch.ethz.ch/parity.html>.

²⁵ Alison Mountz, et. al., “For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University,” *ACME: an International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 14, no. 4 (2015): 1236-37.

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