

TAKING PLACE 8: INTERSTITIAL BREAKFAST

Making Space for Questions about Architecture and Feminism

Teresa Hoskyns and Katie Lloyd Thomas with **taking place** (Jos Boys, Julia Dwyer, Helen Stratford).

Images by Sue Ridge

In November 2001, exactly 15 years before the *Architecture & Feminisms* conference in Stockholm, the feminist spatial practice group **taking place** had organized ‘**taking place 2**’ at the University of North London. We invited 100 guests – mostly women - to the architecture school and brought domestic ‘supporting’ activities into the front-of-house and spaces of presentation. We started the day with a shared breakfast.

The themes of *Architecture & Feminisms* remain central to the work each of us continue to do, and many of the group who had been involved with **taking place 2** were already making individual contributions to the conference. We used the opportunity to re-visit our conversations and to extend them to others at this new event. We asked conference delegates, ‘What are the relevant questions for architecture and feminism today?’ On the second morning, before paper sessions began, we gathered together with delegates over breakfast to discuss their questions, recording comments on tablecloths as we talked and ate.

At *Architecture & Feminisms* in November 2016 the feminist spatial practice group **taking place** convened an early morning ‘interstitial breakfast’ in the main lecture hall, ‘stealing the early morning’ before the conference proper started for the day. Together with conference organisers and volunteers we provided refreshments and remade the space by placing chairs around cabaret tables, dressing and laying the tables for the breakfast (see figure 1). We supplied tablecloths we had designed with printed questions for discussion, provided by conference delegates in response to ‘What are the relevant questions for architecture and feminism today?’ (see figure 2, Table Arrangement by Helen Stratford) and left pens for recording the thoughts and conversation that followed between conference participants who joined us. Each of us gave a short introduction, talking about the group’s work together and the questions which concerned us. Extracts of these individual reflections are included in the text which follows. The tables and annotated cloths were left in place for most of the day, altering the space and allowing the questions and written contributions to be viewed and added to by others as they listened to presentations. Later, we hung them on the wall and exhibited them for the rest of the conference.

¹ For the group’s CV and more details about the range of our projects together see www.takingplace.org.uk. For a more detailed contextualization of the group’s development and early activities see, Teresa Hoskyns and Doina Petrescu (and other mixed voices), ‘taking place and altering it’, in *Altering Practices: Feminist politics and poetics of space*, ed. Doina Petrescu (London: Routledge 2007), 15-38.

² **taking place 2** ‘Women and Spatial Practice’ (University of North London, November 2001). See Helen Stratford (with Teresa Hoskyns and Katie Lloyd Thomas), ‘taking place 2’, *Scroope 14*, 2002.

³ **taking place 3** ‘A 3 day Feminist School of Architecture’ (Sheffield University, September 2002).

⁴ **taking place 4** ‘Becoming Space’ (Living Art Museum, Reykjavik, October 2003).

⁵ **taking place 5** ‘Technologien im Raum’ (Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart, March 2005).

⁶ **taking place 6** ‘The Other Side of Waiting’ (Homerton Hospital, Hackney, 2007 -2011). For more on this long-term participatory art project in the Mother and Baby Unit at Homerton Hospital see; Katie Lloyd Thomas and **taking place**, ‘the other side of waiting’, *Feminist Review 93* (2009): 122-127; Julia Dwyer, ‘Inscription as a collective practice: **taking place** and “The Other Side of Waiting”’, in *The Design Collective: An Approach to Practice*, ed. Harriet Edquist and Laurene Vaughan (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 35-53.

⁷ **taking place 7** was a performative intervention at *Sexuate Subjects* (University College London, December 2010).

taking place 8: Interstitial Breakfast is the most recent of a series of events and longer term projects that the group has collaborated on since 2000, in a variety of sites and configurations of people.¹ As Helen explained in her biographical introduction at the start of the event:

“The **taking place** group began in 2000 with the view to creating a larger celebratory event, the process towards this event, the becoming, has been key, evolving into a multiplicity of connections, practices and processes, opening up questions around feminist spatial practices. Through a series of private workshops, public events and public art projects **taking place** has developed a collaborative methodology where projects are created out of differences between individuals, disciplines, participants, audiences and ourselves. From challenging the male hierarchies of the architecture school, in the Universities of North London² and Sheffield³ through performative practices to feminist conversations and encounters with technology in arts institutions, Living Art Museum, Reykjavik⁴ and Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart,⁵ to working in material ways with the highly gendered site of a new Perinatal Centre, Homerton Hospital Hackney, London,⁶ **taking place** has consistently tried to avoid unitary positions, manifestos or hierarchical ways of organizing. Instead, **taking place** has changed and adapted in size, composition and different states of becoming.”⁷

Interstitial Breakfast was also a re-making of part of our first public event, **taking place 2**, which had happened exactly 15 years before



Fig. 1 Photo: Sue Ridge

the *Architecture & Feminisms* conference. At **taking place 2** we invited 100 guests to spend the day with us at the architecture school at University of North London (UNL) (November 22-23, 2001) and started the morning with a breakfast. Repeating that event in a new context, 15 years on, recalls the first opening out of our private conversations over croissants and coffee; it allows for reflection upon changes – personal, contextual and in the field of feminist practice - across the intervening years, and is also another iteration in our own working method.

Eating Together

Before **taking place 2**, we had been coming together privately for over a year, organizing meetings around sharing food, discussion and our individual practices.⁸ At the public event at UNL, we retained this focus, while bringing domestic ‘supporting’ activities that are usually hidden (from coat-check, to washing-up and lunch preparation) into the front-of-house and spaces of presentation. Teresa described that first **taking place** breakfast event:

“As part of **taking place 2** at UNL 2001, we organised our first breakfast with the idea that at this kind of event people like talking as much as listening. A lot of the interesting

⁸ **taking place 1** private workshops (University of East London, 2000).

taking place Interstitial Breakfast: November 18 2016 8:00 – 9:00

In 2001 the art/architecture collective taking place hosted a breakfast at the University of North London posing our own questions about architecture and feminism. Exactly 15 years later we asked Architecture & Feminisms delegates what are the relevant questions for architecture and feminism today?

We invite you to discuss them over breakfast.

www.takingplace.org.uk

Why do we keep having to relearn our past?

How are feminist principles manifested in built works of architecture?

How can we best address the generational differences between definitions of & attitudes toward the word "feminism" so that it may be a word that joins, rather than separates, all ages?

How can the role of feminine playful spaces contribute to developing new forms of representation in waste urban spaces?

How do we reconstruct a legacy of women working in architecture? How do we make them more visible and present in our discourse about architecture? How do we make their concerns heard?

What are the ways in which architecture as a discipline participates in intersectionality, or the multiple frameworks of identity at play in the social field? Is that a term that our discipline is specially equipped to handle or is it woefully limited in that regard?

If we want to correct the underrepresentation of women in architecture's most visible practices, how do we avoid adopting masculine norms of success as guidelines for women's attitudes in the workplace?

Women Architects are often not mentioned in literature concerning architectural history and/or theory. If they are mentioned than often in passing or as collaborators and wives of male architects. Should it be a goal to 'rewrite' such history books towards a more inclusive history of architecture or are such books obsolete?

Can feminism survive resource conflicts?

What is the framework for sexual ethics in a socio-cultural environment that can interrogate gender equity, privilege and heteronormativity?

How do women redefine their practice?

How can feminist thought approach and improve current housing and make it more socially inclusive?

[Are there] Feminine ways of occupying urban space?

Although feminist scholars have greatly increased their work, it does not flow to practitioners or to the public in a way that has caught on. How to integrate feminism and architecture needs persuasive arguments and activism to compete in a profession with many challenges.

'[Architectural and feminist theory, arguably] has shifted from oppositional dichotomies to include and embrace a spectrum of differences.' (Hilde Heynen and Gwendolen Wright) Is this the case today, and if so, what might this diversity mean for architecture and feminism?

How does architecture address the need for 'situatedness' in an increasingly mobile and networked world?

How can we carve out a space in practice where there is room for analyses of power structures, and how they play out in the spaces we create?

How can the architect reclaim a role where we can contribute to a socially and environmentally sustainable society?

How can we move away from a situation where we are passive executioners of commissions from the builders, and take a more active role in what spaces we create, building more inclusive societies that we can actually be proud of?!

How can we move towards a situation when city planning and architecture is based on the idea of an inclusive and sustainable society, where the initiative comes from the town planning office and not from builders looking to maximize their profit?

How can we challenge the fundamental male dominance in the building industry (that is, as the architecture profession becomes more gender balanced, the building industry at large is characterised by inertia and non-transparent structures), and what could be the result of a balanced field of practice and production?

How is a feminist architecture to develop responsible and caring approaches to transforming/making the world in such a way that it will welcome and host all living beings and all existing, imaginable and still-to-be-invented forms of life?

Is a nomadic feminist practice that actually affirms different notions of spatiality and subjectivities possible within architectural practice?

There is an urgent need for "rethinking the social in architecture" in late modernistic housing areas. In relationship to that I'm interested in posing the question of how feministic city planning could develop a method not only involving the citizens in social pre-studies, but bringing the process further into the design- and conventional planning phase?

There is a need for new types of social places that could change the public sphere, that in many examples are dominated by men - but certainly not are attractive to women.

Women do not have time to spend in public; they are occupied in domestic life. Is it possible to create 'hybrid' spaces with another type of necessary activities, taking more important roles in everyday life in comparison to cafés, shops etc.? One example is Stepwells in India. Could we mix playgrounds with restaurants, laundry with cafés? Or could we take this spatial challenge even further? Could a method be developed to give a strong motif that collaboration between feminism and architecture generates an important tool for "rethinking the social in architecture"?

Simply: How to and why make feminism a mainstream topic in architecture?

How can feminism continue to affect our everyday practice and ethics within architecture?

Is it about the articulation of difference (feminist spaces, practices, etc), or is it about equal rights?

How do we engage those who consider Feminist issues totally irrelevant to Architecture?

How should we raise the question of social and environmental justice to become a mainstream political objective?

Is there a sexual specificity in relation to space?

How can feminism, within and about, architecture engage effectively with our politically unstable times?

Do public planning need feminist separatist groups so change the norm? To exclude to be able to include?

How does the privatisation and neo liberalisation of universities impact on feminist teaching and research in architecture schools?

As our society shifts in values, how do you address the patriarchal nature of much of the pre existing built environment?

To what extent is it possible/desirable for tools and modes of practice informed by feminist theory in architecture to find space within mainstream structures?

In which context and scale is it possible to act and who can make supply decisions?

How could the concerns of feminism be infiltrated in the conceptualisation of architecture, as an active component of the discipline but without its differentiation as activism?

How to implement feminist work practices and research into the architectural profession?

How can we improve wages and childcare support for women in the profession to ensure more women are able to develop their careers in architecture?

Fig. 2 Table Arrangement by Helen Stratford

work that happens in conferences can be the conversations in the corridors and over lunch. The first shared meal and discussion was a breakfast over prepared questions with comments recorded on tablecloths as visitors talked and ate. The breakfast room then formed the setting for the following lectures. At the time questions of public space and public art were high on the agenda. Questions included, ‘why is public art commonplace in feminist practice? To what extent is public art representation and how can we go further?’”

“The performative methods of **taking place** have been literally to ‘take a place’ for the discussion of feminist theory and practice in architecture schools and other institutions by re-inventing, re-arranging and performing space. (see figure 3) The questions themselves act as a critical method to produce discursive spaces. On returning from the Alterities conference (Paris, 1999), Katie and I co-ordinated a regular meeting of the group Women Architects For Equal Representation (WAFER) asking the question: ‘What does a feminist architecture look like?’ Inspired by the Alterities conference, our aim was to move the discussion at WAFER from women’s rights in the architectural profession to the question of sexual difference in architectural design. My question today is, how can feminists maintain a critical position in universities in the context of the ongoing privatisation? ”

Sharing food together has continued to be central to the way we work together in private and in public. The carefully set and choreographed meal is a recurring meal in feminist work, from Judy Chicago’s lavish ornamental *The Dinner Party* to the feast-based events of the Swedish feminist practice FATALE whose work we first encountered at the conference *Sexuate Subjects* following **taking place 7**, our own performance about our project ‘The Other Side of Waiting’.⁹ Prior to Interstitial Breakfast much discussion went into the breakfast menu between the conference organisers and **taking place** members, and the process of buying and preparing food involved many of the conference volunteers and participants. (see figure 4)

Menu

Coffee (unlimited)

Water (ditto)

A variety of fikabröds (sweet Swedish pastries that accompany coffee)

Knäckebröd (crisp flat unleavened rye bread)

Swedish cheese, sliced fine

Clementines

Sweets: liquorice torpedos (sugar coated liquorice)

Chocolate and sugar coated almonds

⁹ **taking place 7** was a performative intervention at *Sexuate Subjects* (University College London, December 2010). For more on FATALE’s work which has run in parallel alongside our own, see Meike Schalk, Brady Burroughs, Katja Grillner and Katarina Bonnevier, ‘FATALE Critical Studies in Architecture’, *Nordic Journal of Architecture* 2 (2011): 90-96; Katja Grillner ‘Design research and critical transformations: Situating thought, projecting action’, in *Design Research in Architecture*, ed. Murray Fraser (London: Ashgate, 2013).



Fig. 3 Photo: Sue Ridge



Fig. 4 Photo: Sue Ridge

As Julia commented:

“I am convinced that the sensual nature of eating is and has been really important to some of our interventions. I think too that what was noteworthy about TP8 was how the physiological effect of having so much sugar and coffee first thing played out during the conference that day alongside the more enduring effect of having those conversations in that setting.”

Questions

Our contribution to ‘Feminism Is On the Agenda’ at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London, 2008, was also organised around food and discussion, and around putting a series of questions to participants. There our questions included: ‘What is feminist critical practice?’ ‘What is the relationship between art and architecture in a feminist approach?’

‘What is the relationship between authorship and feminism in art and architecture?’ ‘What is particular about feminism in the context of other kinds of socially engaged political and critical practices?’

¹⁰ For an excellent collection of reflections on gender in and around mainstream architectural practice and pedagogy see Ruth Morrow, Harriet Harriss, James Benedict Brown and James Soane, eds., *A Gendered Profession: The question of representation in space making* (London, RIBA Publications, 2016).

¹¹ See <http://archiparlour.org> (accessed 08.10.2017).

¹² See <http://architexx.org> (accessed 08.10.2017).

¹³ For examples of feminist practices in architecture see two excellent collections; Lori A. Brown, ed., *Feminist Practices Interdisciplinary Approaches to Women in Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2011); Meike Schalk, Thérèse Kristiansson, and Ramia Mazé, eds., *Feminist Futures of Spatial Practice: Materialisms, Activisms, Dialogues, Pedagogies, Projections* (Baunach: Spurbuch Verlag, 2017.)

At each of these events, the kinds of questions we ask and the concerns we have are informed by developments in feminist theory and practice, and there have been significant changes in the years since we organised **taking place 2**, as well as countless returns to the same problems. Particularly notable is the degree to which feminism – at least in so far as it concerns the equal representation of women in practice - has become a concern for the mainstream architectural profession. In the US *The Architectural Review* and in the UK *The Architects Journal* both host an annual ‘Women in Architecture’ award.¹⁰ They recognise women’s achievements within the profession without asking how their presence, or indeed how feminist values, ethics and ways of working might challenge it. More importantly, the past decade has seen the emergence of internationally known activist groups such as Parlour¹¹ in Australia and ArchiteXX¹² in the US who, through research, communication and campaigns, take a more critical stance on the status quo and provide spaces that allow for re-imaginings of the discipline whilst still operating within it. And since we started opening our discussions to the public and exploring methods such as temporary spatial intervention and participation, it has been invigorating to see so many innovative groups and practices bringing similar ways of working to sites outside the academy and the arts institution in many regions of the world.¹³

In this sense, as Teresa put it:

“By repeating the breakfast here at *Architecture & Feminisms* in 2016 we are taking the opportunity to use the conference as a research tool to re-examine positions of architecture and feminism fifteen years later.”

At the same time we recognise that it is not just the context in which we work that has changed, but also our own subjectivities and positions, as Katie described:

“None of our lives and ‘positions’ are the same as they were 15 years ago. Our careers have changed, some of us have children or care for others, or deal with health issues. In short, a young intergenerational group has become an older one. I’m particularly interested today, amidst many generations of women and men, in how these changes affect our feminism and our relationship to space – from the margins to more of a centre; from powerlessness to sometimes having some power; from ‘nomadism’ to ‘tied-to-one-place-ism’? Are our feminisms ‘out-of-date’? Which feminism fits us? If life changes doesn’t our relation to space change too?”



Fig. 5 Photo: Sue Ridge

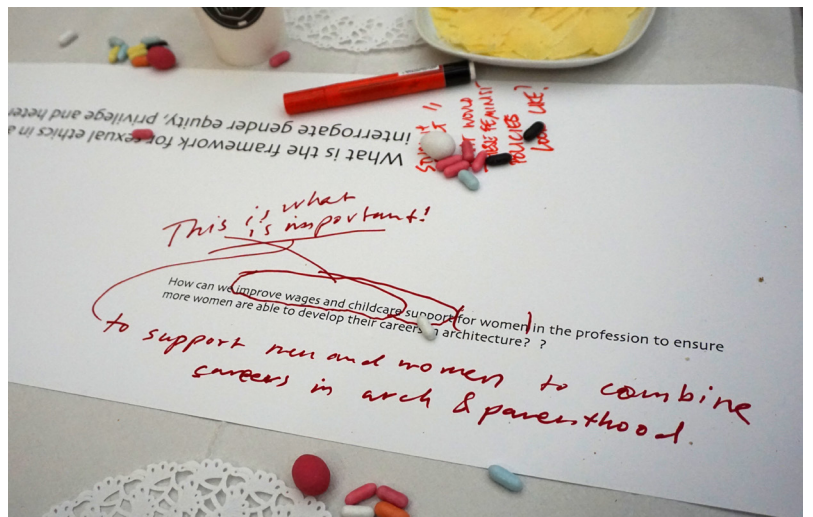


Fig. 6 Photo: Sue Ridge

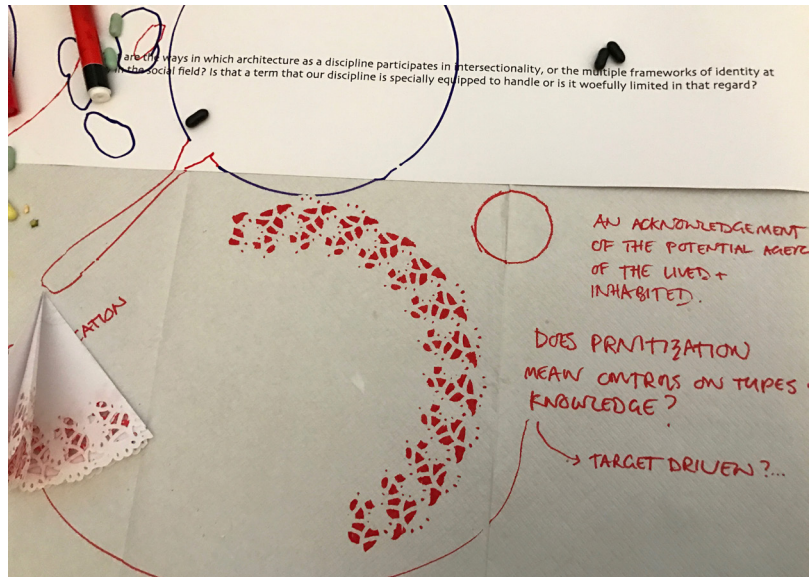


Fig. 7 Photo: Sue Ridge

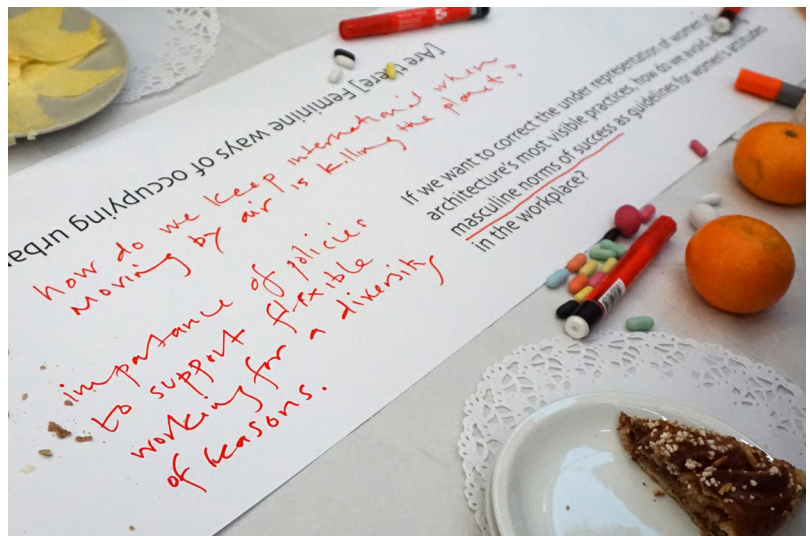


Fig. 8 Photo: Sue Ridge

Within the packed schedule of *Architecture & Feminisms taking place* opened up a generous space of dialogue, and came together again over food with conference participants to discuss key questions for today. The questions were submitted by the conference participants themselves during registration and were printed on table liners and placed onto paper tablecloths as part of the table dressing (see figure 5). During the breakfast we found that many of the questions and concerns from fifteen years ago remain.... Questions about how to address the under representation of women in architectural practice... questions of childcare and working conditions...(see figure 6). One table asked: 'what does feminist architecture look like? and can we have a feminist space?' in response to the question 'Do we need separatist groups to change the norm?' (see figure 6). The question, 'why do we keep having to relearn our past?' implied that

feminism and architecture is not necessarily progressing. Other questions reflected grave political concerns: 'how can feminism, within and about, architecture engage effectively with our politically unstable times?' 'Can feminism survive resource conflicts?' 'How can feminist teaching survive the on-going privatisation of universities and the marketization of knowledge?' (see figure 7) A difference from 15 years ago was that women were not discussing public commissions and how to make work in the public realm. There was instead a kind of new urgency in the feminist practice discussion that was placed more in the realm of activism, action and basic women's rights. Questions about the environment and climate change were also on the agenda and the question of: 'how do we keep international when moving by air travel is killing the planet?' led to discussions about creating a virtual feminist space. (see figure 8)

Difference

Whilst we hoped that the breakfast would allow some of the conference's key questions and concerns to be voiced and recorded on the tablecloths, our intervention at *Architecture & Feminisms* was also intended to provide a space in which a collective event could emerge out of the differences between the individuals participating in it. The question of difference has been central to our work as **taking place** and has tended to manifest through structures where each member produces individual work within a collective project. We have each used **taking place** in different ways as a platform for exploring our own ideas and about feminism and space. However our methods have been shared and so has the core concept, that place can be taken through feminist spatial practice. As Katie put it,

"We have been, from the start, an intergenerational group. Julia was part of Matrix (the UK's first feminist architectural co-operative/collective?), Teresa started out in construction, before coming into architecture, and I heard of Jos when I was an undergraduate and she was already writing about women, architecture and space. Helen and I met through studying Jane Rendell's ground-breaking gender and space module (and Jane has been a member of the group too, along with many others...). We always had shared questions about feminist spatial practice although we approached them from very different backgrounds, perspectives and theoretical frameworks. Difference was a source of stimulation for us – a means to generate work from a variety of positions."

As Jos explained:

"I wanted to explore a bit more a central idea of **taking place** from the beginning, the aim of starting from difference: what that means and how you do it. This idea has led us to a process and

a method. Events and other projects are generated from the concerns of, and responses to, a specific situation by individual **taking place** members (with who and how also a fluid coming together, dependent on circumstances). Collaboration and design development comes out of an entangled combination of these responses, but does not try to unify or make consistent the various perspectives or proposed engagements.”

“I have found this a very powerful and resonant mode of operation. It feels like a positive moving on from some aspects of second wave feminism, replacing oppositional positions and demands for certainty with a model of change that works through the accumulation of many small and partial actions. In the current political moment, though, as many groups find themselves under attack (refugees and asylum seekers; benefit ‘scroungers’ and the disabled) we need to make sure that starting from difference does not just reside in the particular trajectories of individual women. We need to also challenge our own positions of privilege, and think more about starting from differences that are not just ours.”

The potential of opening a space such as Interstitial Breakfast within a packed conference schedule, may not be so much the identification of common concerns and purpose to be taken forward at the event itself, but instead as Julia put it, in the new actions and collaborations which emerge out of these fragmentary interactions as participants return to their lives outside the event:

“Conferences have a (slow) potential to empower: **taking place** was hugely enabled by the participation of many of its then only loosely connected members in the Alterities conference in Paris in June 1999, which provided, as does this event, spaces in which feminist theory and practice could be explored; but also where the foundations of future collaborations and working relationships were laid.”

“Therefore **taking place** here builds on an aspect of this conference, shaped as it is in part by activism, which is its latency, wherein its participants seize on the opportunities it provides to generate new actions, often collaborative, that are not only enacted in academic spaces.”

“Breakfasting together while simultaneously discussing what we all have identified as the underlying issues of the conference creates memorable interactions, often quite sharp and truthful, which endure, to be disseminated later in our other places of work and action.” (see figure 9)



Fig. 9 Photo: Sue Ridge

Ultimately, then, the breakfast was just one of many multiple and momentary events and encounters at *Architecture & Feminisms*, one that we hope continues to accumulate towards crucial social and professional change around gender and architectural practice.

References

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