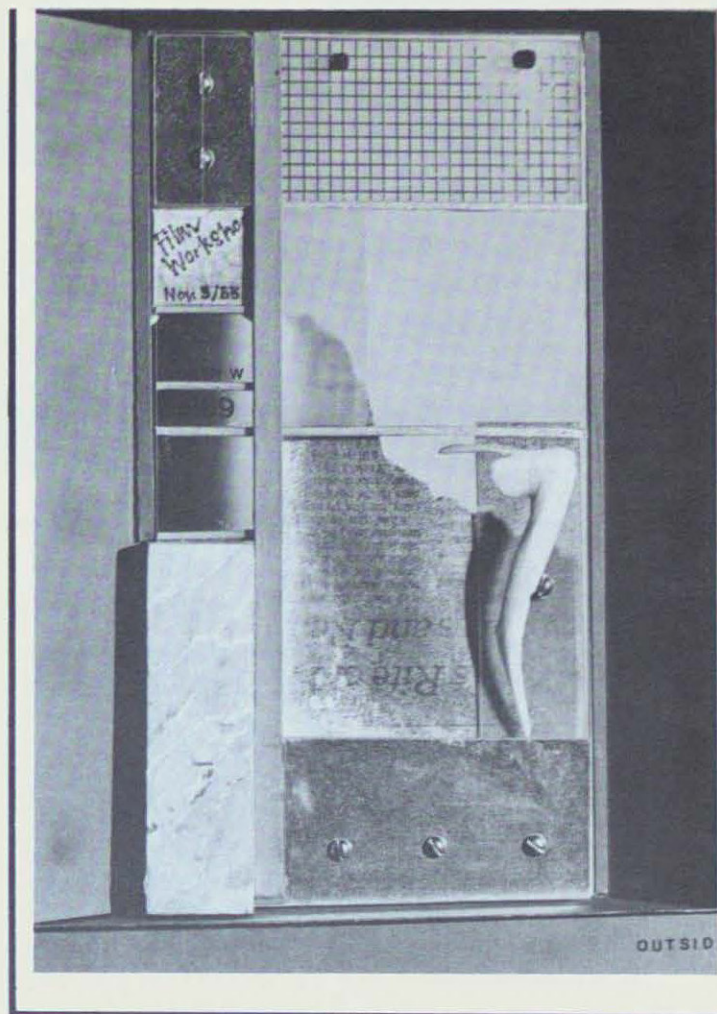


The WOMEN'S CULTURAL BUILDING COMPETITION

La récente compétition consistant en la conception d'un Centre Culturel pour Femmes a permis de questionner l'architecture en tant que moyen d'expression et d'étude de la culture des femmes. Un certain dilemme inhérent au programme s'en suivit, à savoir si le Collectif se devait d'être exprimé par un édifice unique ou plutôt consister en une série de vignettes représentatives. Cette problématique, nommément le rôle d'un tel Centre au sein de la ville, s'est répercutée dans l'élaboration des projets. Il est en outre difficile de discerner les aspects particulièrement négatifs d'un status quo patriarcal des principes architecturaux propres à l'environnement urbain. A cet effet, certains des projets lauréats peuvent notamment être perçus comme préjudiciables, voire contraire à l'intention première qui visait à représenter et susciter une culture féminine distincte.

This is the first of two articles concerning the recent competition for the Women's Cultural Building Collective Headquarters held in Toronto during the summer and exhibited at the A.R.C. Gallery in November 1983. The competition was the first public event sponsored by the Women's Architecture League, a group founded in Toronto in the spring of 1983. This article describes the genesis of the competition, the process of its development and jury selection, followed by a discussion of the results of the competition and the issues addressed by the entries. The second article focusses its remarks on the five winning schemes.

Layout by Guy St.-Arnaud and Ellen Lebovich



A Genesis of the Competition

by Alison McKenzie

The Women's Cultural Building Collective Headquarters Ideas Competition was seen as an ideal vehicle for exploring issues of interest to the nascent Women's Architecture League last spring. The competition, it was felt, would force the question of identifying the place of women in the predominant culture, a culture whose norms and values have been structured and sanctioned by men. The ambiguity of the title was itself suggestive. Was it women building culture? Or a women's cultural building? Or, was it building women's culture?

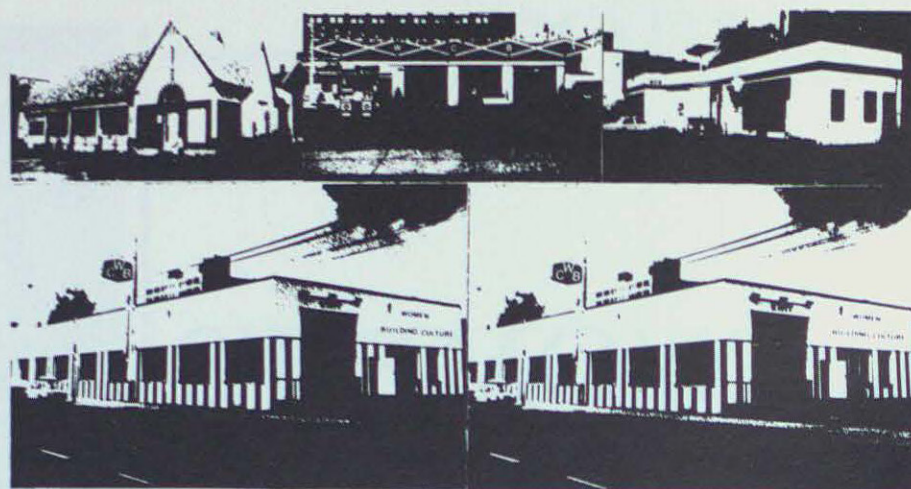
On a more practical level, the WCBC provided the competition with a client, albeit a notional one. Interviews with five WCBC members constituted the brief, which itself served up the problematic of feminist representation.

At every step the Women's Architectural League's desire was to reduce issues to first principles in order to lay bare preconceived assumptions. As a result, the choice of site and the drawing requirements as well as the programme were left up to the entrant. This accounts for the diversity of entries received. It also precluded the selection of any grand prize winner. In retrospect even the title *competition* seems a misnomer.

The jury members were chosen for the broad range of concerns they would bring to bear on the work. In addition the WAL felt that they would be sympathetic to the intents of the competition and familiar with the issues it addressed.

"... getting away from patriarchal ideals or monumentality, dominance and power..."

The Sinclair-Walker project



The seven member jury was composed of practising architects and cultural producers. Of these, two were representatives of the client group, members of the WCBC: Kerri Kwinter, writer and critic, and Kate Lushington, a theatre artist who previously spent two years in architecture at the A.A. in London. Three were architects with no affiliation to the League: Odile Hénault, editor of the architectural periodical *Section A*, Montreal; Lorna McNeur, practising architect teaching at Carleton University School of Architecture, Ottawa; and Susana Torre, an architect in private practice in New York and professor at Columbia University. A representative of the Women's Architecture League was included, Ellen Allen, an architect in private practice in Toronto, as well as one independent cultural producer, filmmaker Anna Gronau.

The judging took place over a weekend in October. An informal discussion of the work was held with the judges and the WAL that weekend, followed by a panel discussion during the two-week exhibition at A.R.C. Gallery, in Toronto in November. Transcripts of the judging sessions have been prepared and are available at Ballenford Books, Toronto. A complete catalogue of the twenty-eight entries, including written critiques, is presently underway and will be published shortly.

The WCBC headquarters proved to be a paradigm for the larger issue of the identification of women's place within culture. As the introduction to the brief states, *"The Headquarters is intended to be a place where women can meet as peers, either as they exist at present within a larger male culture, or as part of an equal role in public life."*

It was anticipated that the competition would address the following issues:

What is the nature of a women's collective and what are its architectural implications.

What relationship exists between the Women's Cultural Building and its larger context.

What can the architectural expression of the Women's Cultural Building offer to its larger physical and cultural context.

This discussion will primarily consider the ways in which the entries addressed the relationship of feminism to the status quo. The variety of responses quite clearly if at times inadvertently pointed to the problem of giving women's culture architectural expression.

At one extreme, there were those schemes that were so

enmeshed in culture as it exists that there was no problem. The task was simply to design a building, an institution with its programme of functions: a women's club. At the other extreme were a number of schemes which identified the city as it exists with the negative connotations of patriarchy and had to infiltrate it, transform it, or dispense with it altogether in order to make room for feminine culture. In between these were two projects which used new and subversive ideas but failed to recognize or exploit their ramifications; projects which tried to posit new forms to represent women's culture or resurrect symbols from ancient matriarchal cultures; and projects which tried to render the problem legible without attempting architectural embodiment.

The IKOY architect's entry, from Winnipeg, was a scheme that raised eyebrows and issues. It seemed ideologically intact, an example of the very hermetic *male* mainstream work which the League had been founded to explode. Then if such was the case, why had they bothered to enter the competition with what was obviously a serious entry? Was it in fact delivered deadpan, a mainstream joke? Clearly it was architecture that concerned itself with its own fetishes and treated the WCBC as it would any other client; it could well have been a club or art gallery except for certain programmatic gratuities like a day-care centre and a rooftop running track.

The project could be criticized in its own terms: as the independence of the component building systems was stated in lieu of an aesthetic, what accounts for the building's strongly formal resolution? Surely this is incongruent to the author's statement that *"technology is dealing with the form and function of each component -the Building as a whole is a discovery- not the product of an idealized pre-conception"*. However, this scheme is particularly interesting for this discussion in its absolute avoidance of the issues of the competition. It raised issues simply by serving up the status quo intact.

The number of schemes that posited the opposite approach, refuting the city and its institutions as they exist, can be accounted for to some extent by the attitude put forward by the WCBC members in their brief. Some of the members spoke of the intrinsically subversive activities of the Collective; others spoke of getting away from *"patriarchal ideals of monumentality, dominance and power...of reclaiming the city."* The problem with this stance, as some members recognized, was that it left the Collective without a *"place as a symbolic housing of a collective function."* Almost all the members anticipated new formulations of public and private spheres. This included, in

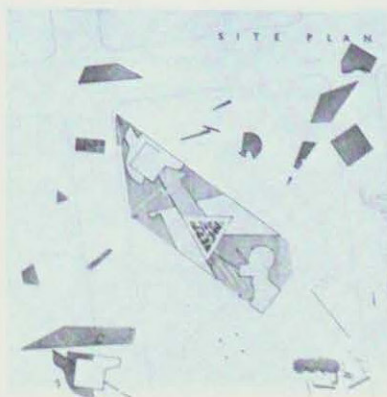
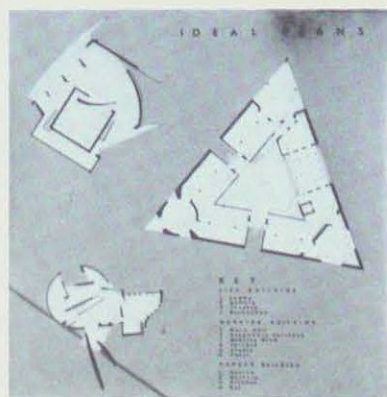
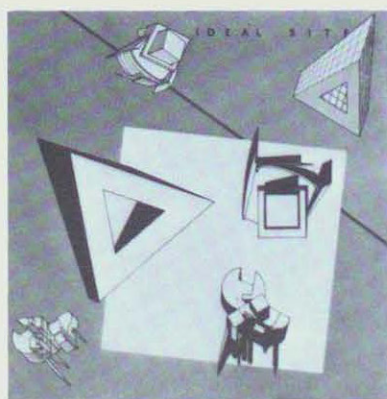
almost every case, the provision of space for child care as well as for work and performance in the Headquarters. One member envisaged a kitchen where twenty might cook at once: a marvellous inversion of the kitchen-as-cell, where the traditional symbol of woman's bondage becomes a place of public celebration.

The desire for informality, for a non-intimidating atmosphere in the Headquarters expressed by the members interviewed produced a predisposition for schemes that had no architectural face. This seemed to belie a mistrust of representation, of the semiotic dimension of architecture. Representation seemed comfortable only when pared down to a single element, e.g. the Door project (Shim/Sutcliffe), or when it co-opted an existing and thereby familiar cultural image, e.g. the Gas Stations project (Sinclair/Walker). In the former, the predicament of the artist is suggested by means of the two faces of the door, private work versus its public representation, but in no way does it specifically address the condition of the women artist. It could be inferred, as one of the jury members suggested, that inside and outside referred respectively to the traditional and potential loci of women. The latter project did not subvert the semiotic codes of gas stations, it was consumed by them. The scheme paired nostalgia - the stations renovated for the collective were all vintage Hansel-and-Gretel moderne, or fifties examples - with apparent economic viability. This combination was unbeatable, particularly for the WCBC members on the jury. The proposal, however, left nagging questions. In the end it seemed the very paradigm for the problem of women's representation. It was *making do*; it borrowed an existing cultural image for itself without declaring itself; GULF simply became WCBC. It provided space without disturbing prevailing ideology; even a billboard or a new facade would have changed this reading. Women have remained faceless culturally precisely because of this scavenger mentality. Scarcity of means, however, should not imply cultural impoverishment, nor should it cloud political intent.

The Concrete Bunker scheme (Owen) posted the extreme critical position in this regard. The scheme takes the WCBC members at their word and provides space devoid of architectural representation and is quite literally underground.

One of the most interesting of the infiltration schemes was the Arbor (Blanchaer). Where most of the network projects inserted monuments or WCBC buildings within the existing fabric of the city in order to render the problem of women's representation active, the Arbor proposed the transformation of the city. The author writes: "*an Arbor represents the theoretical development of the collective where the house stands as the backdrop for the search for a new identity. The Arbor, a non-object, is the antithesis of monumentality (man's image of his own place in society).*" The Arbor grows to encompass the whole city, whereupon the original house is left as a ruin, a reminder of the past. Another infiltration scheme, the Wedge scheme (Moskowitz) proposed entirely new forms to represent women's culture, including buildings entitled *the amoeba* (a place of transition), *the wedge*, etc., all located in Toronto Harbour.

Those schemes that accepted the city as it exists and reinterpreted the forms within it did so either by changing the relationship of the building to its context or by inventing new architectural forms. The former type did so in one of two ways. Some schemes responded to the subversive aspect sought for the Collective by making the space of the Headquarters invisible (out of public view) while providing a provocative presence on the street. The Door project already mentioned did this, as did the Robinson scheme, which made use of the vacant upper floors of commercial buildings. In both schemes, the rationale is framed in economic terms only - vacant space - is cheap space and not as a polemic. The schemes that proposed a highly visible institution changed its contextual relationship by, in many cases, increasing the transparency of the institution to the garden, e.g. in the Taylor/Hazell scheme.



"... getting away from patriarchal ideals or monumentality, dominance and power..."

The Blanchaer scheme