

BUILDING WOMEN'S CULTURE: *on architecture and politics*

by Pauline Fowler

The competition held in Toronto in the fall of 1983 for a Women's Cultural Building has been discussed extensively in recent publications; description of its inception through criticism of the entries can be found in various sources. Now that some time has passed since the competition event, it seems that the issues most consistently touched upon by the prospect of making architecture for such a group are twofold: the making of a building appropriate for women's culture and the relationship between architecture and feminism. While these issues have been dealt with in the competition material, there is a larger one which has not been sufficiently addressed. The Women's Cultural Building, more than any other recent project, necessitates a confrontation of the relationship between architecture and politics, or form and content: hence, the subject of this article. Although these remarks employ the competition itself as example and illustration, they are intended to apply in a wider forum to the circumstances of groups who, like the Women's Cultural Building, stand outside or at the periphery of mainstream society, culture, and politics.

Clearly evident in all the material surrounding the competition—the brief, the jury's comments, the entries themselves, and subsequent critiques—is an association of architectural forms with mainstream patriarchal values, problematic for a dissenting institution and its architects. The resulting outright rejection of architecture takes several forms which include various non-architectural and anti-architectural expressions, and in some instances, the implicit expectation of a new, other architecture.

The competition brief, for instance, articulates a profound distrust of architecture as representing "patriarchal ideas of monumentality, dominance, and power"; another Collective member expresses a preference for "something between circus tent, beehive, and octopus."¹ Both these quotations have found prominent places in publications on the competition, attesting to their general acceptance. An earlier source contains a reference to

anthropomorphically-based architectural designs with their resultant oppressiveness arising from their obsession with the human form.²

L'auteur, en analysant les projets soumis à la compétition pour un Centre Culturel des Femmes, en vient à la conclusion que la plupart sont anti-architecturaux à cause de leurs affiliations à l'idéologie patriarcale: plusieurs projets sont étudiés dans ce cadre de référence. Pour illustrer le lien entre la politique et l'architecture, l'auteur analyse ensuite le club masculin et sa typologie du palazzo. Elle en conclut que les hommes et les femmes doivent maintenant participer pleinement à la théorie et pratique de l'architecture pour détruire le monopole masculin existant et établir le status quo.

Many of the entries are simply not architectural proposals. The Gas Stations project,³ for instance, is the unaltered re-use of abandoned vernacular filling stations; another proposed quarters underground in a concrete bunker, with no visual, representative aspect. In the Door project, it is only the doorways which are considered, and even then, each door is left to the individual artist to design. One such scheme proposes the transformation of a classical patriarchal structure, the Triumphal Arch. This is an admirable beginning, but the form itself is not recognizable without verbal identification, and there is no new narrative which disrupts anything but its "uselessness." The Snakes and Ladders entry, in a brilliant graphic, foregrounds women's place in history, but again there is no proposal for architecture.

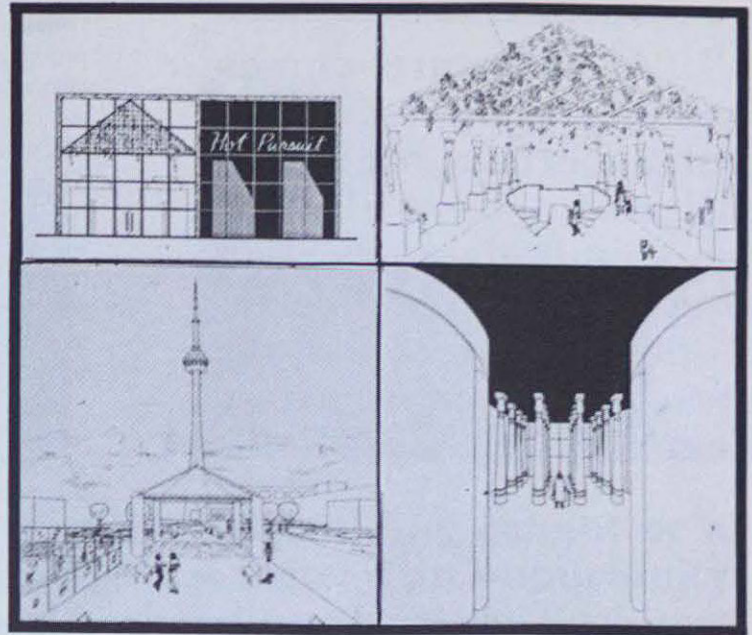
Other entries exhibit *anti-architectural* biases. Several schemes which share the premise of radical decentralization have critical consequences for architecture, and for the City: one wonders if this approach is born of the belief that architecture, as a large, centralized institution, necessarily means the existence of a servant class to effect maintenance and cleaning tasks. The Lighthouse proposal makes a conscious effort to deal with the institution's public/vertical representation, but the notion of a *moving* lighthouse gives rise to disturbing connotations of impermanence, even treachery; similarly, the Arbour scheme proposes the transformation of the City's permanent artifacts into ruins and ephemeral garden growth. The Omphalos project uses "disjuncture and uncertainty" to create a new spatial order: is this what we want our architecture to be?

Furthermore, there is evidence throughout the competition of the expectation of a new, fun-

damentally different architecture, expressive of women's culture and experience. Given that architectural history is almost devoid of contributions by women, it may not be unreasonable to postulate that their work could be perceptibly different from existing architectural stock, and that such expression by women could reveal a coherent aesthetic. However, it's been a long time since anyone invented anything new in architecture.⁴ The project of inventing new forms to embody feminism and/or the female sensibility is one which could very well last as long as time itself. It can be seen, therefore, as a convenient diversion which diffuses opposition to the dominant group by channelling it into unproductive pursuits, which at the same time, are infinitely amusing to those in power: participants in this futile search thus become accomplices to their own bondage. Old parts can be made into an original whole, yes—a New Architecture, which is not very likely. One competition entry rejected any trace of recognizable imagery whatsoever in favour of the *tabula rasa*: the proposed "Wedge", "Amoeba", etc., are more a denial of architecture than a New Architecture. The forms are mute, and illegible in any context.

One recent critic articulates the fundamental question as "was it really an architectural problem in the first place?" This preposterous question contains within itself the germ of its own answer, "the unavailability of architecture appropriate to the specified purpose." The key word in the foregoing quotation is "appropriate": as in other instances, it invokes the expectation that there exists a precise correlation between form and content, and that out there, somewhere, is the perfect architectural counterform for women's culture, just waiting for someone diligent enough to discover it. In fact, such is simply not the case. As will be illustrated shortly, architecture comes *by association* to represent a certain ideology, and not, as this critic seems to feel, by building types embodying certain values inherent at their inception and which survive any subsequent transformation. If we are to agree with his conclusion, that "Architecture is extraneous to the specified purpose of expressing women's culture,"⁵ we are left with the unfortunate situation of such dissenting groups being without architecture, without symbolic presence, without a place in the City, and thus culturally invisible. Such a state of affairs is all too convenient for the *status quo*.

The call for a Women's Cultural Building occurs within the implicit context of a "modern" society in which women participate as full equals and which necessitates, it seems, a rejection of architecture as given.⁶ Implicit in the act of rejection, obviously, is a profound critique of architecture as inextricably bound up with the *status quo* in which women are marginalized or excluded, although the critique remains unconscious and unarticulated. This rejection, we have seen, takes the form of non-architectural and



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anti-architectural proposals, as well as those manifesting the expectation of wholly new forms: the competition entries thus, can be seen as critical anti-projects.⁷ In addition, published criticism contains a similar latent and undeveloped critique of architecture as "extraneous" to the task at hand by pointing out the lack of architecture in the competition entries, but makes no counterproposal. In both instances, the critique without a project—a viable alternative—is not just impotent; if simply an enthusiasm for criticism, it is also nihilistic, an invitation to ever-deepening despair. Leon Krier's observations seem appropriate here:

A Resistance without a project is... a useless effort; because a critic without a project gazes as impotently into the future, as an archaeologist without a vision into the past.⁸

It now seems clear that there exists within society and the architectural discipline the implicit understanding that the forms of architecture embody the collective values of the society which these forms represent. In the words of Paul Philippe Cret:

... the designers of the past have always been able to give to wide different civilizations their most complete expression—their architecture.⁹

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An architectural form's first appeal, obviously, is at the level of the purely visual—the play of light and shadow, solid to void, proportion, etc. But for as long as there has been a discipline of architecture, its forms have been co-opted for the political use of various regimes by means of the rhetoric accompanying the act of appropriation. The visual forms themselves do not have any inherent ideological content; they always require a component of language in order to become a system of signification:

It is true that objects, images and patterns of behaviour can signify, and do so on a large scale, but never autonomously; every semiological system has its linguistic admixture. Where there is a visual substance, for example, the meaning is confirmed by being duplicated in a linguistic message so that at least a part of the iconic message is, in terms of structural relationships, either redundant or taken up by the linguistic system.¹⁰

Thus by rhetoric and by convention, certain architectural forms can come to be associated with a certain value system. Since it is conventional, the relationship between form and content is far from predictable, or precise. Nonetheless, the strong associations which exist between architectural forms and the dominant value system make architecture a main instrument of the society's ideological superstructure.

In spite of this common understanding of architecture's ideological role, there is a reluctance or refusal on the part of most designers to deal deliberately and consciously with this dimension.

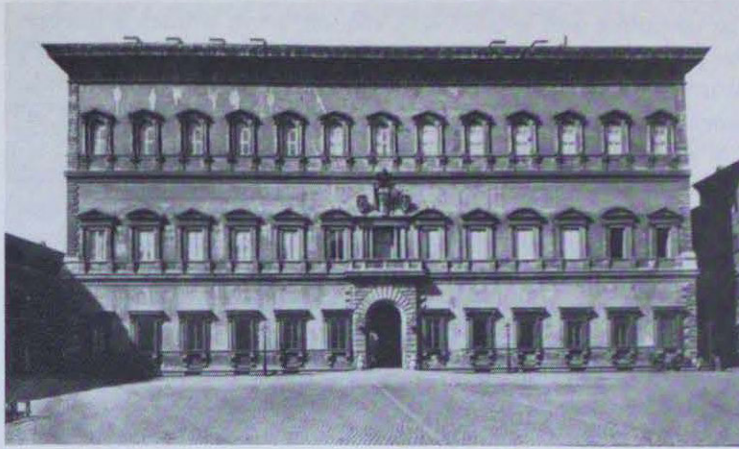
Just as architecture itself is autonomous from political positions, neither can it be sexist or feminist. We would be well-advised to let architecture be architecture, not propaganda.¹¹

Citing it as neutral, as valid on its own terms, architects go on producing architecture which goes on being subconsciously understood as reinforcing the prevailing value system. The refusal to acknowledge this role is not, in fact, an ideologically neutral act: it is instead an implicit acceptance of the prevailing values. To discuss the conventional meaning of a visual form is to open it to question, and to destroy the myth of its neutrality, its “naturalness;” to call architecture “neutral” is to render unassailable the ideological system it currently represents. Concomitantly, to consider architecture as a system of signification which is socially constructed, is to allow the possibility of its transformation for other meanings.

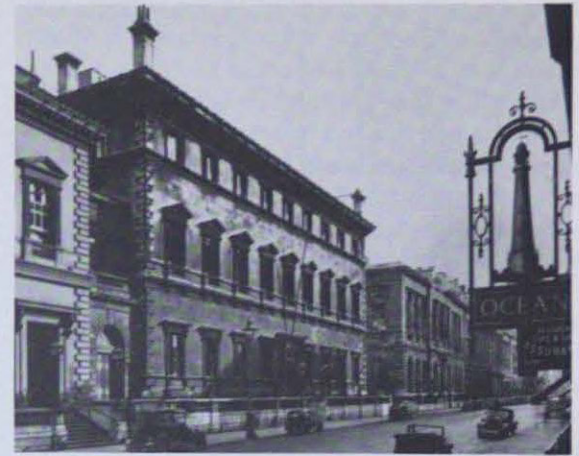
A discussion of a particular institution and its conventional architectural container will serve to illustrate the preceding theoretical remarks on form and ideology. In this context, the private Men's Club and its palazzo building type seem especially appropriate as *undeniably* embodying the quintessence of Western capitalist and patriarchal values, quite opposed to those of the Women's Cultural Building. Such an ideological reading can be applied to both the building itself and its complementary texts.

Men have congregated in clubs for at least as long as “Western civilizations” has existed, their commonalities being political, literary, religious, military, or social. The British clubs, since late in the 18th Century, have represented the crystallization of that elite which conquered half the world, built the British Empire, and ruled it for more than two hundred years—the aristocracy and landed gentry, ministers' and officers' sons, industrialists, and the civil service. Women were most definitely not allowed as members and were admitted, if at all, only on special occasions and very infrequently. It has been said of the London clubs that they are still “a refuge from the vulgarity of the outside world, a reassuringly fixed point, the echo of a more civilized way of living.” Clubs in the New World freely adopted most of the customs of their British ancestors, membership being drawn almost entirely from the wealthy upper classes of Anglo-Saxon descent. Some clubs came to be associated with particular political parties, such as one stronghold of the Republican party, whose unwritten rule was “no women, no dogs, no reporters, and no Democrats.” Whatever its political persuasion, these clubs' memberships included, and still do today, the wealthiest and most influential men in the Western world.

From formal beginnings in late Georgian London through the Greek Revival and eclectic Regency periods, the Men's Club pursued a deliberate search for a normative type. The ultimate choice of the Italian palazzo coincided with maturation of the institution itself, at a moment when architectural culture was engaged in a re-encounter with the Renaissance. If this moment had occurred during the Greek Revival, the Men's Club could have been housed in a temple; similarly, maturation in the heyday of the Gothic Revival could have resulted in a castle as container. Once established as a palazzo at this critical moment, however, and even though architectural fashion moves on, the type endures because of now-established conventional associations. There is no question that the choice of the palazzo may be ascribed in some measure to a wish to partake of already-prevailing associations with the prestige of a powerful nobility, thus documenting the institution's own social pretensions. The essential architectural characteristics of the type in plan, section, and elevation “predisposes” it toward such an appropriation and such a reading, exemplified in the Reform Club of London, 1837, by Sir Charles Barry.



Palazzo Farnese



Reform Club

“...architecture for a Women’s Cultural Building cannot be a search for the perfect counterform. It is instead an opportunity for the subversion of traditional associations between architecture and the dominant value system, allowing the appropriation of these same forms for the new institution and its dissenting values...”

The building’s principal entrance is symmetrically placed to its main bulk and to the major rooms inside. The areaway, the surrounding fence, and the raising of the threshold to just about eye level all act as distancing devices, setting the club at a slightly remote level from the vulgar and ordinary life of the sidewalk. Inside the door is a porter’s station, a point of control to maintain the club as an elite precinct. A further flight of steps sets the club’s preferred floor, the *piano nobile*, almost a storey above the street.

Passing through the colonnade from the entry, one enters the large courtyard which is open for two storeys to a glazed roof; this room is the Saloon, where members gather informally on a daily basis for business and for pleasure. The dominance of this great central hall gives the club a self-sufficient, inward-looking quality, as though the outside world did not exist: the building is thus well-suited to its members. Two other major rooms are located on the building’s principal axis, one on the *piano nobile* and one on the first floor, both with views out to a small park. Other spaces on these two floors are used as obvious adjuncts to the principal rooms. The great staircase which leads to the first floor is off to one side within the building’s main bulk, true to the original palazzo type.

The secondary entrance, at the east side of the building, leads into a staircase which serves the dormitories on the second floor; a distinctly secondary emphasis is thus given to the residential or “private” component. Servants’ quarters on the top floor are of an even lower priority in their lower ceiling height and lack of windows to the street. The two floors which are below grade consist of the kitchen and various other service spaces, essentially all *poché* with no real legibility in plan. The entrance to these quarters is by the steps into the north areaway, which would also be used for delivering coal to the adjacent storage bins. The only connections with the principal floors are a number of narrow stairways, through which food is transported and various other serving tasks performed.

Other club buildings exhibit some interesting variations on this basic palazzo organization. One New York club has its entrance from a side forecourt, which further elaborates the main

sequence of spaces. Another provides a special restaurant for the ladies, a discreet distance away and virtually unconnected with the club proper. In yet another case, the great central hall is given over to a grandiose staircase, which functions as a place of presentation and representation—here the marriagable daughters of club members are presented as “debs” each year. In many instances, the residential rooms of the upper floors are used by members when they wish, for their own reasons, not to spend the night in their homes.

Returning now to the Reform Club, the exterior of the building is as a clear appeal to the associations of palatial architecture, cribbed directly by Sir Charles Barry from the Palazzo Farnese. The *piano nobile* and the building’s interior hierarchy can be read on the facade, with the main floor windows being of a generous size, the first floor of a similar size but more elaborate, and the residential rooms indicated by the smaller, plainer windows of the attic. No windows for the servants’ accommodations appear to the street, either in the mezzanine or, obviously, in the basement.

In summation, the essential architectural characteristics of this type are threefold: the facade, the *piano nobile*, and the courtyard. The facade consists of a singular monumental entrance against a backdrop of window fabric; the plan and section reveal a singular monumental room situated on the *piano nobile*, made possible by a fabric of minor rooms and corridors. The type thus provides the physical analogue for the socio-political power structure of capitalist patriarchy, a small, singular, ruling group whose position of privilege is at the expense of and set

against a *fabric* comprised of all the Others. The palazzo building type remains in use by Men's Clubs today,¹² and has come to be associated with a white male elite and their collective patriarchal values: war and imperialism, exploitation of the Earth's resources, economic class structure, the marginalization and exclusion of women, and racism, all apparently in the interests of accumulating power and profit.

This reading of the Men's Club is to deliberately clarify, in the context of a Women's Cultural Building, the common relationship between an institution—a collective of individuals who share a common set of values—and its architecture. First, the form is not *invented* for the purposes of the specific institution: there is no perfect one-to-one correspondence between form and content. Second, it may be necessary to conduct a conscious search among architectural types, and to employ rhetoric to argue for the chosen type. Third, a type can be deemed "appropriate" for a given cultural moment, but only by a willing audience. Eventually, an architecture can come to "embody" or "represent" an institution and its system of values. It is, therefore, entirely understandable that a certain reluctance to use such a form—the palazzo—may exist on the part of the Women's Cultural Building Collective, which does not partake of the same value system as the Men's Club. At this point, it is absolutely critical to recognize that this has been a reading of *conventional associations: a building type at inception contains no inherent or binding values*. Just as other readings can exist for the palazzo, so can other meanings, and therein lies the possibility of transforming its commonly understood meaning. Such a transformation can occur through the reappropriation of an architectural type for the use of another institution and by the rhetoric which accompanies the act of appropriation. The practice is as old as architecture itself: it includes for instance, the repeated use over the ages of the honorific column, the appropriation of Roman/pagan secular forms for Christian churches, as well as the occupation of the Renaissance palazzo by the modern-day Men's Club which has been described.

The reader will recall here that much of the material from the Women's Cultural Building Competition was of a non-architectural, anti-architectural, or "neo"-architectural nature, brought about, I have argued, by discomfort from subconscious ideological associations. Imagine instead, proposals for this institution which were able to partake freely and without inhibition of the immense range of potentially available architectures, with their multiple capacities for narrative and symbolic content. Imagine, for instance a Women's Cultural Building which chose to inhabit the Men's Club's palazzo. The mere act of occupying such architecture renders visible its normally latent ideological meanings. Architectural interventions could provide a critique, and ultimately *subvert the old meaning*.

A new narrative could be created, combining a reformulated vision of public and private with content from women's history. The project could be made deliberately analogous to women's culture and experience. The palazzo, once the Men's Club's own, comes to "represent" its ideological opposite, the Women's Cultural Building.

The essential and eternal forms of architecture which are constituted of mass and void, light and shadow, proportion, texture, colour, detail, etc., do not in themselves contain any intrinsic meaning; that meaning is always conferred by the given cultural context. For as long as architecture has existed, it has provided succeeding civilizations with their most complete cultural expression, and as such plays a major role in the maintenance of any prevailing ideology. Dissenting groups such as the Women's Cultural Building Collective, and their architects, must participate fully in architectural discourse and production in order to ensure their place in the City. By now it should be apparent that architecture for a Women's Cultural Building cannot be a search for the perfect counterform. It is instead an opportunity for the subversion of traditional associations between architecture and the dominant value system, allowing the appropriation of these same forms for the new institution and its dissenting values, all in the best historical tradition. It would seem that such a reappropriation of architecture, hitherto the exclusive property of the Patriarchy, is entirely appropriate to the Collective's subversive mandate.

Pauline Fowler graduated architecture from the University of Toronto in 1984. Her design thesis was a Women's Cultural Building. She has written for various journals and is now working in the field of architecture in Toronto.

NOTES:

1. Renée Bart and Jahanna Householder of the Women's Cultural Building, Competition brief, 1983, pp.6, 13.
2. Nancy Patterson, in a review of the exhibition "Architecture: Work by Women" at A.R.C. Gallery, Toronto, in February 1983. *The Fifth Column*, Vol. 3, No. 3/4 (Spring/Summer 1983), p. 92.
3. The five winning schemes include the Gas Stations, Snakes and Ladders, Lighthouse, Door, and Omphalos projects, published in the *The Fifth Column*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Winter 1984), pp. 5-10.
4. The Modern Movement, in its attempts at architecture "in the spirit of the times," produced instead that which was *not* architecture, and not New Architecture. The wreckage of our contemporary cities attests to the failure of their experiments.
5. This quotation and the preceding two are from Graham Owen in his "Critique of the Five Winning Schemes," *The Fifth Column*, op. cit., p. 10.
6. Also at issue is (analogously) the internal crisis of Modernism as a whole as it participates with the very dynamic outlined here. At the very least, however, it has itself begun for the past two decades to face the peculiar situation of a seemingly inexhaustible series of new architectures, suggesting that the wrong question is constantly being asked.
7. Similarly, the Modernist exponents of functionalism have been challenged by Jozé Plecnik on the basis that "their proposals, no matter how significant, were little more than polemical anti-projects." From "Plecnik and the Critics," by Peter Krecic, in *Jozé Plecnik 1872-1957: Architecture and the City*. Andrews, Bentley & Grzan-Butina, eds. Urban Design, Oxford Polytechnic, Headington, Oxford, 1983.
8. Leon Krier, as quoted by Maurice Culot in his "Introduction" to *Leon Krier: Drawings 1967-1980* (Catalogue to the exhibition at Max Protech Gallery, Jan.-Feb. 1981, in New York). A.A.M. Editions, Brussels, 1981, p. xiv.
9. In Chapter 6: "Design and Construction" of *Paul Philippe Cret, Architect and Teacher*. Theo B. White, editor, Philadelphia: The Art Alliance Press, 1973, pp. 71-72.
10. Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, 1964. English translation, Annette Lavers, New York: Hill & Wang, 1968, p. 5.
11. S. Hero, review of "Architecture: Work by Women." *The Fifth Column*, Vol. 3, No. 3/4 (Spring/Summer 1983), p. 93.
12. It is interesting to note that the modern corporate banking tower represents essentially the same institution, the same values, and many of the same individuals, which must further confirm that the relationship of form to ideology, as conventional, is far from one-to-one.