

How I Read Lacan and Still Managed To Get an Architectural Education: A Discussion about Gender and Spatial Perception

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From 1992 to 1995 a group of students met weekly at the School of Architecture, McGill University, to discuss the subject of "feminism and architecture." Although an earlier reading group organized by a faculty member in 1991 involved some practising architects, the new group was a direct student response to a perceived lack of such discussion in the school's curriculum. Almost all participants were undergraduates; in fact, the schedule was tailored to accommodate them. Readings were chosen based on individual and group interests. In its third year, we changed the reading group's focus to "gender and spatial perception" in order to indicate better to newcomers the range and themes of the discussions. (A selection of the readings is given in the notes to this article.)

In May 1995 three of the original members met again to evaluate and discuss the group.¹

Carol I still find a lot of what we read impenetrable—the "Manifesto for Cyborgs," Lacan and of course Judith Butler.² I often agreed with something—Butler's worry about the limits of social construction theory, for example—but then when we met, it seemed as if we had all read different books!

Bob I see that as an advantage of our method. Because we started out knowing so little, we were forced to go through the readings carefully. Ironically, the discussions were less critical last year when we had graduate students who were well-read in feminist theory. They always knew the author by reputation, good or bad, before they read the texts, and those reputations blinded them to weak arguments. Why do you need Lacan to know that visibility is not always a good political strategy?³

Anastasia You don't; but you need scepticism. The discussions taught me what I didn't know, and exploded the preconceptions I had when I entered school. If I hadn't participated in the discussion group, it would have taken me much longer to develop a critical attitude towards what I do in design. Put on a postcard, feminism for me is a way of keeping questions open. "Gender" is a question that can always be asked; I now ask it of everything.

B Aha, a testimonial: "How I read Lacan and still managed to get an architectural education."

C Scepticism is ok, but ignorance also breeds complacency. Unfortunately some students, men and women, object to the whole idea of feminism. For them, society seems perfectly democratic; achievement is based on merit; "he" is a naturally inclusive, universal, unambiguous term for both men and women.⁴

A Well, because women—even the first students during WWII—often win prizes and awards, achievement can *appear* to be based on merit. Still, I don't feel that women are separated and treated differently at McGill. We're certainly not separated physically.

B It's not that women are kept in a ghetto and beaten. But gender and femininity and feminism are almost *always* pushed out of sight. By the time we graduate, McGill students have had about an hour total of exposure to the topics of gender and feminism, and that hour is in first year history classes. We have only one female faculty, but an all-female office staff.⁵

C That history class is also the only required course in which students must write an essay, in a four year program! That's why I thought a reading group on feminism and architecture—sorry, gender and spatial perception—was such a good idea. It was a chance to read and to think about something other than circulation patterns or re-bar spacing.

B Why are architects always so reluctant to figure out re-bar spacing?

C There are ideas that are fascinating to think about and that make sense in historical analyses, but that are also almost irrelevant to the design process. Diana Agrest's article on the the body in the city, for example, is interesting as feminist architectural history, if tendentious,⁶ but her designs hardly stand out as feminist.

A Who says the concepts and ideas gathered under the term "gender" can or should have anything to do with "spatial perception"?

C Yes, that's fundamental: What does feminism have to do with architecture?

B You will never get through complex work like Bloomer's if you keep questioning that premise.⁷

A But constant questioning lets us see Barbara Duden's work on the female body as an argument *towards* a history of the body, and not simply as a description of incontrovertible facts.⁸

B I think that the distinction between historical analysis and design is not important. Feminist historians who analyze space and architecture using the categories of feminism and gender can change the way you design: they made me careful not to segregate or deny the women who I am designing for in exchange for abstract formal values.⁹

C But surely you don't need feminism to tell you that? Marxism or humanism or Christian charity—any ethical thinking will help you to understand the real effects, social and physical, of what you build.

B Of course you need feminism; feminism specifically addresses the oppression of women. It supplements or rewrites marxism and humanism by insisting on the importance of private and domestic space: reproduction is a form of production, the private sphere includes citizens.¹⁰

A And I'm concerned that in watching out for those real effects, you end up simply making a functional checklist—Christopher Alexander patterns taken from feminist collectives. Is there a vestibule? Can you manoeuvre easily with a pram? Are stairways well lit? That's where the Matrix group goes wrong—defensible space O.K., but only as something to be considered, like HVAC systems.¹¹

B But those checklists can obviously shape and reflect larger ideas. When Beecher designed a new kitchen, it was in order to effect a new role for women in society: to reinforce or change the way women lived their lives and how they interpreted those lives.¹²

A Still, there are different kinds of larger ideas. I mean the kinds of ideas that Pérez-Gómez talks about when he rhapsodizes over Michaelangelo or Colonna: that architecture embodies rituals, symbolizes the cosmos, gives order and purpose to human existence, connecting finite and mortal lives to an apparently infinite and immortal universe.¹³

B OK, but Pérez-Gómez always seems to say "man's existence," not human existence, and as a historian discussing the history of architecture he's right to speak of man's order, man's rituals, man's symbols. But we no longer live in the Italian Renaissance; very few people ever did. To speak of "man" now is no longer to speak of the human. Only the most naive liberal essentialist would argue that women and men are, deep down, equal.

A But on the other hand, only the most equally naive conservative essentialist would claim to know the exact differences between man and woman, male and female.

C What about Rebecca Horn? Which of her pieces, because of their morphology, directly address gender? Only those that attach to or fit around or ignore the biological markers of gendered bodies—usually breasts and genitals, but, more vaguely, hair, blood and skin? Which are about more general, humanist ideals?¹⁴ For example, in the piece that brings an image of the blood system outside the body, when "human" experience is at stake in her work, I think she works with a "generic" i.e. male-body.

B But Horn's mamillary black lung surrogates conform much more closely to the biological givens of sexual dimorphism than architecture ever can.¹⁵ Even Loos's fur-draped bedroom for his wife Lina is feminine more through symbolic associations—warmth, softness, dim light—than through formal or spatial emphases.

C I still don't know that there are any other important connections between feminism and architecture. Yes, there is a fascinating history of women in architecture as users and producers, a heritage open to the same kind of collection and analysis as art history or literature,¹⁶ but I'm not sure that there is much of an argument for female architecture that addresses feminist concerns. You have art and then you have female art—do you have female architecture?

A Of course you do: spaces for shared domestic work with communal kitchens and daycares, more secure environments, especially adequate lighting at night, care in the design of entrances and parking garages.

C Right, and those are practical, functional concerns, that, as we said, Matrix and Hayden and others cover quite well. But we changed the name to "gender and spatial perception" in order to ask whether men and women, because they perceive their *bodies* differently, perceive *space* differently.

B And to ask whether men and women perceive their bodies differently.

C Don't you think there is a gap between those feminist concerns and the concerns of gender theorists? The feminists who discuss design often have essentialist beliefs about women's bodies and rigid gender categories.¹⁷ The gender theorists, however, speculate with the same fixed categories on which the feminists base their arguments.¹⁸

A What about the feminist gender theorists who design? Don't Bloomer and Diller bridge that gap?¹⁹

C I don't find the gender concerns of those architects the most compelling parts of their projects; and they don't take on the complex debate between essentialist and constructionist theories. Sex does not equal gender. The seemingly natural biological differences between male and female begin to blur as soon as we start to identify the cultural determination of biology; cultural ideas about the roles men and women should play are very often justified retroactively by referring to biology.²⁰

B But biology is not by that knowledge undone.

C Nor made. Talking about gender difference is different from living it.

A And talking about architecture is different from making it (as I always forget). Architecture is about space, form, light. Even Freud says that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

C Unfortunately, more often the feminist psychoanalytic theorists follow Lacan, who thinks a cigar is just a sign of the Phallus which is just a symbol of the rule of order.²¹

A Why can't we maintain that symbolic dimension? Kitchens rather than temples could be the focus of our imaginations. They are pragmatic, but they organize and express social relations just as much as traditional architectural monuments.

C Because I don't want to use all that I've learned merely to predict some ideal to which we should be moving. I'm pro-symbolic, but anti-idealist: the feminist agenda should to have more women in architecture, period, without speculating whether they will make better architecture, or worse, or not change it at all. If they turn out to be thatcherites and formalists, or technocratic, schlocky functionalists, *tant pis*.

A But our education *would* change if instead of one female professor we had a dozen; and I suspect that the world would be different if women were eighty-eight per cent of architects rather than 0.002 per cent.²²

C Why stop there? The slogan to sum up an analysis of gender and spatial perception should be "Women in Architecture," not "Better Architecture." Schools must make explicit the presence of women as producers, users, designers and patrons of architecture, even if this means a generation or two of students who know Eileen Gray,²³ and nothing of Borromini or roof details.

A That's too stark for me. It reduces women to their bodies once again. Shouldn't architecture be positive and not just something to be endured? I, and I think most women—not just white-middle class males—are attracted to architecture precisely because we want to deal with those overarching humanist ideals. I want to compare myself to the best, to work in that tradition: could one really work outside of it?

B I agree. Yes, we need women in architecture schools, in architectural design, in the architectural profession, but also in architectural theory and architectural history. When di Giorgio explains Renaissance proportions he shows the male body, complete with a little erection. I think we need to establish retroactively the female body there, too, which we can't do without a vision of Better Architecture, a set of critically-derived standards to guide our work.

C But even in First Year we were told to design a house as if the social context—the nuclear family—was set, fixed and natural. If teachers don't raise issues about gender when we're designing houses, then when are we going to learn to design critically?

A I guess this is where I came in. Our discussions gave me a set of critical tools, but they are still quite separate from the set of design tools that I learned in the studio. It's frustrating that I've had to gain the critical tools myself, and disappointing that most of my colleagues still ignore the problems of gender, when those problems now seem so urgent.

C But you can name drop Lacan!

B And they still gave you your degree.

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